

The Most Important Question in Hiring

Many managers are understandably far more interested in getting a job opening filled than they are in preparing a good interview. So in their haste, they'll do what a lot of busy people do when they're looking for inspiration, and turn to the Internet. "Somebody out there knows the really good interview questions," they reason. "I'll just use those."

If that manager hasn't yet been you, just go ahead try it. Do a web search on "good interview questions." You'll get pages and pages of results. But before you even click on a single link, take a look at each of the page summaries. You'll notice that most, if not all, of your search results are to help candidates deliver canned "ideal" answers to common interview questions.

So if you're going to base your interview strategy on the Internet's idea of good interview questions, the odds are that your candidates will be better prepared for your interview than you are.

I've been involved in lots of hiring decisions over the years, and probably even more terminations. And when the entrances and exits involved the same people, I'd do my own post-mortem on what went wrong. And here's what I've concluded: The most common reason why a hire isn't successful is because the hiring team wasn't really clear on what they were looking for in the first place.

"Steve was a good big-picture guy," the post-Steve water-cooler conversation would go, "but that job needed someone who's really tactical." Well, whatever Steve was or wasn't, he was or wasn't the day he sent his resume; the hiring team just didn't smoke it out. And that's not for lack of clever interview questions: It's because the team hadn't been clear on what the job required before they ever called Steve.

The most important hiring question is not one you ask your candidates; It's one you ask yourself. The next time you have to make a hire, before you even draft a job posting, sit down and write out the answer to this question: "What are the three to five value-added deliverables this person has to deliver in the first twelve months on the job?"

Think of the deliverables as those things you want this person to leave on the desk or floor when she goes home at night, or what you want her to put in your hand. But make must be the things you actually want from them. For example, suppose you want your next employee to take questions from questions. You might spend time asking about what customer interaction the person has had. But if you dig a bit deeper, you may realize that you actually want a person who can resolve customer problems. Making a hire based on questions about "customer interaction" could yield disappointment when you discover the person doesn't try to understand and help upset customers.

Once you and the hiring team have that kind of deep clarity on what you're hiring for, it's amazing how your most meaningful interview questions will almost generate themselves. Good hiring decisions don't really come from interview questions that are particularly clever. They come from questions that are based on a clear understanding of what you want.