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## Staff the Right People: Identify Four Back-to-Basics Qualities

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By:



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A bad hiring decision can cost an organization tens of thousands of dollars. Yet an automated hiring approach has infiltrated the HR industry, all too often with disastrous results. Many HR consultants are recommending a “check the box” contest in which the person who has the highest number of “relevant” competencies becomes the highest rated applicant. While this approach is logical and analytical, it fails to identify four basic qualities or abilities that can differentiate a top performer from the rest of the pack. Organizations that take a back-to-basics approach in identifying these qualities can consistently yield more successful hires.

### Where “Competencies” Fall Short

Automated hiring practices center around identifying competencies related to a job position. Applicants with the most matching competencies win the jackpot and move on to the next level. In fact, one airline has automated the initial job interview to such an extent that the entire interview consists of a series of recorded questions on the phone and the applicant pushing numbers on the phone to record their answers. Seems like a logical way to weed through an overwhelming amount of job applicants. But the process isn't fail-proof. In fact, it may be inherently flawed. Because while there are certain specific skills and knowledge that are required for any position on a project, there are some basic qualities or abilities that differentiate a top performer from the rest. And these qualities are often overlooked in the automated interviewing process.

There are four elemental qualities to look for in staffing project teams. These represent the outward, observable manifestation of many supportive qualities and provide an excellent start to improving your staffing process immediately. The four qualities are:

1. Continuous desire to learn
2. Ability to communicate
3. Commitment to quality
4. Practical aptitude (or common sense)

## **Continuous Desire to Learn**

To say that today's business world is rapidly changing would be an understatement. What allowed organizations to thrive five years ago is certainly not what works today. And it goes without saying that businesses will operate dramatically differently another five years from now. Today's project challenges, organizational problems, systems complexities and implementation issues cannot be solved with yesterday's knowledge. Project personnel are forced to tackle challenges they have never faced before.

Learning and the continuous desire to learn, therefore, becomes a first basic quality required of all of the human capital you'll want to bring into your organization. When someone has a lifelong learning mindset, he or she doesn't see new tools or processes as barriers, but rather as new capabilities to add to their individual portfolios of knowledge.

## **Ability to Communicate**

The days when management told labor exactly what to do and how to do it are over. While Total Quality Management (TQM) may be out of fashion today, it started an irreversible social process. Project teams must now be able to listen, observe their surroundings carefully and articulate clearly their thoughts and ideas. They must be able to convey how to solve problems, improve processes and present their ideas in an easily understood manner. Today's high stakes actions require that everyone in the organization speak and write clearly, successfully and quickly. Project team members who communicate well will help to propel projects (and therefore, the organizations in which they are managed) toward achieving their goals.

Organizations spend thousands of dollars on electronic and automated ways to improve communications. However, the basic ability of an individual to communicate in written and verbal form is the key to any of these methods. And let's not overlook the powerful ability to listen and understand. How many times has a simple request or requirement been misunderstood, costing lost hours and contributing to the high rate of project failure?

The ability to communication is one of the most powerful qualities of good project team members and is rarely determined from the resume or simple job interview. Invest the time necessary to see if an individual possesses the ability to communicate.

## **Commitment to Quality**

To win or even survive in business, the Japanese taught us that we need to produce consistent, high quality results. Toyota's cost advantage over Mercedes used to come from the fact that Toyota/Lexus built their cars once without flaws. Mercedes used to build its cars, then check them via their

rigorous quality control system, then basically “rebuild” them to get the flaws out. To the customer, both types of cars were high quality yet one car company (Toyota/Lexus) could build them much more economically.

The commitment to quality sought in project applicants must be a commitment that is strong but balanced. A time will come in every person’s work life where a deadline, a tight budget or an unforeseen challenge requires a company to ship a product or perform a service that is acceptable in the marketplace but of a lesser quality than could have been produced given more time, budget and resources.

Consequently, the commitment to quality that one must look for in project applicants must be strong yet flexible. The applicant should be able to demonstrate that they are not satisfied with producing a good or service of “minimum acceptable quality.” But they should also be able to show the ability to juggle the sometimes competing issue between quality and schedule. One element we find that is related to quality is “integrity.” One cannot produce consistent high quality without a high level of integrity. The real attribute to look for is a potential team member’s integrity, which is never learned, but rather comes from within.

### **Practical Aptitude (Rigorous Common Sense)**

The fourth key quality to look for in project applicants is the ability to deal successfully with the daily challenges as they “get the job done.” This quality is comprised of many attributes including:

- Problem solving
- Organizational creativity
- Ability to think clearly/ perform under pressure
- Common sense

The best way to assess this quality is to give the project applicant in the interview various scenarios that put him or her into a “real world” situation that calls for solutions not found in textbooks, handbooks or traditional schooling.

### **Reaching Long Term Success**

The risky practice of merely checking the boxes corresponding to narrowly defined competencies is not a sufficient screening tool for high-stakes staffing decisions. Using a back-to-basics approach will yield at least one additional dividend: long term relationships. These four qualities can help yield powerful indications of long term success for a project and the organization. And there’s no better way to save time and money on the hiring process than to retain excellent employees and be able to skip searching for new employees altogether.

Bruce A. McGraw is the CEO of Cognitive Technologies, a professional services firm delivering project and program management services, products, and PMO tool implementation to commercial and government clients. Mr. McGraw is a program manager with over 25 years of experience across multiple industries. His ability to craft pragmatic solutions to meet project goals, coupled with experience in all aspects of project management, enables him to meet customer expectations with on-time, within-budget deliveries. Mr. McGraw is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and is an active member of the Project Management Institute. Bruce authors a project management blog at <http://fearnoproject.com>

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