

PRINCIPLE 10

Measure Twice, Hire Once

WORKING the late shift, Ronny Quynn had just stepped outside for a cigarette break when out from the bushes sprang several masked men. Brandishing handguns, they roughed up Ronny, taped his eyes shut, and demanded he give them access to The Cyrix Corporation's facility. Ronny had little choice. Using his security badge, he led the men through several locked doors and into Cyrix's manufacturing area where workers assembled the company's valuable computer chips.

The bandits tied up four other employees and forced them to lie on the ground. They then proceeded to swipe as many computer chips as they could carry. In a matter of minutes, the \$350,000 heist – the largest of its kind in 1994 – was complete.

The police later charged five members of a local gang with the robbery. According to an informant from the gang, the thieves “had inside information which would make the robbery easier to accomplish.” In fact, the gang had infiltrated Cyrix by placing one of its own as an employee.⁵²

The Cyrix saga is not unique. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, gang members are increasingly passing themselves off as legitimate job applicants, not only to gain access to merchandise, but also for health insurance and other benefits.⁵³ And it's not just wet-behind-the-ears personnel managers being duped. Gang members have even navigated the elaborate screening process of the Chicago Police Department.⁵⁴

Poor hiring decisions are both costly and commonplace. A classic case, studied in many employment law courses, involved the hiring of a trucker who, unbeknownst to the company, was a convicted rapist. Within days on the job, this formerly-incarcerated new employee picked up and raped a hitchhiker.⁵⁵

Labor unions, too, have mastered the fine art of applicant deception. For many years, they have used a legal⁵⁶ and extremely effective tactic known as “salting,” in which union organizers apply for rank-and-file positions in non-union companies. Once inside, the organizer stands a much greater chance of both reaching the employees with the union’s message and securing a representation election.

Of course, it’s not only polished con artists who misrepresent their background to prospective employers. A study of two hundred job applicants by Equifax, a nationwide background checking firm, concluded that 29 percent of these applicants lied on their resumes about dates of employment, 11 percent lied about reasons for leaving previous jobs, and 8 percent exaggerated their amount of schooling.⁵⁷ Another survey by Accountemps similarly concluded that about one-third of resumes contain misrepresentations of employment histories, degrees, and other vital information.⁵⁸

Proverbs on Staffing

Take a Serious Approach to Staffing

Indeed, employee selection is a more precarious task than ever. Or is it? The Book of Proverbs illustrates an ancient familiarity with the pitfalls of staffing, specifically cautioning us against any casual approach to measuring applicant qualifications and integrity. One key verse is directly on target:

*Like an archer who wounds at random
is he who hires a fool or any passer-by
(Proverbs 26:10)*

The “archer” Solomon referred to was not a leisurely hunter. Archers in biblical times were highly skilled warriors. Trained from childhood and deadly accurate, they were an army’s first line of attack because they could neutralize the enemy from great distances. Little could prevent them from completing their task since, in addition to their pinpoint precision, their arrows could pierce almost any type of contemporary armor.

Now consider what is implied by an archer who wounds at random, or, as translated in the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) and the *New American Standard Bible*, an archer who wounds everyone. This individual’s performance is commensurate with neither his training nor the acumen of his peers. He is

exceptionally bad at something that he should be doing exceptionally well. Moreover, he's a risk. An archer who wounds at random sometimes wounds allies. He is worse than unproductive; he is counterproductive since he shoots people on his own side and undermines the war effort.

It would seem, then, that in choosing this simile, Solomon was making the general observation that *an informal approach to hiring is careless and perilous*. It amounts to doing something poorly that needs to be performed incisively. When it's not, the process harms at random. No stakeholder is immune, from the organization's owners to the hiree's boss to his coworkers to his internal and external customers to the new employee himself, who is mismatched to the job.

Consider the Applicant's Character

The proverb also offers more specific instruction: We should hire neither "fools" nor just "any passer-by." What is translated here as "fool" is not the same word from Proverbs 1:7 that carries a connotation of moral deficiency (see introductory chapter); rather, the word more closely describes those who are arrogant, silly, or simple. And what is translated here as proscribing the hire of "any passer-by" can also mean, more narrowly, don't hire drunkards (in fact, that is the translation in both the NRSV and the Bible in Basic English). One could therefore infer a further message from Proverbs 26:10: Employee character matters and we should measure it before extending any job offers.

Elsewhere in Proverbs, this advice about applicant character is advanced even more directly, as illustrated by the following tandem of verses:

*As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is a sluggard to those who send him.*
(Proverbs 10:26)

*Like the coolness of snow at harvest time
is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him;
he refreshes the spirit of his masters.*
(Proverbs 25:13)

In Proverbs 10:26, we again see the negative consequences of a hiring error. The boss who hires a "sluggard" reaps nothing but discomfort. Indeed, he gets burned (as smoke might burn the eyes) and becomes embittered (as vinegar is bitter to the teeth). If he had instead employed someone reliable and industrious – a "trustworthy messenger" – he might have been refreshed. That is, his burden

would have been lightened rather than exacerbated. The chasm between these two outcomes should prod the manager to staff prudently and, as part of that staffing process, to consider character traits (such as the prospective hiree's work ethic and trustworthiness).

Calibrating the Selection System

These proverbs encourage what businesspeople may know intuitively, but for various reasons sometimes disregard: A staffing system should be sophisticated enough to accurately and consistently screen out undesirable applicants. And the measurement of character, as difficult as it may be, should be a focal point in the system.

The design of an effective staffing system begins with knowing what one needs to measure. In human resource parlance, this often-neglected step is called conducting a "job analysis" for the vacant position or, from a macro perspective, for each job in the organization. In a sentence, the job analysis identifies (1) all of the specific tasks performed in the job, and (2) the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes (like character) required to successfully perform these tasks. Typically, more formal approaches to job analysis generate better data than less formal ones.⁵⁹

Once we identify exactly what is to be measured, the screening phase usually includes some combination of reference checking, employment tests, and personal interviews. Each of these elements acts as a gauge, however imperfect, of the prospect's qualifications and future job performance. To refine the metrics for our current hiring processes, we can benefit from using all three tools, provided we recognize and address their limitations.

Reference Checking

Every employer asks for references. They not only serve as an important check on data given by the applicant; they often provide information that is simply unavailable through any other means.

Of course, this assumes you will be able to get the information from the references. It seems that people just won't talk about former employees anymore. However, the trend is not borne of a fresh respect for scriptural teachings on gossip. Like so many current people-management initiatives, it is driven by a concern over man's law.

In particular, defamation suits – allegations that Person A harmed Person B’s reputation by communicating something to Person C – have prompted a steadily increasing number of organizations to prohibit their employees from granting references. As a result, when checking references, the best you can get much of the time are the dates of employment, eligibility for rehire, and the title of the position this person held. They can’t tell you that the guy was terminated for sexually harassing a coworker. It’s company policy.

One survey of 1,300+ human resource professionals affords us some insight into the magnitude of the problem. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, 63 percent said that they or a staff member have refused to provide information about a former employee due to fear of a lawsuit, and 17 percent said they had actually been challenged by a disgruntled former employee alleging that an inaccurate reference had been furnished.⁶⁰ Reference checking, historically a staple for soliciting critical information, is fast becoming a bankrupt enterprise. The law has rendered reference providers mute.⁶¹ Consequently, employment tests, personal interviews, and other measures must pick up this slack.

Employment Tests

The proliferation of new testing instruments over the past three decades bears witness to the deficiencies in other selection tools. Employment tests purport to predict things like applicant Smith’s cognitive ability, his job skills, his leadership potential, and his illicit drug use from past weekend. They’ll forecast for you whether Smith is emotionally stable or if he might come to work toting an AK-47. Does he have a propensity to steal or is he so uncompromisingly honest that he’ll turn in his own mother for pilfering a girdle?

For many business professionals, the legitimacy and value of things like performance tests or cognitive exams is a settled issue. We generally believe, and rightly so, that these instruments deliver on their claims of validity. What is less certain, though, is the validity of tests that probe dimensions of an applicant’s character. Such tools are often perceived as transparent in what they seek and, therefore, fakable. After all, what applicant is going to offer a self-deprecating response to the question: “Have you ever stolen from your employer?”

However, testing instruments for these intangibles have evolved rapidly in recent years. And in the scholarly community, there has been no lack of zeal for scrutinizing their accuracy. We can report that those studies have shown some employment tests can indeed effectively assess character. To date, research appearing in the best management and applied psychology journals has affirmed the validity of

both honesty tests⁶² and other “organizational delinquency” tests (appraising the likelihood for vandalism, absenteeism, grievances, insubordination, violence, etc.).⁶³ Moreover, recent large-sample studies have concluded that test-taker attempts to distort answers are not much of a threat to these tests’ validity.⁶⁴ In other words, some of the sensitive character data that, according to Proverbs, is a prerequisite for making wise staffing decisions can be gathered through employment tests.

But remember, the adage “you get what you pay for” is never more applicable than it is here. There are plenty of bargain-basement tests out there that measure nothing but one’s ability to take that test. So carefully research character tests before you buy them. Take them yourself to evaluate their predictive capabilities. Then, invest in one of the better ones. In doing so, you will procure a powerful tool for raising red flags where they should be raised and for directing attention to applicants who may have otherwise been overlooked.

Personal Interviews

What organization does not rely on the interview? It is without question the tool of choice in employee selection, being accorded more weight than any other.⁶⁵

But this is usually a mistake, and a significant one at that. It is precisely our over-reliance on the personal interview that is responsible for our most regrettable hiring decisions and our many rejections of those who would have been exceptional workers. We interviewers pride ourselves on being accomplished predictors of ability and judges of character and therefore, we give controlling weight to the twenty minutes we spend with a person. Indeed, much of the time, we make what later seems to be the right call; other times this is not the case.

The Book of Proverbs suggests that a person has an infinite capacity to mislead, and that we should weigh interviews more lightly than we do:

*A malicious man disguises himself with his lips,
but in his heart he harbors deceit.
Though his speech is charming, do not believe him,
for seven abominations fill his heart.
His malice may be concealed by deception,
but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.
(Proverbs 26:24-26)*

Regardless of our experience, we can still be hoodwinked. If we naively or stubbornly ignore this possibility, we’ll probably make more staffing mistakes than if we humbly acknowledge it.

Moreover, the proverb teaches that when we do make such a mistake, the blunder will ultimately become public information. In King Solomon's day, an "assembly" referred to a gathering of many people, usually at an appointed time (not unlike the contemporary workplace). Part of the proverb's message, then, is that whereas an individual may be able to conceal his persona initially, over time, and among many people, the truth about him will become evident. On the job, his character flaws will eventually be exposed to everyone.

Ample interview research, dating back over nine decades, bears further witness to this proverb's implication that we weigh interviews lightly. To encapsulate it in a sentence, interviewers can do many things to improve the validity of an interview process, yet interviews tend to be very flawed measures of qualifications and character.⁶⁶ Using them, as we so often do, as the exclusive predictor of applicant fit and future performance is not a prudent move. They can remain the centerpiece of most staffing selection processes, but personal interviews should be heavily supplemented by the tools discussed above as well as the two below.

Two More Options: Background Checks and Employee Referral Programs

To get at some character measures, you can outsource much of the task by springing for the \$150 or so to do a background check. A lot of money per applicant, for sure, but in the long run, it might be a lot more expensive to neglect this step. Reputable background checking firms can legally search past criminal activity, motor vehicle records, credit history, eligibility to work, and other things that might be germane to the job. They can also verify educational and licensing credentials and employment histories. Careful, though. Applicants must sign off on having their background checked, and some will infer negative things about your organization from your request. So consider the down side and use these with prudence.

Alternatively, or supplementally, you can adopt an increasingly-popular option called employee referral programs – rewarding current employees for finding high-quality new hires. As common sense suggests, these programs will tend to reduce the number of low character employees in your workforce. That's because employees generally refer people whom they are proud to know and with whom they'd like to work, not just people who might be available.

The program works like this: after a successful referral and after the new hire has been on the job a certain period of time (usually 60 to 90 days), the employee who referred that new hire receives a reward – anything from cash (typically a few

hundred dollars for non-exempt positions to more than \$1,000 for hard-to-fill jobs), to cell phones, to video equipment – whatever employees value in that particular organization. It's a real win-win. Beyond attracting more upstanding applicants, referral program keep your recruitment costs down and build employee morale at the same time.

Measure Applicants Wisely

The central advice of Proverbs on staffing is straightforward: sophisticate the process. Don't underestimate its importance. Don't under-invest in it. And don't do it informally.

In practice, and stated in the form of a managerial proverb, a sophisticated staffing process is one where we “measure twice, hire once.” The first of these measures entails the examination – the rigorous examination – of the essentials: knowledge, skills, work history, and other traditional criteria. Measure two, the gauging of applicant character, is often ignored but is equally important. When we measure these two areas, we are more likely to have a successful hire, one who is productive and reliable.

Remember, an applicant's character is as important as his or her credentials. In fact, the Book of Proverbs goes so far as to suggest that character be used as a litmus test in the hiring process. That's because when work needs to be done, great credentials and an effervescent personality can be undermined by things like dishonesty, a lackluster work ethic, or an insubordinate attitude. Although budget and time constraints may make measuring these traits cumbersome, institutionalizing character measures in the staffing process is one of the more strategic human resource investments that exists. It's a critical step in hiring, and ultimately in building a competitive workforce.