

Hire Slow and Fire...Slower?

A hiring process that lets you correctly identify the right people most of the time may not always be quick, but the slowest part should be getting the right people to apply.

By Stephen Balzac

How often have you heard someone from a company say, “We hire slow and fire fast?”

I’ve heard this line so often that it sounds sort of a like a mantra or one of those wise sayings that are taken for granted but are generally wrong: “I invest for the long term,” or “There is no room for emotions in the work place,” or “The Red Sox will never win.”

This is not to say that it’s always wrong to “hire slow.” However, it’s important to understand the different ways that a company can hire slow. Some of them make more sense than others. What, fundamentally, does it mean to hire slow? For that matter, what does it mean to “fire fast?”

In the last issue of the *Journal of Corporate Recruiting Leadership*, I described a company I referred to as “Asteroid Systems.” Asteroid had a hiring process that was not so much slow as glacial: candidates were called back for round after round of interviews with more and more people. Some of them did, apparently, get hired. Many others found different jobs long before Asteroid could make up its collective mind. Did Asteroid hire slow? Yes. Was that particularly useful? Not so clear.

A company can hire slow for two major reasons: because they know exactly who they’re looking for and are willing to wait for the right people to apply, or because they don’t know who they’re looking for and believe they’ll know when the right person applies.

The first is more useful. If you’ve done your homework and figured out the characteristics of the employees you’re looking for, and if you’ve trained your interviewers to recognize those people, then by all means hire slow. Take your time and wait for the right people or, better yet, go out and attract them to the company.

Asteroid Systems, though, wasn’t doing that. It didn’t re-

ally know what it was looking for. Some interviewers were looking for top performers; others were looking for someone who would be “fun to work with” and “not threatening.” Still others were searching for people who “wouldn’t damage the culture.” Sadly, Asteroid Systems is hardly unique; I’ve observed the same behaviors over and over. Let’s take a moment, therefore, to understand what they mean.

Seeking Top Performers

This is a worthy goal, no question about it. The problem lies not just in identifying who will be a top performer, but who will be a top performer at your company. This is where your corporate culture plays a major role: if your culture is one of aggressive individualism, then team players are less likely to thrive; conversely, if you’re working to build high-performance teams, then someone who has never cooperated with their team in the past isn’t likely to change just for you. Identifying the intersection between top performers and your cultural values takes more than listing buzzwords on a job ad and then hoping for the best. It requires taking an honest look at your company and how you’re doing business; it requires paying attention to the things that you normally take for granted: those are the elements that a new person is most likely to notice.

Fun to Work With

I am frequently told that the goal of the interviewing process is to find people who are fun to work with. In one case, the same person who told me that they had a great system that enabled the company to hire people who were fun to work with later told me that it was successful about one time in three. In other words, it was failing twice as often as it was succeeding!

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The problem with looking for people who are fun to work with is something that I've dubbed the "hydrangea effect," after the Russian spies recently arrested by the FBI. The neighbor of one of the spies was quoted as saying something to the effect that, "She couldn't be a spy. Look what she did with the hydrangeas!"

Planting hydrangeas is so far outside the image of a Russian spy that this simple act created a very powerful illusion. After all, who would imagine James Bond planting hydrangeas? This, of course, is exactly why he would plant them! (And, being Bond, probably knows detailed information about seven different cultivars.)

By the same token, many interviewees learn early on how to conduct themselves in an interview. In fact, most candidates probably have more experience being interviewed and more knowledge about how to evoke the hydrangea effect than the interviewers have about how to interview. The worst prima donnas are generally extremely charming and friendly. It's only when you've worked with them for a while that the problems emerge. Perhaps even more disturbing is that psychopaths, in the clinical sense of the word, are particularly charismatic, are generally skilled communicators, and are extremely good at masquerading as effective leaders. No, that's not a joke or an exaggeration.

Fun to work with is a not a particularly good metric. Not only does it get you the wrong people, it can easily get you the wrong people who are the best at masquerading as the right people. More broadly, gut instinct, positive or negative, is easily fooled. It takes a lot of training to develop a smart gut, and, even then, it'll be wrong more often than we like to admit.

Not Threatening

This is an odd statement. What does it mean to be looking for someone who is "not threatening?" After all, as long as the candidate didn't show up for the interview armed to the teeth, one might assume that they are "not threatening."

When I've asked people what they meant, the answers were as varied as the people asked: "won't disrupt the way we work," "good team player," "respects others," "isn't a know-it-all," "will be loyal," and so forth. A common element, though, was a key element of the corporate culture: employees at organizations with highly competitive "fire fast" cultures were more

likely to view strong candidates as "threatening" than employees at organizations where people were not pitted against one another. Quite simply, if the company takes the attitude that the poorest performers will be fired, then many people will instinctively respond by making sure not to hire anyone more qualified than they are! While I've had managers tell me that such an attitude is highly unprofessional, it's also highly intelligent self-preservation. I've observed that most people would rather feel smart and unprofessional than stupid and professional, especially if the former lets them keep their job and the latter does not!

Not threatening also comes into play in organizations that have a culture that does not tolerate mistakes. The less tolerance there is for mistakes, the less willing people are to make decisions. At RC Systems, a manager made one hiring mistake, bringing in a candidate who turned out not to be qualified (despite all the appropriate reference checks!). This error

was brought up at his reviews over and over again! It takes little imagination to guess how likely this particular person was to take a chance on even the most perfect-appearing hire after that!

Wouldn't Damage the Culture

Another popular explanation for hiring slowly is to "not damage the corporate culture." This might be a real concern ... if the company is extremely small, as in tiny, or if you're hiring someone into a very senior leadership position. Organizational culture is one of the most powerful, most immovable forces in any business. Culture is extremely resilient and does not change easily. Now, if you're hiring a new CEO, then a cultural fit is very important. If you have a cultural mismatch between a CEO and the organization, then one or both are going to be extremely unhappy: a culture mismatch produces a culture immune response (for more on this topic, see my book, *The 36-Hour Course in Organizational Development*). Apple under John Sculley is a good example of an organization suffering from a culture immune response: morale disintegrated, motivation collapsed, innovation suffered, and so forth. In the end, the culture won: Sculley was driven out.

If you are hiring for less lofty positions, though, there are a couple of things to recognize: first, if someone really doesn't mesh with the culture, they probably won't stay; and second, if you haven't done a great deal of homework, you probably can't tell in advance anyway. Because most people fo-

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cus only on the surface trappings of organizational culture, it's easy to be misled by cultural artifacts. To be fair, it does take a fair bit of effort and training to identify the "why's" of culture that underlie the "what we do around here."

Now, it is certainly possible to hire people faster than the organization can assimilate them. Surprising as it may seem, that won't damage the culture. It may damage team cohesion though, and bring out weak points in the culture: Digital Equipment Corporation had a very aggressive culture, where ideas were constantly debated and challenged. This worked in large part because DEC had developed a very tightly knit team structure, in which a strong sense of trust of connection between employees kept the debate focused and manageable. When DEC grew too rapidly, the team structure couldn't keep up and trust was lost. The culture didn't change; however, the mechanisms of the culture were no longer functional in the new environment. This was not a problem with hiring people who "damaged the culture," though so much as it was a problem with hiring a lot of people faster than the necessary socialization could take place.

Finally, let's take a look at "fire fast" and what that says about your hiring process.

First, and just to get this out of the way, if someone is committing corporate malfeasance, breaking the law, harassing others, and so forth, you should already have policies in place to deal with that. If you don't, you have bigger problems than anything this article will address.

There are times when it becomes painfully obvious that someone just isn't working out well in a job. In that case, it really is worth having a frank discussion with them to find out what's going on. It may be that the kindest thing you can do is fire them: they really aren't going to thrive in your company. Take that as an opportunity to look back at your hiring process and see if you can figure out where the process was flawed: not where a person screwed up, but where the process

didn't work. If you focus on the former, you'll get nowhere. If you focus on the process, you can change things. Some mistakes really are part of the business, so get used to it!

What about someone who seemed really good in the hiring process but just isn't living up to expectations? If you're quick to fire, that says more than anything else that you don't have a lot of faith in your hiring process. Why not? What can you do to improve it?

Assuming you have faith in your hiring process, though, and you really believe you have someone good, it's more worthwhile to invest some time to understand why they aren't performing.

Focus on their strengths: if your hiring process is well-designed, you should have a good idea of what those strengths are! It is not unusual that once a candidate is immersed in the culture of your company, some weakness will emerge that they might not have even known they had! If you value their strengths, don't spend a lot of time fixing the weakness; rather, find a way of working around it. When a weakness prevents someone from using the very strengths your hiring process was designed to identify, the key is to remove the obstacle. Legendary martial artist Bruce Lee used to say that if you built your strengths, they would eventually overcome your weaknesses. The same is true in business.

A hiring process that lets you correctly identify the right people most of the time may not always be quick, but the slowest part should be getting the right people to apply. If you really know how to recognize them, the process should be clear and transparent to the applicant. And if you have invested the time and resources to build that process, firing slow gives you time to take advantage of the talents it's bringing you. But you can only fire slow if you know how to hire right.

At Asteroid Systems, the process was slow because no one was willing to make a decision. It wasn't about finding the right people, it was about an inability to recognize them and a fear of making mistakes. Don't be an Asteroid.

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