

How to Tame 500-Pound Gorillas (aka Your Hiring Managers)

By Lou Adler, December 2, 2008

I've been in the recruiting business in some way or another for the past 30 years. Here are the ten most common hiring mistakes I've seen repeated year in and year out by company after company. Most of them are attributed to the inability of hiring managers to properly assess and recruit top performers. The second big problem is the lack of understanding of real job needs on the part of the recruiter and hiring manager alike. What's most surprising is that most companies aren't focusing on addressing the hiring manager facing problems. This is the 500-pound gorilla in the room that HR and recruiters seem to be afraid of, or can't see. First, let's review the problems and see if they line up with your personal experiences before we introduce some taming techniques.

Adler's Infamous List of Top 10 Hiring Mistakes

1. Managers overvalue motivation to get the job, not motivation to do the job. Lack of motivation to do the work required is one of the primary reasons for underperformance, lack of job satisfaction, and turnover. Managers seem to think that extroversion and interview preparedness correlate with on-the-job performance.

2. Ignoring the importance of managerial fit. Another major reason for underperformance and turnover is not considering the management and development needs of the candidate in comparison to the manager's coaching and delegating style. Most managers are not great managers from an organization, team development, and project planning basis. Under these conditions, candidates need to be selected who complement these weaknesses, not reinforce them.

3. Most managers think they're great at interviewing. Job success requires multiple factors including technical competency, motivation to do the work, team skills, problem-solving ability, organizational skills, consistency, and cultural fit, among others. Unfortunately, most managers rely on a candidate's resume, interviewing skills, and technical competency to decide yes or no.

4. Managers and recruiters use less than half their brain when deciding whom to hire. Yes/no decisions made in the first 30 minutes of an interview are typically emotionally-based. During this time the "friend vs. foe" component of the brain automatically short-circuits two-thirds of a person's rational thinking ability with the decision heavily based on the candidate's presentation and personality. If the interviewer can get past this point, people either emphasize their intuitive right brain half or their analytical left brain to collect information. Whole brain interviewing requires objectivity to prevail in combination with an evidence-based assessment that considers all critical job success factors in balance.

5. Managers don't know how to recruit top performers. Recruiting isn't selling, over-talking, or pandering. The best people aren't going to work for someone who is not a mentor or leader. Selling comes across as desperation, and even if the candidate ultimately agrees to pursue your job, you'll wind up paying too much, or setting yourself up for a counter-offer. Getting the candidate to sell you is the key to effectively recruiting top performers.

6. Managers not hiring the best candidates. When managers don't trust their recruiters they demand candidates who meet a rigid set of selection criteria. Most high-potential candidates have less of the typical experience requirements, and there are some other great candidates who have different, but comparable experience. Unless the recruiter is confident, these two best groups are typically excluded. This problem can be eliminated when the assessment focus is shifted away from skills and experience to the need for the candidate to meet demanding performance objectives. This is a much better screening tool than an absolute level of skills and experience.

7. Managers and recruiters who don't understand real job needs. Lack of understanding of real job needs is the fundamental cause of most of these hiring problems. It's impossible to source, recruit, assess, and hire top performers unless job needs are clearly understood by every person on the hiring team. From a candidate perspective, the primary criterion top people use when selecting one job over another is the work itself and the opportunity and challenges it represents. Recruiters need this insight to convince top people their job is worthy of consideration. Managers need this job understanding when assessing a candidate's ability and motivation to do the real work required for success.

8. Lack of professionalism during the interview. Top candidates are turned off when recruiters, managers, and interviewing team members don't know the job, when they don't ask in-depth questions, and when they haven't read the candidate's resume ahead of time. Managers don't like candidates who are unprepared, unprofessional, unfocused, uninterested, and late. Neither do top candidates.

9. The use of a very informal assessment process based on the idea that collective guessing will result in a correct answer. Adding up a bunch of ill-considered yes/no votes with the no votes being worth more is not the best way to make an accurate hiring decision. Matters are made worse since a "no" is voted more frequently, since it's the safe decision when the candidate is not a clear winner or when managers are either unprepared or weak interviewers. It's much better to narrow the focus of each interviewer to a subset of all of the selection factors, and then use a formal debriefing process to develop a collective assessment based on evidence, not emotion or intuition.

10. Managers not totally involved in the hiring process delegating too much to the recruiter and HR department. Managers who take personal responsibility for hiring the best seem to hire the best. Those who delegate the process to their recruiting group and wait for candidates to arrive rarely hire the best on a consistent basis. It takes a lot of work to hire the best every time. At a minimum this means clearly communicating job

needs to the recruiting team, meeting with candidates on an exploratory basis, being willing to interview candidates who your recruiter says are high potential even if they don't have the exact skill set, and spending enough time with the candidate to ensure an accurate job match and strong managerial fit.

Addressing all of these issues was the impetus behind the development of Performance-based Hiring. I was concerned that too many good people were being excluded for bad reasons, and that too many average people were being hired who weren't the best overall fit. It's pretty clear that hiring managers need to solve these problems, with the HR/Recruiting department providing guidance and oversight. With this in mind here are the some Performance-based Hiring principles you can follow to tame your hiring managers.

Some Gorilla Taming Techniques

1. Know the job. Don't start looking for candidates unless you know what the person is actually going to be doing on the job. To uncover these, ask your hiring managers what they'll be telling your candidates when they ask, "Tell me about the job, some of the big projects, and the growth opportunities." If they can't answer this question, you'll wind up hiring the best of the average candidates. Obtain a list of the top 5-6 performance objectives describing what the person will be doing as part of the req approval process. This is the first step in the gorilla taming process.

2. Don't sell the job, sell the next step. The best people want to explore opportunities in bite-size chunks. So if you rush to push a specific job in a specific location with a specific title and specific comp, you'll only attract those that are actively looking. Instead, set up your hiring process as a series of steps for your candidates to learn more about your job. As part of this, hiring managers must be willing to meet people on an exploratory basis. Great managers do this anyway, so by making it part of your hiring process, you can tell every other manager this is a "best practice" benchmark.

3. Use a structured performance-based interview that directly assesses on-the-job performance. A [comprehensive interview can be conducted using two core questions](#) in combination with a detailed work-history review. The first question focuses on digging into a candidate's major accomplishments and is then repeated to evaluate consistency and performance over time. Comparing these accomplishments to the performance expectations of the job is a major part of the assessment process. This type of interview is scalable with different interviewers using the same questions, but digging deep into different accomplishments and looking for different job success factors (e.g., planning, team skills, managerial fit, and motivation). If you don't have some form of structured interview process in place that assess on-the-job competency and motivation, managers will do their own thing and focus on what they believe to be important to them.

4. Be a juror, not a judge. Errors due to emotions, over-valuing intuition, bias, and lack of preparation can be reduced just by eliminating the yes/no voting system. In its place implement a [multi-factor assessment process](#) where interviewers formally debrief and

evaluate each job-success factor independently. This way no one makes a hiring decision until all of the evidence (facts, details, org charts, test results, etc.) is shared and discussed. HR must implement this process and ensure it's being followed. This alone will tame your gorillas without having to be in the same room.

5. Increase your close rate by creating an opportunity gap and getting the candidate to sell you. The best people accept jobs based primarily on what they're going to be doing, learning, and becoming. Unfortunately, telling people these things is not as impactful as them learning it for themselves. This [can be done in an interview by demonstrating the differences in their accomplishments compared to real job needs](#). For example, suggesting to a software developer that you think he's a bit light to handle a major project alone, will get him to sell you on why he is qualified for the job. This is a great way for managers to present the job as a series of growth and learning opportunities instead of trying to convince the candidate to take an offer.

6. Manage and sell time. Time is a critical asset that most managers waste and most candidates overlook. Preparing performance profiles up front, using a structured interview, conducting a formal debriefing process, and working closely with their recruiters will save managers time during the hiring process by seeing fewer but more qualified candidates. It will save even more time after the person is hired since the person will be motivated and competent to do the work required, rather than having the manager over-manage them. This idea of [managing time](#) can also be presented to the candidate as a recruiting point by suggesting that the steeper the learning curve of the job, the faster the person will be able to move up in the organization. This point alone can offset a 5-10% difference in salary between one offer and another.

Taming hiring managers is the 500-pound gorilla in the room. Somehow, most recruiters and HR don't even see him sitting there. Maybe they're afraid to look.

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