



Discussion Paper

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT? RECRUITING AND HIRING FROM THE HEART

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RECRUITING AND HIRING FROM THE HEART

The difficulty in finding the right person for the job cannot be overstated. The process of recruiting, interviewing, selecting, training, and onboarding is time-consuming and expensive—especially for public sector jobs, where time just from application to hire lags far behind the private sector. To find out that the wrong person for the job has been hired and to eventually lose them and have to begin the process all over again can be disheartening. There are ways to improve the odds that the right people for the job are hired.

The idea of finding the perfect person for the job is kind of like the idea of finding “The One,” or the love of your life. Regardless of whether or not you believe there is one person out there for you, no matter who you end up with, you both will have to compromise in order to have a healthy, successful relationship. Finding the right person for the job also involves compromise, so think about a few key things that a candidate must possess and then be more flexible in other ways. For example, if your office culture requires that everyone on the team conforms to specific work hours, make sure the person you hire is the kind of person who can thrive under those conditions. A candidate with all the right skills but the need for a more flexible work environment will struggle to be successful and engaged in a more rigid culture. Conversely, you might work in a more laid back environment and find someone who is greatly qualified but needs more structure in order to be successful. If a candidate lacks some of the skills necessary for the job, think about what she can be trained to do and consider hiring her anyway if you think she will fit the culture, particularly at the entry-level. Most skills can be learned, but personalities are more difficult to change. Hiring someone who fits your agency’s culture will usually turn out better long-term than hiring someone solely for the skills he or she possesses.

There is a saying that is often used in matters of love: set it free and if it comes back to you, it is yours; if does not return, it was never yours to keep. This same attitude may work well for retaining employees. Many candidates come to the public sector because they appreciate the job security most public sector jobs offer. You do not want this security to turn into hand cuffs, though, so it is important to make sure your employees feel like they have freedom. The opportunity to grow within an agency, whether it is through promotion or switching to a different position, will help employees stay engaged in and committed to their work.

Employees should also feel like they will be supported if they feel the job is not a good fit. Helping employees move on and find suitable work will help your agency maintain a very positive reputation and brand. Knowing that they will not be left out in the cold if it turns out to be a bad fit actually increases the chances of your agency recruiting and retaining the best candidates. Life is full of changes, but it is much less painful if we embrace change instead of resist it, so be willing to set your employees free and find comfort in the fact that this approach will only help you keep the best of the best in your organization.

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A good place to start to ensure that you are considering and hiring the right candidates is with interviews. Interviews are meant to determine if a candidate is the right person for the job, and what this actually means is getting to know the person during the interview process, which could last anywhere from a few minutes to hours, spanning the course of a few weeks. One of the most important things to determine during this process is what drives a person, whether it is money, a desire to help others, a need to create, or any other of the numerous things that inspire people. What drives someone will partly determine how he or she fits the agency culture, for there is usually something significant driving the agency as a whole, as well. The Army, for example, is driven by being all it can be and serving and protecting the American people. If someone joins the Army for those reasons, he is likely to find fulfillment in his role.

You can find out what drives someone sometimes by asking them directly, but other times you may need to dig deeper. For example, someone who says she is driven by financial success may actually be motivated by something deeper, such as the desire for security. Figuring out what motivates someone enables you to get to know him or her on a deeper level and will make you better able to determine if he or she is a good fit for the position.

Many companies and agencies today possess an awareness of how important it is to make sure a candidate will fit in with the company or agency culture. Although this is, indeed, a very important factor to consider when interviewing candidates, determining a cultural fit can be quite tricky. First of all, within one department or company, many different cultures may exist simultaneously. For example, those working in more technical departments at NASA likely work in a different culture than those working in the finance department, so while an agency may strive for an overarching culture, there are likely several varying cultures within one organization. Taking into consideration which department a candidate will be working in can help determine whether or not he or she will be a good fit.

Another factor to consider is the fact that the culture a company or agency strives for may be different than its actual culture, so ask your peers and yourself what the true culture feels like and if you should hire for the actual culture or the desired culture. Hiring for the desired culture, though, is only a good idea if the candidate is a strong leader and will be in a position of leadership; otherwise, you may be trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. When interviewing a candidate, you can ask what kind environment he or she prefers and what his or her ideal boss would be like. Questions like these help determine if the candidate will be a good fit with your agency's culture. Just remember, hiring for cultural fit is not a simple process, and hiring for future cultural fit is even more complex. Doing so would be similar to choosing a future spouse based on what you aspire to be rather than what you are. In either case, there are numerous factors to consider, but doing it right is worth it in the end.

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Part of agency culture is ensuring that an equilibrium exists on a steady basis. Much as it is at home with life partners, harmony in the workplace is vital to the wellbeing of everyone, including in this case, the level of productivity, and the retention rate. With more and more people working remotely, though, finding someone who fits in and gets along with everyone else may be less and less important (does absence make the heart grow fonder?) While it is doubtful that workplace harmony will ever become a complete non-issue, the importance of finding candidates who fit in may be less vital now than before the rise of telework. While getting along is an important trait for a team—even one that works remotely—to possess, not spending five days a week, eight hours a day in an office could help reduce the number of interoffice disagreements that occur and may even reduce the turnover rate. Conversely, in a harmonious office environment, the advantage of collaboration may be diminished where much of the team is virtual.

The number one reason employees cite for leaving a job is their boss. If a manager has a leadership style that doesn't jibe with someone on the team, that person may be better off if given the option to telecommute even part-time. While it is extremely important that managers remain open to evaluating their leadership style to make sure it is supportive and productive, there is no reason employees should suffer under a boss who is disrespectful and difficult to interact with in person. Teleworking enables employees to communicate via phone and email, greatly decreasing tensions that arise in person. If your office is experiencing discord, then, yes, get to the root of the problem. In the meantime, though, be open to telework so that everyone can cool down. Also keep the option of telecommuting in mind if you have a candidate that you think would be great for the job except for perhaps not fitting in perfectly with the team. Telework does not completely remove the importance of workers getting along all the time, but it might enable some people to be more productive by focusing on the work at hand instead of the gossipy coworker.

When scouting for talent, it is important to keep in mind whether your agency needs specialists or generalists and also what the future needs of the agency are. Specialists are very important to have around, but so are those who can take on multiple roles. When stuck in a hiring rut, make sure your search is not too narrow. Individuals who are flexible bring diversity in thought and experience to the table, and we need new ideas now more than ever. With budgets shrinking and hiring freezes on the rise, it is important to make sure that those you do hire are not static in their roles, but can be placed in many different roles. The last thing you want to do is waste resources hiring someone who can only fulfill the duties of one role. If your department might be or already is short-staffed, you will benefit from having employees who are able to perform many different tasks. Having too many specialists could leave certain duties undone. Some tips for finding strong candidates who are also flexible include not being too strict with qualification requirements -- those who are flexible in mind and ability tend to learn skills

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along the way very well. Be open to hiring someone who might not meet all of your ideal requirements but who could perform diverse duties. Also be sure to ask how they feel about change. A good candidate should be able to embrace change and see challenges as opportunities. Ask them for some real life examples of how they turned a problem into an opportunity to make sure they can walk the walk, and check those experiences with their references. Seek out those who have had projects on the side or their own start-ups. Even if those projects or start-ups failed, the fact that a candidate has tried to make a real go of it shows that he or she is driven and flexible—through good times and bad. This country's biggest issues require new answers to new problems, which means we need to change the way—and who—we hire. Flexibility and a positive attitude toward change are key traits for today's ideal candidates. As in love, hiring should be taken seriously and never entered into lightly. Chemistry is critical but do not be blinded by it; apply rigorous and consistent processes to make sure he or she is Mr. or Ms. Right.