

## The new office matchmaker

### Can a quiz predict who is likely to stay?

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In the continual search for commitment, at least one workplace matchmaker is striving to measure people's potential for engagement at the job interview stage.

No, not in the matrimonial context, but as a way for companies to find the right employees who will grasp the brass ring and remain happily wed for the long term to their job, peers and overall workplace culture.

Introduced by international recruiting agency, Development Dimensions International Inc., the concept of "hiring for engagement" aims to take the best aspects of a workplace and quiz job applicants on their potential to fit into the dynamic.



CREDIT: Andrew Barr Illustration,  
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(See hardcopy for Illustration)

But other recruiting experts doubt there can be any certainty about a new hire.

In the past several years, many companies have implemented measures or programs to officially foster "engagement" among employees who are already on the job in order to create a positive and productive workplace, and hence, increase employee retention.

The company now brings the concept to the hiring stage: "People who are high on engagement are less likely to leave, have lower turnover, better performance serving customers and better productivity," observes Jocelyn Berard, managing director of DDI Canada.

"So we said, 'What about backing up and going to the entrance door when we select them, can we do something there before they get into the company?'"

To provide an effective way to measure a job applicant's potential to be an "engaged" employee, DDI's consultants set out an engagement readiness index, based on six characteristics most common in productive employees: adaptability, achievement orientation, attraction to work, emotional maturity, positive disposition and self-efficacy.

The six characteristics were identified following surveys and assessments DDI conducted of 3,800 employees at seven client organizations.

Employees with a high ERI are, according to DDI, more inclined to excel at sales, teamwork and persuasiveness within their workplaces, and rated themselves 33% less likely to leave within the next year than their less "engaged" colleagues might.

The consultancy concludes its research "can be used to strongly predict engagement."

At each workplace, the index is customized to reflect the position that needs to be filled along with the nature of the industry, Mr. Berard says.

He notes that DDI is retained by several leading Ontario automakers to assist with filling assembly-line positions with dedicated employees. "You always need to make sure the motivation of what [a candidate] is looking for in a job is matching what you're offering or hiring for," he says.

The consultancy also numbers among its clients a major printing company based in Quebec and transportation companies in Western Canada.

In some cases, job applicants are required to fill out a questionnaire online to determine their propensity to be "engaged" before even getting an interview.

However, he warns that hiring for engagement is "just the first step" and workplaces must have the environment, culture, management and work roles that will sustain an employee's interest and loyalty.

"There's never 100% guarantee. We're not measuring a piece of metal or wood or liquid, we're really measuring a person," he says.

Dr. Billy Strean, an associate professor at the University of Alberta's Faculty of Physical Education & Recreation, who has studied commitment by athletes to sports teams, suggests DDI's hiring for engagement approach could be helpful. "I think a lot of questions get asked in interviews that aren't ultimately that useful in determining whether the candidate is going to do well on the job, or the questions don't discriminate between one candidate or the other," Dr. Strean says of many workplaces.

"If you can capture certain dispositional qualities about a person that are unlikely to change, then you can teach them the technical side of the job," he says. "It's much easier to train people to be able to execute a function than alter their attitude."

Dr. Strean proposes that ideally, candidates -- including professors seeking tenure -- audition for their position. "Then you'd know their capabilities."

That's maybe the only way Dr. Robert Hebert, managing partner for of the Toronto-based Stone Wood Group Inc. human resources consulting firm would bet on a best fit. He contends there is no means to invoke certainty into the employee hiring process largely because employees, too, are increasingly savvy.

"You've got a difficult thing there," he says about certainty in the hiring process. "You've got candidates who tell you what they want to tell you, you've got

companies that often believe their own press clippings.

"One observation I would make is companies tend to hire for the culture they'd like to have rather than the culture they have," Dr. Hebert, says.

Although he advocates an approach to hiring similar to DDI's, Dr. Hebert is less optimistic about the certainty of the outcome despite the effort. He suggests the best an employer can do is focus on hard facts, knowledge and realistically, hope for the best.

In a paper titled Searching for Certainty in Hiring, he writes, "Despite their best efforts, purveyors of science, junk-science, universal truths, and even secret recipes, have yet to successfully serve up certainty in hiring."

He cites a line from a David Bowie song: "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," says Dr. Hebert.

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