Searching for Certainty in Hiring

You hear the word 'certainty' a lot these days. Hockey fans were deprived of their favorite pastime for an entire season as NHL owners and players waged labor war on the issue of 'cost certainty'. In the United States, the 'politics of certainty' has become one of the defining dictums of the post 9/11 federal administration. The word punctuates the letterheads of scores of companies, as well as the mission statements of hundreds more. Legal proceedings are decided using the yardstick of certainty, and finally, better than any other word, certainty describes the relationship we expect with our essential service providers, regulators, institutions and corporate leaders.

Yet despite its popularity, it is uncertainty rather than certainty which better captures the turbulence of the topsy-turvy world around us. From rampant global geopolitical quagmires to environmental volatility, to the latest 'hi-carb, low-carb, no-carb' confuse-fest, there is no escaping the fact that there is a lot of uncertainty out there. Consider a spate of recent corporate announcements as cases in point. Last month shareholders of Nortel, Xantrex and Mitec, all jettisoned high profile 'hired-guns' from their executive teams. In press releases announcing the changes, all used the word 'certainty' to comfort shareholders that the future would be better than the uncertainty of the present. The Chairman of the Board of Xantrex assured shareholders that though the previous leadership was 'mismatched' with the needs of the business, 'we will be certain with the next leader we hire'. Similarly, Mitec's press statement read, "Our new leadership will be aligned with the changes we are announcing. Of that you can be certain". Finally, Nortel's Chairman stated, 'though we had irreconcilable, divergent views with management, the organization is certain in the direction it is now taking'.

This article explores the seductive notion of 'certainty in hiring' including the vast literature which promises to deliver it. The paper also discusses the practical challenges in ensuring certainty in hiring and then offers a path forward with specific recommendations and observations gleaned from a quarter century in the hiring trenches.

Searching for Certainty
A perusal of the literature on leadership and selection is a reasonable starting point to explore the notion of certainty in hiring. Countless academics, consultants, and executives alike have deconstructed and analyzed both subjects, filling bookstores, libraries and magazine stands with their prescriptive certainties. Sifting through this literature, however, one is quickly cold-cocked by the realization that the search for certainty in hiring collides squarely with the inconvenient reality that there is little agreement on the essential 'truths' pertaining to leadership and selection. To illustrate, stroll down the aisles of your local Chapters Bookstore and you will see titles such as *Leading Quietly* and *In Praise of Slow* sitting side by side with *Lead Out Loud* and *Speed is Life*. Testosterone charged covers such as *Hardball Leadership*, *Playing to Win*, *The Tyranny of Niceness*, and *Sun Tsu was a Sissy* sit in intimidating proximity to books on the importance of *'principle-centered'*, *'soulful'*, *'servant'* and *'spiritual'* leadership. Books preaching the power of employee trust, loyalty and commitment compete for our attention with others on the need to outsource and maintain maximum organizational flexibility. Book covers challenge us to *'Want it all'*, *'Have it all'*, and *'Take it all'* while others beg us to strive for *Just Enough – Balancing Happiness*, *Achievement*, *Significance and Legacy*. If you feel the urge to scream, feel free to succumb by reading *Primal Leadership* or avoid the leadership section altogether and wander straight down to the recruitment and selection section of the bookstore. Perhaps the key to certainty in hiring resides in **how** candidates are evaluated rather than in what they are evaluated for.

The literature specific to recruitment and selection also boasts a wide array of conflicting truths. Proponents of *'structured'*, *'behavioral'*, *'competency'* and more recently, *'performance-based'* interviewing all argue the merits of their approaches

while pointing out the glaring limitations of the others. Advocates of selection centers and psychometrics complicate matters further by noting the low reliability and validity of interviewing as a standalone selection methodology. Scores of books share with us what their authors believe to be the single, quintessential high performer attribute, the defining quality underlying greatness. Select for this one attribute and you are certain to have a winner on your hands. Unfortunately, you will have to take your pick from books championing *'courage'*, *'toughness'*, *'balance'*, *'adaptability'*, *'simplicity'*, *'integrity'*, *'confidence'*, *'likeability'*, *'love'* or the ever popular grab-bag of *'emotional intelligence'*. In biography after biography, one gleans from the ruminations of the rich and now, often infamous, on the selection criteria for *Zero Defect* or *High Impact* or *Error-Free* or *Six-Sigma Hiring*. The one or five or ten secrets to hiring immortality are revealed to those fortunate enough to purchase these books. Judge for yourself, but some of hiring treasures may well be best left buried. Consider the author who offers the following hiring advice, "Sure I look for what everyone else looks for, drive, passion, leadership skills, team-skills, commitment and vision. But I also want people who have a slightly crazy streak. I want them to be nuts, but in a positive way. I want them to be able to stretch and think big, to think wild and think crazy". Another book's author shares the following tip, "Go through a standard set of questions, but do not be afraid to ask unconventional questions to elicit a more profound understanding of how the candidate thinks. Such questions could include: 'What's your favorite Elvis song?' 'Who are your comic book heroes?' You'll be surprised at what the answers to these questions will tell you about a person".

It would be most helpful if one could apply a simple litmus test of cause and effect in order to reconcile some of these conflicting perspectives. However, it is no easy task to isolate variables, measure them, test and control for them. One cannot demonstrate for example, that intelligence 'causes' high performance only that it correlates with high performance. The same can be said of a whole basket of attributes such as drive, initiative, adaptability, flexibility, optimism, resilience, and passion which appear to cut across many leadership roles. Aggregating these attributes and understanding their interaction so as to make prudent hiring decisions becomes a key challenge. In the business of hiring, decisions invariably involve choices which carry costs and all of the choices are between imperfect and imprecise options.

The Context of Hiring – Crafting Pegs into Moving Holes
A few years ago, the Managing Director of a well-known industrial psychology firm announced that he would no longer interview potential candidates for his own company. Instead,

his staff would administer batteries of psychological tests to all applicants and those scoring the highest would be hired. If the firm truly believed in the efficacy of its own selection tools, he reasoned, it should have the confidence to make hiring decisions on the basis of them alone. The Managing Director would only meet the candidates on their first day as employees of the firm. Over the next year a total of eight senior staff members were hired. They lasted, on average, less than fourteen months.

The above story illustrates that certainty in hiring requires not only the ability to identify, screen and hire 'competence' but also to consider the circumstances which will realize and optimize that competence. In the case of the industrial psychology firm, working for the technically brilliant, highly analytical Managing Director was a notably unpleasant 'circumstance'. Staff found him and the environment he fostered, to be particularly harsh, autocratic and uncaring. Lacking the requisite self-awareness to recognize this, the Managing Director neither sought to improve his leadership skills nor to hire staff on the basis of their ability to thrive in such an environment. In other words, expertly beveled candidate pegs were crafted without serious consideration to the characteristics of the organizational holes into which they were expected to be so snugly fitted.

Organizations are entities of varying maturity, health and defining individual characteristics functioning in industries similarly differentiated. Orbiting both are environmental factors with varying gravitational forces and complexities which are always dynamic and changing. Organizations are also collections of individuals who bring their own perspectives which shape, filter and often distort how they view their organizations and requirements. Boards of Directors boast varying intimacy and diagnostic understanding of their organizations and their needs. They often conceptualize their company cultures as they wish they were rather than how they actually are. Hiring managers are often unaware or prefer not to discuss their own management styles or to speculate on how those styles inform the requisite attributes of the successful candidate who will 'fit' well with them. Busy and hurried, managers often see cost rather than value in hiring processes which invite multiple inputs and perspectives. Compensation systems reinforce and at times frustrate efforts to focus and align staff to common goals. Politics and power dynamics, sometimes palpable, sometimes lurking under the surface, must always be assumed to be variables.

Not to be overlooked, candidates are increasingly sophisticated in their understanding of how to 'play the hiring game'. They read the same leadership books, anticipate what organizations look for, and have often been trained on dealing with various interviewing techniques. They occasionally exaggerate results

and accomplishments, and enhance previous job responsibilities. Candidates bring varying levels of self-awareness, and often camouflage, hide or are unaware of their derailing attributes or developmental needs. Finally, they bring changing motivations and agendas to the process which confounds efforts to predict the future from the past.

Thus, if certainty in hiring is likened to expertly fitting finely crafted candidate pegs into carefully measured employment holes, it must be understood for its true level of complexity, a real-time endeavor where the shape of the holes constantly change. Understanding the nature of these changes, anticipating them and adjusting for them becomes an important skill-set in the search for hiring certainty.

Approximating Certainty

The authors of the best-selling book *Freakonomics*, caution their readers that so-called experts use their informational advantage to serve their own agendas. Thus forewarned, the following observations are gleaned from our ongoing 25 year long search for certainty in hiring.

- *Process matters.* Hiring excellence is a process which is of equal importance to engineering or manufacturing in the success of a business. Furthermore, as with any other complex, mission-critical process, there are few shortcuts that don't carry significant costs. Organizations need to carefully map and understand how they go about hiring employees and how the various steps interact to affect an outcome. Only then can they drive to increase quality, reduce variability, and increase predictability by continuously improving the process.

- *Understand the context.* An effective hiring process does not start with a job description but rather with a careful assessment of a company's landscape. Growing entrepreneurial firms, for example, are characterized by the processes they have in place, the cadence of their sector, their rate of growth, the competitive environment, ownership characteristics, the Board of Directors dynamics, decision-making style, characteristics of the founders, commitments made for growth, financial health, strengths and weaknesses, etc. These considerations interact to describe an organization as it is, where it wants to be, how it hopes to get there and the gaps in-between. Ignore or pay lip service to context and the odds are very high you will hire the wrong person.

- *Know the outcome you want.* This includes consideration of why a specific hiring need exists, the key challenges in the role, obstacles to success as well as measures of performance. Specifying how performance will be measured is a much more difficult and time-consuming endeavor than simply specifying responsibilities, especially when they can be difficult to quantify. However, it has two very large benefits: first, the organization can much more accurately evaluate candidates by delving into how they have delivered to those measures in the past, and secondly, the firm begins to manage expectations and stimulate constructive dialogue with candidates early in the process.

- *Solicit input.* Take your pick from the following two axioms: 'we see things as we are not as they are', or, 'the mountain looks different from the top than the bottom'. Both send similar messages that we all have positional perches, personal biases, filters, and agendas, which color our vantage points. To reduce the risks which these present in accurately specifying the requisites for a position, a number of stakeholder inputs should be solicited. If these validate your perspective then the hiring process can proceed with confidence. If they raise concerns or conflicts, then these should be discussed and reconciled. Otherwise, these issues will fall onto the unsuspecting shoulders of the person you hire who may or may not have been selected for their ability to undertake such challenges.

- ***Think hard about the fit and then think about it again.*** Fit means aligning the candidate to the tasks, the deliverables, the company characteristics, context and the person(s) to whom he or she will report and work with. Consider which employees have been most successful with your company and what qualities they possess which helped them succeed. It is useful to contemplate your own values and leadership style, the effect you have on others, and what this means for people who work best with you. These were presumably issues of concern which the former vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and now Nortel CEO, Bill Owens considered before hiring a multimillionaire, Cisco-trained executive to 'shake things up' at his organization. The fact that they parted company due to 'divergent management styles' in only three months suggests that perhaps they were not considered enough.

- *Focus on key requirements.* While a select few exceptional individuals excel at all things, most of us skew decidedly in our skill sets. It is highly unlikely, for example, that an organization will find a candidate who is concurrently a lateral thinking product visionary, a superb sales/marketing management professional and a process/execution oriented operator. It is even further unlikely that such an individual will excel equally as a firm scales from inception to $100 million per year in revenues. Yet organizations set out such requirements with alarming regularity, only to be disappointed. Instead it is far more productive for an organization to focus on the few key attributes which,

over a defined period of time, will most impact on the success of an individual in a role and then select against those competencies.

- *Evaluate candidates with a plan.* Organizations often subscribe to the multiple interview strategy where candidates are subjected to a barrage of interviews by various stakeholders. Unfortunately these interviews are usually unplanned and uncoordinated with the result that the candidate undergoes a variant of the same interview, from different vantage points, multiple times. Consensus is rare and the inputs difficult to reconcile. Thus, while considerable resources are expended in the noble pursuit of rendering a thorough hiring decision, the result rarely passes that test. Instead, a plan should be in place outlining how each interview will add to an in-depth understanding of the candidate's fit to the role and company in question.

- *Ask What, How and Why.* Equipped with a set of key requirements, questions should focus on what candidates have done in the past related to those requirements, how they went about doing it and why they did it in that manner. As importantly, questions should delve into what the candidates learned from their past efforts and what they would do differently in the future. Finally, if the organization has taken the time to outline how performance will be measured once in the job, it should then look for evidence that candidates have delivered similar metrics in the past. Patterns of past behaviors combined with the appropriate motivation to achieve the future, are good predictors of future performance.

- *Get supplementary data.* If an organization has the time and willingness to invest, supplementary assessments can certainly add useful information by which to make confident hiring decisions. Minimally, scrutiny of references from multiple sources is a critical step which should be pursued with vigor. Such probing should delve into themes pertaining to candidates' strengths and developmental needs, style, motivation, and personality. The key is soliciting many, many points of contact not simply the

two or three guaranteed to provide positive comments. As with the interviews, the references should focus on *what*, *how* and *why*.

- *Don't dump them at the door.* The hiring process can be likened to a corporate version of a courtship in which emotionally charged parties put their best feet forward in nurturing potential employment relationships. The 'morning after' however can be sobering for all parties. It is thus highly useful to ensure that a clear understanding of expectations and a plan for the first 90 days on the job is in place beforehand to assist the new hire integrate effectively into the organization.

Conclusion

Despite their best efforts, purveyors of science, junk-science, universal 'truths', and even secret recipes have yet to successfully serve-up certainty in hiring. Predicting outcomes with certainty requires an awareness of all the factors influencing those outcomes. Such knowledge can never be fully obtained in a process such as hiring whose outcome is the interaction of human beings in complex systems. However, if managed diligently as a key process for organizational success, hiring can be continuously improved and excellence achieved.

In one of his best known songs, David Bowie lamented, 'I don't want knowledge, I want certainty'! Take it from us, in the world of hiring, forget the certainty and go for the knowledge.

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