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VIEWPOINT

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Experience Doesn't Always Count

WHEN it comes to hiring, we are still trapped by the past. Experience is what we look for in job candidates. We often view experience as the ultimate tie-breaker when making a final decision.

Some executives will even use experience as the primary factor in attracting job candidates, looking first in their competitors' backyards for individuals who are ready to make a move. Conventional wisdom is that experience will poise someone to hit the ground running. But the price tag for taking this road can be high.

Pirating is often simply a way of doing your competition a favor by recirculating mediocrity. All too frequently, "experienced" job seekers don't live up to their claims. Twelve years of experience have been known to add up to just one year's experience warmed over a dozen times.

In the end, effective hiring has less to do with experience than with potential.

This has become strikingly evident as we have begun helping companies hire in the Czech Republic—where virtually no one has experience. As that country moves to a free-market economy, new ways are needed to supervise staff, manage projects, sell products, and serve customers. Without experienced candidates, executives are looking for ways to find people who have the inner ability to benefit from the extensive, expensive training required.

Just think about how that changes the way these executives are hiring. They are looking for managers without a track record who can lead, inspire, organize, and provide vision

and momentum. They are searching for a sales staff, with absolutely no experience, that will be able to persuade prospects, understand where clients are coming from, and handle rejection. And from unseasoned customer service representatives, they must select those who are conscientious, motivated to please and enjoy solving problems.

Since they cannot rely upon experience, our clients in the Czech Republic are uncovering the potential of job candidates by finding out what they are made of psychologically. These clients have discovered that motivation, dedication and sales or customer service talent have far more to do with who applicants are than with the jobs they held previously. And this approach is proving profitable for these operations—no small feat in Eastern Europe.

We aren't surprised, for we first confirmed this in a somewhat similar experiment conducted in this country more than a quarter of a century ago. We were involved in several Government programs that resulted in hiring more than 3,000 so-called hard-core unemployed people for 72 companies in San Juan, P.R., and New York City.

None of these people had much experience by any stretch of the imagination. What the majority of them did have was the motivation and talent to succeed. All they needed was the opportunity to have their strengths recognized and matched to the jobs offered. When this happened, they performed at least as well as candidates who had experience in these jobs.

There were hundreds of success stories, but perhaps the most striking involved two "inexperienced" individuals who were hired because, through psychological testing, we were able to determine that they had the motivation and the drive needed to succeed in sales. Not only did these two previously unemployed individ-

uals set new sales production records, but they both recently retired as brokers — and millionaires — from the same investment firm.

Based on more than three decades of assessing the potential of employees and applicants, it is clear to us that most companies are mistaken in overemphasizing experience in their hiring decisions. Top-flight managers, and sales and customer service representatives, can and routinely are being discovered among former engineers, production-line and other factory workers, software developers and so on.

Mark Steinberg, managing director of Allmerica Financial, a diversified group of insurance and financial services companies, says he has hired experienced people "who have fallen flat on their faces," but on the other end of the spectrum, has seen "former nurses and teachers become highly successful in the financial services industry."

AND at Avis, the car rental company, Thomas J. Byrnes, vice president of sales, says that when searching for entry-level sales staff, the company has had "the most success in hiring people with little or no sales experience."

We have found, in fact, that one of every four people in the general population has better potential for sales work than 50 percent of the people already in the sales profession. And in reviewing the performance of employees for thousands of large, mid-size and small companies, we have found that nearly 80 percent of the workers are not filling the jobs best suited to their talents, abilities and potential.

With technological advances driving the restructuring and reshaping of markets and industries, as well as the nature of many jobs, it does not make sense to base staffing decisions solely—or even largely—on the myth of experience. □

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