TCii Strategic and Management Consultants

How to hire people you can trust

A Guest Article by Gerald Law
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Some high-profile blunders

In June 2007 Patrick Imbardelli walked out of his £300,000 a year job as head of InterContinental Hotel Group's Asia Pacific chain, only days before he was to join the main board of the company. He had lied on his CV when he first joined the company. No one had ever checked his CV. One might feel that if InterContinental Hotels was ready to sack Imbardelli for lying on his CV, it would have done well to check the details on it before hiring him in the first place.

In March 2005 Pierre Danon joined the board of Capgemini as Group COO, in a highly trumpeted move from BT. On 30 September 2005, *Le Figaro* reported that Danon had been short-listed for the position of president of Accor. Capgemini CEO Paul Hermelin waited five days for the sake of decorum, and then fired Danon. Hermelin, it seems, did not realise that Danon wanted to be a CEO himself and not another CEO's second-in-command.

These very public recruitment blunders represent a common difficulty found in all recruitment: how do we succeed in hiring people we can trust?

How to avoid the pitfalls

CVs can be misleading. Interviews, more often than not, are only really good at telling us how convincing and professional an individual can be when interviewed. If candidates are actively seeking work, the effect is exaggerated, as they are more likely to be tempted to enhance their desirability with determined interviews and euphemistic retelling of their career histories.

If you want to avoid the pitfalls, here are some guidelines to follow.

Step 1: Plan the process

The all-important message is to create as many opportunities as you can to get to know the candidates you will hire, before you hire them. Meet them several times, take them out for dinner, talk through your business plan and get their thoughts.

However, while some organisations do this, they take months to put candidates through multiple interviews. (Big 4 consultancies do this all the time when bringing on new partners.) Getting all the important stakeholders' diaries co-ordinated up front is a much better route forward. Long processes put candidates off and can all too frequently result in others getting to your preferred individual ahead of you.

In summary:

- If the person to be hired matters to the organisation, then the relevant executives should give appropriate priority to meeting the candidates.
- This needs to be agreed in advance and then ruthlessly policed.

Step 2: Check the CVs

The reliability of CVs can (and should) be dealt with easily. There are now companies that, for a small fee, will take the burden of checking CVs away from potential hirers. One example, Verifile, charges only about £10 to check any important basic detail, and less for large users of their product, such as major corporations with substantial staff turnover. And there are others who provide similar services.

If candidates will not give permission for a professional firm to check their CV details, do not proceed with them.

In summary:

- If you are not going to check details properly yourself, use a third party or make sure your agent is doing this properly for you.

Step 3: Evaluate the candidates

Assuming the raw data is accurate, getting the right people is partly a matter of letting others tell us about the people we are to hire and partly about letting the candidates tell us about themselves.

Letting others tell the story

The first element is usually solved by making use of an executive search process, in strong preference to a selection process. Let me be clear: selection is a valuable approach in the right circumstances; it is simply that it comes a distant second when getting the right candidate is paramount.

A search process seeks out candidates by speaking to individuals who are in a position to offer good advice. By utilising a structured process focused on target companies where suitable individuals can be expected to have gained relevant skills and experience, it is possible to home in on individuals who can be reliably identified as performing the tasks required in a suitable candidate, without the risks of exaggeration inherent in letting eager candidates speak for themselves.

Remember that a search process is not a telesales operation. It involves piecing together information to identify suitable individuals – not just phoning everyone with the right sort of title that a receptionist is prepared to put you through to and catching those who are interesting in moving company. If this triangulation of information is not occurring, find another search firm!

While magic circle firms are often significantly more expensive than a selection process, there are niche firms that are surprisingly competitive on price and provide a quality of service indistinguishable from that of magic circle firms – and, depending on the off-limits situation, possibly better on a given assignment.

In summary:

- Always consider using a search firm if possible, and always ask for an explanation of the process to be used.

Letting the candidates tell the story

Of course, many readers of this article will already be well aware of the value of a good search process. It is the second element – getting candidates to tell us about themselves – where there is a surprising lack understanding in many cases.

Interviews are an indispensable element of the process, and these are increasingly narrowing down to competency-based formats. In the UK this is partly because age discrimination makes a more traditional chronological run through a CV more problematic, and partly because people are realising that in the limited time available in an interview, it is better to focus on experience that is strictly relevant to the role.

But whatever the format, interviews are often very badly done.

The all-important element in an interview is to know what you want to find out. There are always a small number of absolutely key issues relating to the roles for which interviews are taking place, and one must not leave without getting candidates to explain how they would address the issues concerned.

The SOARA model

If you are a “tell me about yourself” sort of interviewer, then the SOARA model may help you to make sure you get fuller answers. The acronym stands for Situation, Objective, Actions, Result, Aftermath, and it allows the interviewer to be sure that all the relevant information has been gathered to unpack candidates' experience and approach to particular issues for given roles.

For example, perhaps you are seeking a new sales director for a software company and partnering is going to be a key element of the role. You have selected candidates who, you have been told, have been involved in partnering.

- **Situation:** You would ask your candidates to explain enough of the background to allow you to understand the context in which the partnering had taken place.
- **Objective:** You would want to understand what the candidates were seeking to achieve in that context.
- **Actions:** You would ask what concrete actions the candidates themselves took to reach the objective.
- **Results:** You would quantify the achievements that came from the actions.
- **Aftermath:** You would see if there was any legacy: did the partnerships endure, say, or collapse as soon as the candidate moved on?

The SMART model

For each of the five elements, use the SMART acronym to fill out the detail.

- **Specific:** Tie the candidates down to quantifiable and demonstrable fact.
- **Measurements:** What were the key criteria – people, revenues, etc.?
- **Allocation:** What resources were involved and who had control of them?
- **Risks:** What were the stakes and what contingency plans were in place had something gone wrong?
- **Timelines**: It is amazing how many excellent stories turn out to have been relevant only to a couple of months out of several years a candidate has spent in a job!

In summary:

- Make sure you are clear on what you need to find out.
- Use the SOARA and SMART acronyms to guide your questioning.

Having said all that, career and competency-based interviews are formal events for which candidates prepare carefully and for which they have most likely been trained in their careers. It is therefore important to use them in combination with other interview types and elements.

Extra dimensions

Other sorts of interviews

Given that several interviews usually need to take place during a recruitment process anyway, some more sophisticated companies use a variety of different formats of interview as a matter of course.

For example, one global consulting and outsourcing firm we work with adds an interview for which their interviewers are trained by the creators of the system, RMS Potentia, to draw out problem-solving and thought-structuring approaches that are not so easily revealed ordinarily.

Another of our clients uses a mix of case study and prepared scenario interviews, which can be surprisingly revealing as both the candidates' preferred outcomes and their preferred route to reach them become clear.

Psychometrics

Understanding candidates' personalities is about helping them to explain how they would like us to work with them should they be hired.

Another route to getting candidates to tell us about themselves is to ask them to fill out self-report psychometric questionnaires. In my opinion, these tools are not used enough in recruitment, but hiring managers avoid them as experience of them is poor.

The reason is that outputs are often poorly understood by their administrators. For example, a score of 4 on a 16PF scale is not a low-ish score out of ten, but indicates that the respondent is close to the mean for the scale. Even the test itself is misunderstood. For instance, a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment does not tell you whether person A will get on with person B.

Further problems rest with the respondents. We are not all very accurate judges of our own character, even when we are being completely honest. But when filling out these questionnaires, some people do try to present themselves in a more desirable light.

A user of a psychometric tool whose entire experience of assessment is the two-day course on which they were taught to administer the test will have significant difficulty drawing out the character of the candidate in the follow-up interview, beyond the gut feeling that would have been used in an interview anyway.

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One way is to make sure you have your candidates tested and then interviewed by an experienced occupational psychologist or other specialist, preferably using a variety of tools along the way. This is common in some countries. In Sweden, for example, candidates understand that going for an executive position will often involve a full day of psychometrics and interviews of different types, before they get to the final “crunch” interviews with key hiring managers that typify the usual process in Britain.

A second and complementary way would be to use tests that, by design, address some of these difficulties. For example, Roy Childs of Team Focus has developed self-report questionnaires that ask people to describe both how they (think they) behave and how they would actually like to behave, producing test outputs that encourage a richer conversation with the respondent – a few more questions, a lot more to discuss.

In summary:

- Make use of a variety of tests, not just the big name tests.
- Get a properly qualified person to select the tool to be used and to carry out the debrief.

References

There is only one message here: don’t let the candidate choose the referees. As hiring manager, you want to know about your candidates’ working relationships and that means external contacts, work colleagues – both superior and junior – and so on. So you should ask to speak to a range of people. Provide a list of people you think it would be good to talk to and ask your candidate for permission to talk to them.

Ask the referees how they think you should work with your candidates in order to get the best out them, tailoring your questions to the particular situation of the roles for which you are hiring. What will make the candidates happy in their work? Where will they need help? Using the SOARA technique described above will add considerable richness to these conversations.

Note that asking a former employer for a formal reference is a different activity, and will produce only a legally accurate reference that cannot be used to sue for loss should the candidate not gain employment. We are talking about taking a variety of informal references where the candidate has voluntarily given permission for you to talk to the people concerned.

Good practice checklist

- Check details properly and formally.
- Use a recruitment process that lets others point out your candidates before you approach them.
- Interview according to your requirement and do so thoroughly.
- Make as much use of alternative format interviews, psychometrics and informal references as you can without drawing the process out to breaking point.
- Avoiding this last problem is usually best done by scheduling the process clearly and briefly before the process begins.

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If you would like more information on any of the points covered in this Guest Article, please contact **TCii** on **020 7099 2621**.