

How to Hire for Attitude

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Hire for attitude, train for skill. This motto was the mantra of the economic and hiring boon of the late 1990's. For some companies, this sentiment continues to drive their hiring processes and systems. The traditional model for hiring involves identifying the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities required to do the job. Then, you use the interview, reference checks and other hiring tools to assess a candidate's level of job-related experience and skill.

Rapid and significant changes are occurring both inside and outside most organizations. In addition, continuous innovations in technology suggest that jobs (and the skills needed to perform them) will change dramatically starting now and on into the future. This situation requires you and other leaders in the organization to move beyond the traditional hiring model to "hire for attitude, train for skill." This approach allows you to hire people who can change and evolve as their job changes and evolves. While this approach makes intuitive sense, many managers are often at a loss as to how to use this approach. What do managers need to do to hire for attitude? How can managers use the interview and other hiring tools to assess candidates' attitudes?

IDENTIFY ATTITUDES

First, you must identify and clearly define the attitudes that drive successful performance on the job. One way to do this is to identify your top employees within the job and across the company to see what attitudes they share. As part of my consulting and training work with clients, I frequently ask managers to identify their top employees and list what attitudes they have in

common. The list typically looks something like this:

- Conscientious
- Dependable
- Flexible/open to change
- Good judgment
- Has high standards
- Honest/trustworthy
- Motivated/self-starter
- Strong work ethic
- Team player/works well with others
- Willing to put forth extra effort/to go the extra mile

DEFINE ATTITUDES AND WRITE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Managers often find it fairly easy to identify top employees and to list the attitudes that they share. Once they have their list, however, they are usually unsure about what to do next. Given this list, you need to clearly define each attitude or value. It is very important to clearly define an attitude. Managers frequently use words like "flexible," or "open to change" to describe what they are looking for in a good job candidate. These words can, however, mean different things to different people. Ideally, the definition of an attitude should include some concrete, specific behavior. After the attitude is clearly defined using behavioral information, then you need to develop interview questions that will provide information about the candidate in these areas.

Using the attitudes listed in this article, here are definitions and one interview question for each attitude.

ATTITUDE	DEFINITION	INTERVIEW QUESTION
Dependable	Consistently keeps work commitments	Tell me about time you agreed to do something for someone when you weren't sure you'd have the time. What was the situation, why did you tell them you'd help them, and what happened?
Detail-oriented	Looks for/catches errors and inconsistencies in information	Tell me about a time that you had to pay attention to details. What was the situation? What did you do?
Flexible/open to change	Is constructive and positive in his or her approach to change	Tell me about a major change that you had to deal with at work. What was the change and how did you deal with it?
Good judgment	Makes decisions that consider aspects of the situation and results in a positive outcome for the company	Tell me about one of the best work-related decisions you've ever made. What was the decision and why was it so good?
Has high standards	Consistently goes beyond what is expected of him or her	Tell me 2-3 things you've done in the past to indicate that you set high standards.
Honest/trustworthy	Avoids taking advantage of or misleading others	Tell me about 2-3 things that have happened to you at work that indicate that others trust you.
Motivated/self-starter	Looks around to see what needs to be done and, where possible, takes action	Tell me about a time when things were slow at work? What caused the situation and how did you handle it?
Service-oriented	Is genuinely interested in others and uses what he/she knows about others to make them feel important and valued	Tel me about a situation or two at work that reflects your typical approach to service.
Strong work ethic	Consistently takes on extra work and works longer hours, when needed, to get something done	Tell me about a time when you were involved with a big project that had to be completed in a very short timeframe. What was the project and what was your role in the project, and what happened?
Team player	Prefers achieving goals through teamwork instead of individual effort	Tell me about a time when you worked as part of a team. What was your role in the team? Describe how your team worked, what you liked best about working with the team and what you liked least.

Keep in mind the following guidelines to create good interview questions to assess attitudes:

- The best predictor of future performance is past performance. Nothing accurately predicts future performance 100% of the time. What someone does in the past is, however, the best predictor of what they are likely to do in the future.
- Make interview questions open-ended. Closed-ended questions can be answered with “yes,” or “no.” You are likely to get more information and better quality information when asking open-ended questions.
- Make questions non-evaluative. Job candidates can sometimes tell the answer that you are looking for by how a question is worded. Take the time to make sure that your interview questions do not “lead” candidates usually get more honest and detailed answers from candidates.

OTHER WAYS TO ASSESS ATTITUDES

Other than the application, the interview is the most popular tool used in the hiring process. As you can tell, the interview can be very helpful in providing you with information about a job candidate’s attitudes. There are, however, other tools that you can use to get a better idea of applicants’ attitudes. These tools include reference checks of previous employers and pre-employment tests that assess a person’s attitudes and personality.

Mini-simulations can be another powerful way to assess candidates’ attitudes. This hiring tool requires a job candidate to perform activities and tasks during the hiring process that they would have to do on the job. Mini-simulations that would give you more information about a candidate’s attitudes towards customer service, their work, and their boss include:

- Responding to an angry customer complaint in writing or in person
- Working with a co-worker who is difficult to work with (e.g., not pulling their fair share, taking credit for ideas/work that is not theirs, etc.)
- Telling their boss something that the boss doesn’t want to hear
- Selling a product/service to a prospective client

CONCLUSION

Given the significant changes occurring in today’s workforce, a “hire for attitude, train for skill,” approach to hiring makes sense. For this approach to work, you must carefully identify that attitudes associated with successful performance on the job. More important, you must clearly define those attitudes using behavioral questions. Finally, you must carefully craft interview questions that provide detailed responses from candidates while, at the same time, that do not lead or encourage the candidate to answer a certain way. To obtain the best idea of candidates’ attitudes, use another tool (other than the interview) to provide you with more information. You can have greater confidence in your assessment of candidates’ attitudes by using multiple tools or methods to gather information.

About the Author

Joan Brannick, PhD, SPHR is President of Brannick HR Connections (BHRC). She is an organizational psychologist that consults, writes, and speaks on recruiting, hiring, engagement, and leadership trends and best practices. She is the co-author of Finding and Keeping Great Employees, a Fortune Magazine “Best Business Book.” Her insights have appeared in many business and HR publications including Fortune Magazine, HR Magazine, and the Wall Street Journal. For more information about BHRC’s services, call (813) 672-0500 or visit www.BrannickHRConnections.com.