Using What We Know About Personality to Hire the Ideal Colleague

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It is that time of the year when the world of academia is gearing up to hire recent and seasoned PhDs to fill their vacancies. These new hires will ultimately become the new blood of the department and will someday be running it. We are all familiar with the finding that a good indicator of an individual’s future behavior is their past behavior (Colvin & Funder, 1991; Funder & Colvin, 1991). By reviewing a candidate’s resume, transcripts, and publication and grant record we can reasonably predict how productive that individual will be if they are hired for an academic position. However, there are also additional concerns that run rampant in every search committee member’s mind, after determining that a candidate is very qualified for a particular position. These concerns involve the candidate’s personality and are typically not voiced as often. Some of these pivotal questions that linger in search committee members’ minds might be:

“Will this candidate actually want to teach the courses that he or she says they would like to teach? Once they are hired will he or she want to focus on an entirely different specialty?”

“Will this candidate take on his or her fair share of committee assignments?”

“Will this candidate’s personality fit well with the diverse student population at our university?”

“Will this ABD candidate really keep his or her word and finish their thesis before joining our department?”

“Will this potential faculty member become an adversary at every faculty meeting?”

“Would I want my office next to this individual?”

I am sure there are some job searches that we all look back on with regret. We might have feelings such as “if the faculty as a whole had only followed their instincts this would not have happened.” As I-O psychologists we are privy to a tremendous amount of research on the science of selecting personnel. However, when the time comes for the search process, a lot of the time we fail to use this knowledge, let alone share this knowledge with our colleagues. We need to practice what we teach. If we implement the hiring techniques that we teach about in our classes, we will be assured that whoever we choose has the highest probability among the other candidates of being the optimal colleague.

Many search committees structure their searches based upon “the way we have always done it” with the rationale that it has worked so far. Don’t
assume because all search committee members have a PhD that they are experts in the selection process. Go ahead and share your knowledge. Everyone is always appreciative of anyone who is willing to take the reins, especially of a search process.

Here are some ideas to share with your colleagues about how to structure the interview process to best ferret out the job candidate’s true personality characteristics and put those lingering questions to rest. As I-O psychologists we are very familiar with the strong finding that the structured job interview, with its standardized questions and rating procedure, best predicts a candidate’s job performance potential (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1999; Campion, Pursell & Brown, 1988). However, when it comes to assessing a job candidate’s personality characteristics, research has shown that interviewers should use an unstructured interview format (Blackman, 2002a, 2002b). The unstructured interview consists of free-flowing conversation between the interviewer and applicant with no standardized questions. This interview type is usually conducted in a very casual atmosphere such as over coffee or lunch, and many follow-up questions are asked of the applicant. Research has shown that the unstructured format is far superior to the structured format when predicting a job candidate’s personality, though the structured interview should still be used to predict the future performance aspect of the job candidate (Blackman, 2002a). Why are interviewers who use the unstructured format so successful in accurately predicting the job applicant’s personality? The answer lies in the fact that the unstructured format puts the candidate at ease and the relaxed nature of the interview elicits more candid responses from the applicant (Blackman, 2002a, 2002b). Many times the interviewer befriends the candidate during the interview, and the candidate may inadvertently reveal telling personality characteristics about themselves to their new found friend. The job applicants find that the script that they had prepared for the structured interview will not fit in this interview format, so they rely on off the cuff responses, and their true personality characteristics have a higher likelihood of appearing during an unstructured interview format (Blackman & Funder, 2002). For instance, the candidate might reveal why they are leaving their current tenured position or if they have any other job prospects on the horizon.

What I would recommend would be to utilize both the structured and the unstructured interview format during the interview process. Use the structured standardized interview and a job talk first to reaffirm whether you determined from the candidate’s file that he or she is qualified for the position. After you have determined this, follow-up with an unstructured interview over coffee or dinner.

As the interviewer, you need to be savvy about the telltale signs that an applicant might be stretching the truth or deceiving you. David Funder, professor of psychology at UC Riverside has shown that there are four factors or
moderators that increase the likelihood that you will make an accurate personality judgment of the job applicant. These four factors are:

1. The Good Judge
2. The Good Trait
3. The Good Target
4. Good Information

Funder’s (1995) research has shown that interviewers or judges of personality who are very extraverted and out-going are the best judges of personality—the Good Judge. Extraverts, typically, have had a lot of experience socializing with individuals and reading others’ personalities. Ideally you should refrain from using an introverted colleague to conduct the interview process as these individuals are shown not to be as adept at reading the nonverbal behavior of others.

The Good Trait moderator variable is simply that some traits are easier to judge than others. Funder’s research has shown that traits that are more observable to the eye, such as how talkative or dependable an individual is, are easier to judge and be accurate about than traits that are less observable, such as how much an individual daydreams or feels guilt. So as an interviewer, if you are judging how warm and caring an individual is (a very observable trait), more than likely you will probably be very accurate about the extent to which the job candidate possesses that trait.

The Good Target variable implies that some targets or job applicants are easier to judge than others, and it is those individuals who you will be more accurate about in your judgments (Colvin, 1993). For example, upon meeting a candidate who opens up to you and tells you their life story and exhibits consistent behavior throughout the interview process, you can consider this individual a Good Target and know that you will probably be correct in your judgment of him or her. However, if you interview an applicant who is very closed mouthed and inconsistent in their behavioral patterns during the interview process (a hard to judge target) you really can’t conclude with any certainty your accuracy level about this individual’s personality.

And last, we come to Good Information. Funder states that it is important to look at the quantity and quality of information that you have about the job candidate. More information and the better quality of information that you have about the applicant will increase the accuracy of your personality judgment about him or her. Ideally you want to gather as much information about the candidate as possible. The longer the interview the better. Blackman and Funder (1998) have shown that increased acquaintanceship or longer interviews leads to more accurate personality judgments. As for getting “good quality” information about a job candidate, interview the candidate in a variety of settings if possible. Perhaps, interview the individual in a formal office setting, then in an informal setting over coffee at a coffeehouse. The more faculty members that can be scheduled to meet or have a casual meal with the
job candidate the better. These varied situations will allow you to gather good quality clues and determine a consistent behavior pattern from the job applicant. The more clues that you gather about a job candidate’s personality, the more accurate you will be in making an assessment as to whether the candidate will engage in behavior that is counterproductive to the goals of the department and the university.

Looking at a job candidate’s nonverbal behavior is very important for obtaining clues to factor into your personality assessment of the candidate. Paul Ekman (Ekman, 1992) has shown that ideally we should focus below the candidate’s waist for telling clues or “leakage” as he calls it. When an individual is trying to pull the wool over an interviewer’s eyes, they tend to rehearse the deceitful statements with a conscious control of their facial expressions. Ekman has shown that what individuals fail to control is involuntary movements or gestures below the waist that can signal that the individual is lying. For instance, a candidate may inadvertently display a telling hand gesture (an “emblem”) that may not be seen by an interviewer sitting behind a desk. Another clue that an individual may be deceiving the interviewer would be if the applicant was manipulating some accessory that they were wearing (e.g., a belt or ring) or a body part (e.g., hair). Ekman warns us that these are just clues that an individual might be lying and that the more clues that we gather the more likely we can assume that an individual is not being truthful. However, using just one clue as a concluding piece of evidence for deceit should not be done.

Ekman’s clues for deceit lend more supportive evidence for implementing the unstructured interview. In this casual interview environment you will be able to see the applicant’s entire body and be more cognizant of any discrepant behaviors or telltale signs. So when implementing the unstructured interview make sure that you are positioned in a vantage point where you can see the applicant’s entire body.

One final tip for predicting an applicant’s potential to engage in behavior that is counter to the goals of your department: Multiple methods are best. If your search committee has the time, get different perspectives of the candidate from various sources such as their mentor, academic advisor, peers, and those individuals who wrote their letters of recommendation. By gathering different sources of information you should have a higher likelihood of coming upon a clearer picture of the applicant’s true personality. Good luck sleuthing for clues!

References


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