

Cultural-Fit Screening Might Help Avoid Bad Hires

The 21st century job seeker typically faces a battery of screenings after their applications are accepted for serious consideration by a large employer. Their credit and criminal records, personality and behavioral profiles, professional history and education claims are among the many aspects of their backgrounds to be examined.

Isn't that enough to put candidates through? For a growing number of companies, in this age where many hires fail in short order, the answer is no. These employers say candidate screening isn't comprehensive unless it includes an assessment of the individual's fit with the unique corporate culture of the company he or she wishes to join.

"Culture fit is increasingly important in environments where, to get the work done, people have to talk to each other, as opposed to working on an assembly line," says Ron Selewach, CEO of Human Resource Management Center in Tampa, Fla., which provides a variety of candidate assessments. "Companies may not have explicitly acknowledged the importance of culture fit, but it's always been there."

Corporate Culture Is Wide-Ranging, But Hard to Define.

What are companies talking about when they refer to their culture? Corporate culture comprises, among other things, a company's shared assumptions, beliefs, values, attitudes, modes of decision-making habits, team or individual orientation, collaborative or authoritarian management style, recognition and rewards practices, jargon and symbols, stories and legends, dress codes and daily routines. It's everything from the reserved parking spot for the employee of the month to the work schedule of the CEO, whether it's round-the-clock or strictly 9-to-5.

Though personality has an effect on cultural fit, they are not the same thing, observers say. "Interviewers often make the mistake of assessing individual personality fit rather than the organization fit," says Michelle Lederman, an adjunct professor at New York University's Stern School of Business.

Some believe that although defining the culture of a particular enterprise is like nailing jelly to the wall, effective HR and hiring managers know a culturally fit candidate when they interview one. Yet the efficacy of this approach is unproven, and it's fraught with the potential legal and public relations pitfalls of eliminating candidates for entirely subjective reasons.

How can employers go about testing cultural fit? By bringing in a provider of candidate assessments that endeavor to bring some objectivity to the intrinsically subjective notion of a particular company's culture.

Test Instruments Add Some Objectivity to Assessments of Cultural Fit.

One player in the cultural fit assessment arena is Taleo Corp., a maker of staffing management software. "The cultural-fit assessment is part of our multi-tier selection strategy," says Adrienne Whitten, a spokesperson for the Dublin, Calif., company.

"When we originally created the cultural fit assessment, it was a research project on the elements that go into corporate culture," says Nathan Mondragon, a senior industrial psychologist and assessment product manager at Taleo. "We came up with 38 facets of culture." Questions on the assessment ask candidates how desirable it is to work in a stable work environment or to be held to high performance expectations, for example.

"We ask our client's executives to rank order the 38 facets of culture, then we build the actual list of questions for applicants," rewording some questions if necessary, Mondragon says. Taleo also helps clients interpret applicants' responses to the cultural fit questionnaire.

HR Gets Involved in Many Aspects of the Cultural Fit Assessment.

Human resources typically plays a critical role in the selection of a provider of cultural fit assessments, and in the implementation and ongoing administration of those assessments.

"The C suite becomes very interested, but HR is the owner of the project," says Anna Safran, an industrial psychologist at Human Resource Management Center. "We generally start by giving a survey to the C suite, and that may be all they want. But preferably, they want us to sample the employees. It's always interesting to see what the staff thinks the culture is versus what the leadership thinks." HR leaders may be in the best position to lean on the executive team to extend the survey to line managers and rank-and-file.

HR, which typically makes the decision to use a cultural-fit assessment, is often heavily involved in the development, implementation and interpretation of a cultural fit assessment, according to Mondragon. "HR is the point person for us," he says. "They organize the effort internally, and sometimes they play a major role in editing and critiquing the questionnaire."

How hard is it to sell a cultural fit assessment to top management? "For most executives, the proof is in the pudding," says Selewach. "Some clients will give it a try, even though they're skeptical. They quickly see that we're onto something, because they see improvement in their workforce's productivity, performance, satisfaction and tenure."

Customized Assessments Seek to Peg Behaviors to Idiosyncratic Culture.

Other industry insiders say that an effective assessment of cultural fit can't be gleaned from a standardized questionnaire that's only tweaked on the margins to accommodate the needs of a particular client company.

"With computerized instruments, you get a lot of standardization," says Linda Ford, a business consultant based in Austin, Texas. "What you don't get is anything that specifically reflects the behaviors you want to see in your culture." Ford's approach to providing cultural assessment involves greater customization of the instrument.

Ford's consultation process involves an investigation of the client's corporate cultural values, professed and actual. "Most companies have a values statement;

you've got the platitudes on the wall somewhere," Ford continues. "You create opportunities for individuals to tell you about examples of when they saw the values lived out – or violated." These interviews lead to the creation and administration of a questionnaire that Ford believes effectively assesses the natural fit of the candidate's work-related behavior with the culture of the hiring company.

"Cultural fit is tacit knowledge; it's hard to assess fit with something that's invisible," Ford continues. "So you translate it into behaviors that are visible."

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