

The first five minutes

Contributed by Administrator

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How many times have you felt that a candidate is right for your organisation in the first five minutes? Well, you could be right! There is an increasing amount of research that shows that the gut feel or intuitive hunch about a candidate is a good predictor of success.

We know from experience how difficult it is to persuade managers to give up reliance on intuition. So, we decided to make some fairly controversial adaptations to training we were conducting for one of our clients, a leading luxury clothing manufacturer. Rather than ignoring the line manger's intuition, we used it as part of the design of our selection interviewing training.

To do this, we conducted a fun exercise. We asked managers to study a number of pictures of different people and then asked them to tell us what they deduced about the individuals in the pictures. The results were amazingly accurate - down to spotting that one person was a real life criminal and not to be trusted.

Our next step was to help the managers understand more clearly the signals they received when intuition was at work. We trained the managers to recognise when the intuition signal was positive and when it was negative. With these signals firmly identified by the managers, we used this knowledge to help them conduct competency based interviews.

The method was that if the manager received a positive intuitive signal about a candidate, the rest of the interview was used to seek counter examples. So, that means if the manager felt intuitively that the candidate was a good team player, then they would seek examples to evidence that the candidate did not match this criterion. The reverse process was used if the intuitive signals were negative.

In the training we used real candidates whom the managers had never met so that the intuitive insight was valid. The result was that the managers really enjoyed the training and became "hooked" on testing their intuition. A process some of them have no doubt used outside the recruitment process.

Michael Gladwell has explored this concept in detail in his book 'Blink' published by Allen Lane. Gladwell describes an experiment conducted by psychologists at the University of Toledo. Two people were selected as interviewers and then trained in the proper procedures and techniques of effective job interviewing. The two then had to conduct interviews and evaluate the candidates on a number of criteria.

Unknown to the candidates, the psychologists took fifteen seconds of videotape showing the applicant as he or she knocked on the door, entered the room, shook the hand of the interviewer, sat down, and was greeted by the interviewer. A series of strangers were then asked to rate the applicants based on the handshake clip, using the same criteria that the interviewers had used. Against all expectations, the ratings of both groups were very similar. The results matched on nine out of the eleven competencies.

The leaders of the experiments believe that this power of first impressions is a particular kind of pre-rational ability for making searching judgments about others. This ability is likely to stem from the most ancient part of our brain that has made these kind of judgements since ancient times - as part of our survival strategy.

Our training has shown that far for ignoring intuition, effective competency based interviewing by a trained manager can be utilised as part of an effective selection process.