The standard hiring process routinely fails both candidates and employers.

HELP WANTED

Five questions everyone should be asking about their company's hiring process

Your company is terrible at hiring. (No kidding, this is true!)

I state this with a high degree of confidence, not because I have such little faith in you, but because I have such little faith in the hiring process.

Given the number of ways in which standard hiring processes routinely fail employers and candidates—and risk reinforcing diversity shortages—I'm inclined to believe that when things work out, it's not because of the process but in spite of it. Consider how things can go wrong at every step:

- When it's time to write a job description, you risk dissuading potentially perfect recruits by using subtly biased language.

- Even if you manage to craft an ideal job posting, you are probably relying on resumes to sort applicants—which is increasingly recognized as a flawed system for predicting success in the role.

- If you get that far without shooting yourself in the foot, you move onto the interview process, where the biases of the people doing the interviewing have potential to throw things off course.

- Once the selection is made, there's a good chance the rest of the candidate pool gets ghosted, which is a terrible way to treat people you've already screened and whom you might want to hire in the future.

- Finally, unless you've developed a thoughtful onboarding process, your new recruits will likely take longer to settle in than they should.

It's a lot to think about before you even get to the big questions about retaining people. And if you're inclined to just fall back on years of accepted practices for handling this stuff—which I really don't recommend unless you have zero complaints about your staff and are fully satisfied with your diversity statistics—you are still likely to sink way more time into the process than you probably wanted to.

It's too soon to say that machine-learning is the secret to properly evaluating candidates, or that the world is ready for whatever is going to replace resumes. But it's plain to see how even small changes in the process might address some of the biggest failings of traditional hiring methods.

In the midst of all this flux, here are five questions employers and applicants should be asking about the hiring process.

QUESTION 1

Are foreign-language skills really "a plus"?

When you're casting about for fresh talent, it's tempting to draw up an exhaustive list of qualities that the ideal candidate would bring to the table. This is ground zero for gendered language or other subtle, if unintentional, messages about who is and isn't welcome to apply for the job. Software can now help identify potentially troublesome phrases and suggest neutral words in their place. The better advice, though, is to avoid all of this entirely. "Assertive" is subjective. "Makes sales calls" is not. Wouldn't it be easier on employers and applicants alike if what was described in detail was the job, and not the imaginary person who might do it?

When a role is defined in detail, it signals exactly what the employer needs—without the risk of overly narrowing the funnel of applicants.

Employers: If the job includes translating documents or working with colleagues or clients who speak French, say so. Otherwise, why are you describing foreign-language skills as "a plus"? If it's just shorthand for type of person you hope to attract, drop the dog whistle. Requesting traits and experiences that don't correlate with success in the job potentially deprives you of excellent candidates and probably works against your diversity goals.

Applicants: When you have traits or skills that the job ad requests, by all means flaunt them. Otherwise, consider whether what you lack is likely to impede your ability to succeed in the role. If foreign-language skills are mentioned in the post but you don't have them and can't see why the job would ever necessitate that you do, call out the employer for this nonsense by simply applying anyway. And if you aren't sure, err on the side of being ambitious. Should you make the first cut, you'll know that not having the skill isn't a dealbreaker, and you can ask outright about the connection between the skill and the job when you interview.

QUESTION 2

What does a resume actually tell us?

People have a lot of questions about resumes. One page or two? Photo or not? Do typos actually matter? A better question might be why we still use them at all.

Resumes are, of course, the perfect answer to job postings that foolishly focus more on the specifics of the desired candidate than the specifics of the position, and they are similarly deficient in predicting whether the candidate will succeed in the role. As Quartz's Oliver Staley has argued:

Resumes force job seekers to contort their work and life history into corporately acceptable versions of their actual selves, to better conform to the employer's expectation of the ideal candidate. Unusual or idiosyncratic careers complicate resumes. Gaps between jobs need to be accounted for. Skills and abilities learned outside of formal work or education aren't easily explained.

Resumes do have the virtue of helping big employers cull the applicant pool. But this can also be accomplished now with technology that purports to do it in a much smarter way, including tests that can

determine if an applicant should be disqualified or moved onto the next round based on their fit for the role.

Skills assessments are increasingly being used alongside of, if not yet in lieu of, traditional resumes, and not just by professional search firms filling executive roles. In 2018, Indeed, the online jobs site, started offering dozens of different assessments employers could use to evaluate an applicant's skills, whether broad ("attention to detail") or highly specific ("retail-shelf stocking"). The tests are multiple-choice and designed to be completed in under 10 minutes, which is a lot less time than it takes to format a decent resume.

QUESTION 3

How biased is the interview process?

Ridiculously so, and in ways you would not expect. But there are steps employers can take to contain the effect that preconceived notions, misplaced feelings, and inconsistent questioning can have on your hiring decisions.

Some of the increasingly common or innovative new practices we're hearing about include:

- Standardizing interview questions so that multiple interviewers can compare notes productively

- Using rubrics and scorecards so that candidates are evaluated on more than just "vibe"

- Appointing one interviewer to be the lead thinker about a crucial skill or red flag you plan to ask the candidate about, so that everyone else stays focused on the rest of the interview and doesn't let that particular issue take on any more weight than it needs to

- Reviewing what was gleaned about a new hire during the interview process and determining how that information correlates (or doesn't) with the person's performance in the role, so you can fine-tune your process accordingly

QUESTION 4

What happens if there isn't a match?

In its December 2018 Beige Book summary of US economic conditions, the Federal Reserve noted that more employers were reporting incidents of being "ghosted" by employees who would simply stop showing up for work with no explanation. The resulting schadenfreude was palpable.

The lack of transparency in the hiring process at most companies is a huge pain point for applicants. It's not so great for employers, either. Candidates who make it to the late stages of the process have already been pretty well vetted. If they aren't selected to fill the opening, they still might be perfect for one in the future. Why sink the relationship with radio silence?

Even ghosting people who did nothing more than submit a resume carries a reputation risk. Johnson & Johnson, which receives roughly 1 million applications a year for 25,000 job openings, recently built a system designed to help candidates follow their progress in the process.

It's true, of course, that the ghosting flows both ways. If you've ever been a manager on the front lines of hiring, no matter how skilled a recruiter you are, you've probably had the experience of a sought-after candidate disappearing on you. (That candidate might even have been me, and I am indeed very sorry about that.) Your frustration is warranted. Just remember, the level of courtesy you were owed, and did not receive, is the same level of courtesy an applicant wants to receive from you.

QUESTION 5

Is your onboarding any good?

This can be a particularly thorny question for fast-growing startups, which—if they ever put much thought into onboarding at all—will periodically find their process is in need of a refresh as the company scales.

My first day at Quartz in 2014, I signed forms, generated logins, and sat through an HR call about benefits. A colleague showed me how to use our publishing system and invited me to walk with him to a take-out place up the block. I edited a story while I ate alone at my desk. Actually, the desk wasn't mine. I was part of a wave of new hires and we were short on workstations. So I plugged in my laptop at the desk of a vacationing colleague, and continued to desk hop for a few weeks until new furniture arrived.

It was a far cry from how we treat our new hires now. But it actually felt sufficient at the time. Our news staff at that point had 30 people and two main products (the Quartz Daily Brief and qz.com). There wasn't much complexity to the place. And there certainly seemed to be a need for me, and the other new hires, to dive in and start helping out as soon as possible. It was classic scrappy startup stuff, which was fine by me.

But as a company grows, adding products and people, it needs an onboarding process that can help new hires make sense of the environment. If you're lucky, by that time you will have developed both a much stronger sense of what you want new hires to learn immediately, and the documentation to teach it. If you haven't, then your new folks are likely to find it harder to settle in (and take longer to start producing at top speed for you) than did the folks who joined when the business was smaller and simpler.

So ask yourself the question: Is your onboarding any good? And six months later, ask it again.

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- [Staying home with kids is a job. So how does it fit on a resume?](#)

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