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But I Really Like Her!

When to Risk Hiring Someone With No Experience

Michelle Malay Carter

How do you determine if a candidate with no experience is "trainable"? Most of us rely on intuition; we just have a gut feel that the candidate can get the job done.

For some of us, that's enough for us to roll the dice and make a hire. For others, our particular circumstances make the risks outweigh the potential payoff, so we regrettably let them walk.

I find it interesting that companies frequently hire CEOs with no industry experience whatsoever. Everyone assumes they can "learn" that. Why is it that we are less and less willing to make this type of stretch as we move down the ranks?

Instead, we stick to our non-validated but mainstream criteria such as prior industry experience, managerial experience, or certain college degrees. According to Forbes magazine, 58 members of the Forbes 400, including Bill Gates, have no college degree. (McMenamin, 1998) How many of these candidates would be able to land an entry-level professional position with your firm?

Let's admit it. It's just easier not to buck the system. You may end up choosing what your gut tells you is the inferior candidate, but at least HR won't question you. Moreover, you won't have to invest time, effort, and money into training someone.

Six months later, your "qualified" candidate may still fail, but you won't have to defend your choice because you fulfilled your obligation to check all the boxes on your "candidate competencies credentials" form.

Can We Discover "Raw Talent"

It is possible to accurately determine if a candidate has the "raw talent" necessary for any job if we define "raw talent" as general problem solving ability, which can be exercised to make decisions.

There are distinct types of problem solving capacity, which range from less to more complex. Each type lays the foundation for the next level, just as addition and subtraction lay the foundation for multiplication and division.

If we were to group jobs in terms of problem solving ability necessary to perform the job, we could then pursue candidates who are capable of this level of problem solving as our leading qualification.

In other words, a specific level of problem-solving ability would be designated a "must have" capability. From there, we could add to our list items like experience, education and personality characteristics. However, most of these would qualify for our "nice to have" list rather than our "must have" list, if we fully understood the concept of problem solving ability.

As a bonus, adopting this process would provide you a generous recruiting edge, as your candidate pool would increase substantially.

All of this is not to say if someone proved to have the raw talent necessary to be a brain surgeon but possessed no medical training, I would invite her to slice into my gray matter. Training and experience are impact job performance, but I am arguing that many of the criteria we commonly use to screen candidates do not deserve the reverence we give them.

Four Levels of Problem Solving

Let's define the first four levels of problem solving capability necessary for organizational work. Note how each successive level allows for increasingly complex approaches to problem solving.

Sample interview excerpts of people demonstrating the various levels of problems solving follow each definition.

As you read them, pay particular attention to the way the different subjects group and organize their

information. This can be done by attending to the connecting words such as or, and, if, and then.

1. **Declarative** problem solving is the least complex. It is representative of the problem solving needed in shop and office floor roles. People with the level of capability address problems as they come upon them.

In work situations, it involves following procedures and addressing "glitches" only as they are encountered.

Solutions are formulated in terms of independent thoughts. There is no explicit connection between or among ideas. This form is akin to disjunctive logic of A or B or C.

Common jobs requiring this level of problem solving are: Clerk, cashier, many administrative assistants, line worker, and many technicians.

When asked the question, "**How could we improve customer service at our call center?**", one using declarative problem solving might answer:

Customer Service Rep John:

"We need more training. We need a better computer system. They should do a customer survey."

(The solution could be doing any one of these, as opposed to doing all three of these. The statements are three independent declarations. There is no explicit indication that two or three of the ideas should be done together.)

2. **Cumulative** problem solving requires one to accumulate bits and pieces of information and begin to see a pattern: in other words - the ability to see things coming and be proactive.

Solutions are formulated in terms of an explicit accumulation of related thoughts. The proposed solution is the weight of the sum of the parts.

This form is akin to conjunctive logic of A and B and C.

Common jobs requiring this level of problem solving are: first line manager, some district managers,

many retail or restaurant managers, entry engineer, scientist, or programmer.

When asked the same customer service question, one using cumulative problem solving might answer:

Call Center Team Leader Susie:

"The reps need more training. I don't like the reps having to forward so many calls to me because it makes customers angry. In addition to that, we need a better computer system. Also, we should do a customer survey."

(The solution is the sum of three parts, and it is clear that we should do all three.)

3. **Serial** problem solving requires the ability to see a series of cause and effect relationships. Solutions are formulated in terms of explicitly stated sequences of at least three items. This form is akin to conditional logic of If A then B, and if B then C. $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$.

Common jobs requiring this level of problem solving are: some district managers, some regional managers, unit manager, any manager of first-line managers, sr. engineer, scientist, or programmer.

When asked the same customer service question, one using serial problem solving might answer:

Call Center Manager Joe:

"We should survey our customers to find out what they like and don't like about our customer service. Based on their input, we should upgrade our computer software. That will then require that we provide training on the new system."

(The solution is a three-fold sequence of events. Survey \rightarrow Software Upgrade \rightarrow Training.)

4. **Parallel** problem solving requires the ability to see connections between multiple serial paths.

Solutions are formulated in terms of explicit relationships between two or more series. This form is akin to bi-conditional logic of If A then B, but if and only if C then D.

Note: Serial problem solvers can conceive of multiple serial paths, but they deal with them independently.

Common jobs requiring this level of problem solving are: director or general manager.

When asked the same customer service question, one using parallel problem solving might answer:

Customer Relations Director Joan:

"We need to upgrade our computer system to give our reps more "fingertip" access to information when customers call. Right now, our reps have to forward many of their calls to team leaders because reps have only been trained to deal with a handful of situations.

This, of course, was intentional because of the limitations of our antiquated computer system.

Once this is done, more training in how to incorporate using this additional information to answer customer questions is necessary.

But, before any of that occurs, it would only make sense to first survey our customers about their experience with using our call center. They may have ideas on what types of software upgrades we need to make."

"We also need to investigate Web based customer service options. With many customers being computer savvy, we may be able to provide customers with the ability to get their questions answered via the Web and not have to call our center. We could incorporate some web interest questions on our customer survey, then talk with our Webmaster about our Web capabilities, and then research whether this would be a cost effective solution.

There would be technical costs, but chances are, we could reduce our live representative headcount to offset the cost. If it seems cost effective, we would need to develop web-based customer service, provide related training and then 'go-live.'"

(Joan's solution contains two connected series)

First series:

Survey customers → Call Center Software Upgrade → Rep Training

↓ (Explicit connection is made between the two series)

Second series:

If Web based Interest from Customers → Technical Considerations → Cost Considerations → Develop → Training → Implementation

You Already Sense This

It is likely that you intuitively sense people's differing abilities in problem solving as you go about your daily life - as you listen to others give presentations, ask questions, deliver speeches, sermons or engage in debate.

You will find some people consistently intriguing, always adding value to your viewpoint. Others rarely say anything you had not thought of yourself. Chances are these people have higher and lower problem solving ability than you do respectively.

Unfortunately, most of us are limited to using ambiguous words to express what we are experiencing. We describe some people as sharp, clever, on-the-ball, smart, intelligent, or quick.

The problem with this is that if we were to ask 10 people for definitions of the adjectives listed above, we would get 10 different answers.

A Common Language

As we begin to understand problem solving ability, we can begin to clearly and consistently describe the phenomenon.

In the workplace, this means using problem solving terminology to describe both what makes some jobs more complex than others and using that same terminology in relationship to "must have" candidate qualifications.

For example, let's suppose a team leader job calls for the ability to create the weekly employee work schedule. If being able to create the schedule requires the team leader anticipate customer demand, we know that cumulative problem solving is a requirement of this job. Considering candidates who do not have this capacity is futile.

The Consequences of Mismatching

Mismatching an employee to a job in terms of problem solving ability will leave him either bored with a job's "simplicity" or, conversely, unable to handle the "complexities" job.

One in Three Employees is Mismatched

Our research shows that about 35% of employees are mismatched to their jobs. When the most loyal, hardworking, talented employee is mismatched to a role, she becomes "systemically disabled" - made incapable and ineffective due the system within which she is operating.

Masquerading Personality Issues

Many of the "labels" under-performing employees carry - poor communicator, poor leader, unmotivated, micromanager, defensive, lazy, complainer - are the result of poor placement, not actual incompetence or some "personality flaw".

Proper placement can convert a "problem child" into a star performer, literally, overnight. Do you know anyone who goes to work each day intending to fail, to annoy, to neglect, or disappoint? If your answer is no, then how do you explain why so many employees fall short? Mismatching not only explains it; it allows for a relatively easy fix.

Dr. Elliott Jaques

Research led by Elliott Jaques uncovered a relatively straightforward way of determining the way in which any given person processes information in order to solve problems, which, likewise, reveals at which level of the organization a person is best suited to work.

It consists of examining both the structure and content of one's speech when he is fully engaged in arguing a point. The interview excerpts from the customer service problem-solving example demonstrated just this - various people involved in arguing a solution to a problem.

Differing levels of problem solving were evident in each of these examples. Quite simply, the most complex form of argument a subject uses when fully engaged in "creating a case" reveals his current problem solving capability level or current work potential. Jaques has coined this aspect of

problem-solving ability, complexity of information processing (CIP).

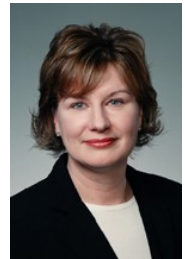
Back to Hiring

Therefore, the next time you find yourself trying to find a way to justify hiring someone without experience, use problem solving capability to build your case.

First, identify the highest level of problem solving called for by the job, and then go about finding a candidate who can do this.

If he has applicable experience to go along with his raw talent, you've got yourself a bonus. If he doesn't, don't despair - he's trainable!

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