THE LIKEABILITY FACTOR

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A resume and a brief job interview can’t answer the question that matters most to hiring companies: Will this person be flexible, likeable; have the right credentials but the wrong personality and attitude? Companies are more often inventing ways to find out whether a potential new hire will get along with coworkers and be a team player. Call it the “plays well with others” factor.

Whole Foods Market Inc. holds group interviews consisting of management and regular staff. The interview panel chooses new hires collectively. With a low national unemployment rate and many baby boomers ready to retire, Service industries are not only worried about staffing their companies, but also concerned about hiring the employees who will work well in their businesses for the long haul.

Rackspace Managed Hosting, a 1900 employee web hosting firm is finding interesting ways to weed out candidates who are an inappropriate match for their business concept. Job interviews last as long as 9 or 10 hours in an attempt to rub out any fake pleasantness and to hopefully reveal any glaring ‘kinks in the armor’ of potential new hires at Rackspace. CEO, Lanham Napier, reports that employees will spend a weekend helping a fellow employee to move to a new home. He wants to hire people that fit into a tight network of employees.

On the flip side, an article in the Harvard Business Review says that some of these new hiring practices may be counter productive; you may have a group of employees who “[have] a great time going out for a beer, but the quality of their work [may be] seriously compromised”.

At Lindblad Expeditions, a 500 employee adventure cruise company, that is not a worry. Kris Thompson, VP of Human Resources there says, “You can teach people any technical skill, but you can’t teach them how to be a kindhearted, generous minded person with an open spirit”. Lindblad shows potential applicants a DVD of an employee cleaning toilets and of another employee describing how in one shift he washed over 5,000 dishes. The idea behind Thompson’s thinking is to show potential employees what life is like on a Lindblad cruise and to scare away those who shy from the unglamorous side of tourism. New hires undergo a drug test, physical exam and are outfitted and flown to their port of departure, costing Lindblad money. It would be cost prohibitive to hire employees who may decide that its not what they expected.

One of the questions that applicants are asked is to describe a job that wasn’t what they expected and how they dealt with it. The best answer came from a woman who had worked construction; she said when she found that her all male co-workers kept borrowing her tools, she painted all of them hot pink. The woman was hired by Lindblad and went on to head their Antarctica expeditions.

At KaBoom, a children’s playground equipment company, they make applicants sit in a playground while waiting to be interviewed and observe their behavior. If they just stand there and don’t interact at all with the equipment, they are often not asked back. They also invite a potential management candidate on playground building trips to see how they deal with a project that can take as many as 300 volunteers to build. KaBoom CEO, Darell Hammond, reported that his staff turnover has decreased and employee staying time has doubled since they initiated this practice. Hammond said he isn’t afraid of scaring people off, since the best candidates “are constantly looking at themselves to excel, not just cross the finish line, but blow through the finish line.”

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