



# SOME OF THE MYTHS OF HIRING

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**O**ur company has experienced ten recessions and expansions in employment since 1952. In many ways, they're alike in the sense that the economy is more difficult and hiring slows only to be followed by an expansion. We all know objectively that these expansions and contractions are always going to happen. None of us know when. The mistake most of us make is to "read our own press clippings" and think that we're smart enough and wise enough to outsmart and outrun a downturn in the economy. If we survived two or three recessions we realize that, as one of our ex-presidents successfully campaigned, "It's the economy, stupid." A good economy masks many sins.

Here are some myths about hiring that many hiring authorities use as criteria for hiring. The most successful hiring authorities realize that these are myths:

**"We're really good at hiring."** Numerous studies show that the typical employment interviewing process is only 57% effective in predicting subsequent employees' success. That's only 7% better than flipping a coin.

**Hiring people and doing it right is one of our highest priorities.** If that were true the above statistic of the hiring process being only 57% effective wouldn't be the case. Everyone says that hiring is one of their highest priorities, but they are so afraid of making a mistake in hiring that they give the idea lipservice. Because they don't want to take a risk and they are fearful of making a mistake they P-R-O-C-R-A-S-T-I-N-A-T-E, postpone, pass the buck, appoint a committee, etc.

**"We're so busy; we just don't have time to screen candidates. Someone else needs to screen the best candidates."** And of course, everyone doing the screening knows exactly



what “best” is, even if the HR person doing the screening has only been on the job three weeks or it’s somebody’s admin trying to “take a load off the boss.” If hiring the right people was really a priority, hiring authorities would do their own screening of potential candidates.

**“We never make a mistake hiring.”** You’re either a liar or you’ve never hired anyone. People really say this kind of thing... they really do! What is worse, they fully expect some people to believe them. Everyone makes mistakes hiring from time to time. The key is to rectify your mistake as soon as possible.

**“Don’t send us anybody resembling the last person who didn’t work out. We want to avoid anyone who is too short, too fat, too old, a woman, a man, had a degree, didn’t have a degree, had too much experience, didn’t have enough experience, (or whatever the reason why we think that person didn’t make it.)** It couldn’t be that we just made a mistake and so did they. It is so amusing that hiring authorities acting like human beings will find some reason that the last person did not work out and generalize that issue to other people.

A month or so ago one of our clients called and explain they needed to replace a person who was late all the time, primarily because she lived 15 miles from the office and they wanted to hire somebody who lived closer so that person wouldn’t be late. Now objectively, we all know that being late isn’t caused by living far away. We all know that people who are late are late. People who are on time are on time. It really doesn’t have anything to do with where you live.

We see this kind of thing all of the time. It’s a human tendency to avoid what you last think burned you. But often the issue people cite has nothing to do with the person being able



to do the job or not in the future. Just because the last person who didn't do very well didn't have a degree doesn't mean that having a degree is going to ensure that the next person will be successful. Just because your last purchasing manager was 58-years-old and didn't seem to have any energy doesn't mean that a 38-year-old with seemingly more energy is going to do better. Age and energy really don't have anything to do with each other. The take away is to avoid a knee-jerk reaction to what you perceive to be the reason of your last hiring mistake.

**“We have a proven system for hiring. I'm just not sure what it is this week.”** These “systems” seem to change with every management change. A number of years ago we worked with a tremendously brilliant CEO. She was also a real driver. After suffering through a number of mediocre managers she decided that the problem was her managers not seeing the world the same way she did. So, over a period of six months she took a number of psychological surveys and intelligence tests and decided to use those results to qualify any new managers she hired.

Over another six month period she interviewed and tested close to 40 of our candidates for three different management-level positions- COO, a VP of finance and a VP of sales. After countless hours of interviewing and literally thousands of dollars worth of testing . . . each final candidate had an appointment with her psychologist, She managed to find her three leaders.

Within a period of nine months the company was a mess. The leaders she hired were so much like her that every one of them wanted his or her own way and wanted to run the show. They were at each other's throats constantly. They ran off good,



subordinate employees because of their yelling and screaming matches . . . even with the CEO herself. They alienated each other, people in the company and, yes, the CEO. All three managers were either fired or quit on their own and, unfortunately, she had to start all over. The problem was obvious. She tried to hire people who were just as intelligent, just as aggressive, and just as strong as she was. She hired people whose personality was so much like hers they couldn't get along, let alone run a company. It was like a person marrying someone with an identical personality to theirs. It simply didn't work very well. She scrapped her system and went back to the traditional way of hiring.

We recently worked with the company whose president “discovered” a system of interviewing and hiring called *Topgrading*. It is actually a fairly proven, successful system of interviewing and hiring. The problem came in the execution. The president got so wrapped up in the “system” that he instituted it throughout the company. People weren't ready for it and they really didn't know how to use it, and because it wasn't presented in the right way, the top brass resisted. The process became more important than the result. In the final analysis the company would lose quality candidates simply because their process took so long that the candidates would either grow tired of it or find another job before our client could execute the relatively drawn out process. It turned out that the theory was great as long as they were interviewing a candidate who was *only* talking to them and who had no particular sense of urgency in finding a job. Four or five weeks of the Topgrading process per candidate wasn't practical. They lost good folks and therefore had to change systems. (*Topgrading* theoretically



seems to be an excellent system of hiring. It just didn't seem practical for this client.)

The take away lesson here is to try to develop a consistent, systematic approach to your hiring. Develop your own system a little at a time. If you're going to implement a specific system, try it a few times before you "institute" it throughout your whole company. Experiment and find out what works for you. Let people know that, initially, these systems are experiments and you're going to see how they work before they are instituted companywide.

**"The more money we pay, the better candidate we can hire."** We do get what we pay for. However, it takes more than just money to attract a good candidate. It's very hard to show anybody the difference between an accountant who is making \$65,000 and one that's making \$75,000 (other than \$10,000 a year in salary). Money, is the fourth or fifth reason why people work anyhow.

We often experience clients with relatively high turnover who think their turnover problems will end when they pay more money for the people they hire. They may pay more money but they don't change their culture, their attitude toward their employees, the working environment or the management that might work there. Companies get a reputation for being good places to work or not such good places to work. It is not uncommon for us to experience a candidate who, after we get them an interview, goes to [glassdoor.com](http://glassdoor.com) only to read some very unfavorable reviews about the company and decides not to go. No matter how much money a company might be paying, it's hard to overcome this kind of press.

Just last month, we had a candidate who was excited about



getting an offer from a firm that we referred her to. It was going to be \$15,000 more than what she had been making. However, when she was in the lobby of the company she heard the CEO having a yelling and screaming match with another manager. She decided that, since she was leaving an adversarial environment, there was no reason to run the risk of going to work at the company. Kind of sad.

**“Hiring good people is one of our highest priorities. That’s why it’s taken six or seven weeks to get through the process.”** Do the paychecks show up this way too? What quality candidate is going to wait for this? Your actions are speaking so loudly that the candidate can’t hear your words.

This situation is probably the biggest challenge in hiring quality people that we, as recruiters, run into. To a candidate, looking for a job is one of their highest priorities. When they go to interviews, they hear from hiring authorities that interviewing and hiring is a high priority to them also. Of course, what is a hiring authority going to say, “Well, we’re glad you came by and took a half a day to come over here and speak with us. We’ve been interviewing for six months. We tell everyone... even ourselves... that hiring someone is a high priority. But it’s really not. We are going to tell you, and others, that is a high priority because we don’t want to look foolish in interviewing you and having you feel like that you took a lot of time and effort to get here only to find out that this just really isn’t a high priority. So, with that in mind, let’s continue the interview.” No one in their right mind is going to say this. But this is exactly the message candidates get when they are told hiring is a high priority and yet nothing ever happens beyond an initial interview.



If interviewing and hiring are a high priority, then hiring authorities should act that way. It is okay if it's not, as long as a candidate understands the situation in the beginning. Even quality candidates understand something like, "We have been interviewing for a while. We are sincere about getting someone hired and we are glad to have the opportunity to speak with you. Unfortunately, our process is dragging on longer than we would like because there been a number of complications. With that understanding our process may drag out a little longer than any of us, including you as a candidate, might like. Please bear with us."

Or, even saying something like, "We have dragged this process out longer than any of us like. We know that it isn't the best way to do things. We don't seem to be as good at it as we'd like to think. Please bear with us and know that you're not wasting your time; we are just not absolutely sure of our direction." That type of reassurance will put the process in perspective for the candidate.

**"We need young people because they're highly energetic."** People who have energy have energy. It has nothing to do with their age. This claim often comes from a manager or hiring authority who is in their first or second management job and is just downright afraid to hire somebody older than they are for fear they won't be respected. We can understand that.

These managers feel that they have enough problems to deal with and don't want to add another problem by hiring somebody who might second-guess their decisions. This is an easier issue to understand than the idea about energy. Most hiring authorities and managers will only admit to this kind of thinking in confidence. It's understandable. And whether



anyone admits to it or not, it goes on daily.

There are just as many lethargic 27-year-olds as there are 65-year-olds. And there are just as many energetic 65-year-olds as there are energetic 27-year-olds. People who have energy throughout their life have energy throughout their life.

**“We need someone with ten to fifteen years of experience.”** The question should be about the quality of the experience. Some people have one year of experience ten times and it doesn't mean their ten years of experience is better. There is really no real way of qualifying a person's experience by the quantity of it. Obviously, there is a really big difference between one year of experience and 10 years of experience. But the difference between say, five years of experience and eight years of experience is, most of the time, only three years.

Most hiring organizations come up with this “quantity” idea because they don't know where else to start. And in a time where there are plentiful candidates, this is as good a place to start as any. But as the market for candidates gets tighter and tighter these kind of limits will have to be less important.

**“MBAs are better.”** American society has deemed that more education makes a person better. It simply isn't so. We hear all the time that MBAs go further and make more money than those without MBAs. But the truth is, those people would be successful with or without an MBA. Again, our society tells people that more education makes you better. These people want to be better, so they get more education.

The education doesn't make them intrinsically better. They may become better, but they are the kind of people that will become better with or without the MBA. Having an MBA might be more of an indication of the persons desire to please



or appear to wanting to get ahead than it would be an indication of real learning.

Colleges and universities sell the dickens out of MBA programs because they are actually moneymakers for the school and there is a tendency for people with MBAs to be the last to tell you that you don't really need one. So, it's relatively self-perpetuating. Schools sell the idea that an MBA will make you better. People who want to get ahead figure it's something that they ought to do so they do it and they make more money (because they would anyhow). They let their school attribute it to their having received an MBA, and since they made that kind of an investment they don't want to minimize what they really learned. They even go so far as to require an MBA from the people they want to hire.

**“Why would someone with an MBA, a Ph.D., and a graduate degree want this job? A person with that much education is overqualified.”** Unless it's a scientific or academic position, (and even then, the degree level has nothing to do with capabilities), it's hard to prove any degree causes someone to be underqualified or overqualified for any position.

Some people get graduate degrees simply for the joy of learning. They are not as concerned about how far it's going to get them as they are about how they might intrinsically grow. When the hiring authority asks this kind of question it's more of a reflection of their own insecurity than it is a reflection of the qualities they might look for. We have known lots of candidates, especially with Ph.D.'s who simply take it off of their resume when applying for certain kinds of positions.

This again gets back to the perception of what a graduate degree might mean or be. The perception is quite a bit different from the reality. Our recommendation is to let the candidate



decide if he or she is “overqualified” for a job.

**“We have to have a degree.”** Ditto to the above. There are some professions, such as accounting, engineering, and scientific research, where a degree indicates an inclination toward and proficiency in a particular profession. Companies often require a degree to avoid having to interview more candidates than they wish and to let someone else, i.e. the school, “certify” the candidate. There are an amazing number of apprenticeships that companies can develop to do the same thing.

The importance of having a baccalaureate degree has waned in the past few years. Some companies simply assume that a candidate is going to have one and often don’t even bother stating it as a requirement. Some companies have come to the conclusion that a degree simply indicates that a candidate has the capacity to learn and they’re going to have to train them anyhow. These organizations start out by saying things like, “The folks with degrees coming out of the schools these days really aren’t what they used to be. We’re going to have to train them anyhow.” Then, after a while of doing that, they come to the conclusion that the baccalaureate degree may not mean that much. They just don’t think a degree in sociology, simply because the candidate “loooooooved” sociology has anything to do with the capacity to learn. They’re going to test the candidate’s capacity to learn and simply take on that responsibility from scratch...with or without a baccalaureate degree.

Since the baccalaureate degree doesn’t conceptually ensure a better paying job like it used to many people will be looking for good apprenticeship programs rather than pursue a four-year degree. It’s going to be interesting to see how this situation sorts out over the next few years.



**“No online degrees. Only degrees from top-tier schools, and no foreign universities.”** This kind of comment will simply go away in a few years. When hiring authorities begin to appreciate that a baccalaureate degree from traditional schools just isn’t what it used to be and college-age students question whether or not a baccalaureate degree is going to be worth the investment the historical meaning and concept of a baccalaureate degree will change. Within a few years, every university in America will offer online degrees. Some studies show that online students are more diligent and hard-working than classroom students.

The problem with online degrees has been complicated by the government’s crackdown on proprietary schools. These are “for profit” schools and some of their practices regarding student loans have come under fire. Eventually the more traditional schools will offer online degree programs because of their cost-effectiveness. And let’s face it, an online lecture by one of the top engineering professors at MIT is going to be a lot more effective than a classroom with some of the teaching assistants many of us had in undergraduate school, who ranged from poor to absolutely horrible.

Rather than making this kind of statement, it might be good to investigate the candidate’s education. The question should be: “What did you learn?”

And a degree from a foreign university like Oxford might also be ok!

**“People with high GPAs are smart.”** Maybe book smart, but that doesn’t always translate into common sense and diligence. A few years back, one of our Fortune 500 clients hired a candidate through us who graduated summa cum laude from



the University of Texas. She had a 4.0 grade point average and an IQ of 138. We don't hear this much anymore, but our client insisted that the candidates they interview have a 3.8 grade point average or better and they even delineated the schools that they wanted those 3.8 grade point averages to come from. They required a 3.9 grade point from lesser schools. They had a whole chart of colleges and universities with the accompanying grade points that they would take.

Of course they were thrilled to hire our candidate. And she was brilliant. She had an absolutely phenomenal memory. She aced every test she took at UT because she could memorize every fact she was going to be asked and regurgitate it.

She didn't last very long though, because she had no common sense... at all. Our multinational client sent memos throughout the whole company announcing the fact that she was joining the company. It was a big feather in their cap. It just didn't turn out so well.

GPA's in college can't really predict a person's ability to do a job.

**“The candidate has had too many jobs in the last few years.”** The truth is that companies come and go, expand, and contract more than they ever have. The average age of a business in the United States in 1973 was 59 years. In 2009, it was 15 years. In 2013, it was 12.5 years. Companies are unstable, too. We have a global economy. The average 40-year-old in the United States has had 10 jobs. Companies come and go and expand and contract more than they ever have.

The major reason that hiring authorities are concerned about the short terms of employment that a candidate has is that they imagine if they hired the candidate, the candidate is



only going to be with them for a short period of time. There is a tendency to hold the candidate responsible for these short stints. Hiring authorities will even chalk it up to “poor business judgment” and don’t wish to have anyone around who is that poor about making decisions. Of course, this whole attitude changes when the hiring authority loses their job after a short period of time.

We will admit that hiring authorities, if given a choice between a candidate with lots of stability and one who has had three jobs in three years, are more likely to hire the former candidate. But this is assuming that the candidates are equal. There are very few equal candidates.

The question that should be asked is: “*Why* did the candidate leave the jobs?” An in-depth understanding from not just the candidate, but from others as to why the candidate left the jobs he or she has held, may reveal understandable reasons. In fact some of our clients like to hire people who have had recent short tenures because they think, and rightfully so, the candidate is less likely to leave of their own accord in a relatively short period of time. The candidate can’t afford to explain another short stint, so he or she will commit even harder to make the job they are interviewing for work for them.

**“Candidate has been at his present company too long.”** This is the opposite end of the spectrum from the previous myth. It, too, is a myth. We’ve heard hiring authorities express this concern, followed by comments like “What’s wrong with this guy or gal? Don’t they know how to take any risks?” or “If they have been at the same place that long they only know how to do things one way. We aren’t anything like them, so we’re going to pass.” Or “If they have been at one place that long,



they haven't been challenged and they must have a cushy job where they don't have to work very hard."

The comments and thoughts that we hear about candidates that have been with their present company a very long period of time are just as inane as the ones we hear about the people who have had three jobs in three years. Every situation is different. There are no absolutes.

**"He or she has owned their own business or been the president of a company."** Implied in this myth is that the candidate is going to come in and want to run the show, that they won't take instructions and that they won't be a good follower. Good leaders are just as good at following and serving others.

This is a difficult challenge for both the candidate and the hiring authority. Hiring authorities look upon people who have run their own company or been the president of a company as one less factor they have to worry about if they hire a different candidate. They think to themselves, "If I hire this candidate and he or she doesn't work out, the bosses are going to ask, 'Why did you hire someone who was the president of their own firm? Don't you know they don't really want to follow anybody else's instructions?' And then I look like a real doofus." It is simply too easy to eliminate this person and hire someone else.

What is interesting about this observation is that people who have run their own company or been the president of their own firm really know the ins and outs of managing a company. They really understand all of the things that their potential management is looking at. With the right attitude, these people can be phenomenal.

The idea that these people never answer to anybody is crazy. They answer to their employees, the IRS, their accoun-



tants and auditors and, above all, their customers. If they are truly leaders they know what it is to serve more than they know how to lead.

**“The candidate has been a consultant, which really means they’ve been out of work.”** This doesn’t always follow. Some people do mask their unemployment with purporting to be a “consultant” but others really do take on short work assignments, based on their expertise and actually learn a lot by doing them. So, find out exactly what kind of consulting the candidate has done and see if it applies to what you might be looking for.

If you discover, for instance, that the candidate is simply covering up the fact that he or she has been out of work for a long period of time, you simply don’t have to hire them. However, if you dig down deep and find that the candidate, even if they had to take these kinds of engagements because they couldn’t find full-time work, did perform short-term consulting assignments, you can check the candidate’s references with those that hired them as a consultant.

**“The candidate has been out of work for six months (or longer), so something’s wrong.”** This blanket judgment is invalid. We stated elsewhere about the experiment by Rhand Ghayad of Northeastern University. He sent out 4800 fake resumes at random for 600 job openings. And what he found is that employers would rather call back someone with no relevant experience who’s only been out of work for a few months than someone with more relevant experience who’s been out of work for longer than six months. In fact, *none* of the candidates who had been out of work for six months or more were contacted. As we have mentioned before, if given a



choice between apparently “equal” candidates, a hiring authority is more likely to choose to interview someone who appears presently employed.

There are lots of good candidates who have been on the sidelines for good, valid reasons. The issue is the reasons. We know a number of hiring authorities with whom we’ve worked who voiced this concern . . . until they were out of work for an extended period of time.

**“We need someone older because they’re more responsible.”** Maturity has nothing to do with age. There are many immature sixty-year-olds.

**“Young people are more irresponsible.”** See above.

**“Women don’t do as well as men.”** Maybe in some companies, but the truth is that women may actually work harder than men in business because, like any minority, they simply have to. When any minority individual doesn’t do well, it’s more pronounced. It’s that simple.

**“Women do better than men.”** Maybe they work harder and sometimes they do. Again, when a minority does well, it’s simply more pronounced.

**“People who have been in positions one or two levels above this job won’t be happy. When an opportunity comes along for them to become a manager or a vice president again, they’ll leave.”** It’s simply untrue. Most of us are intrinsically motivated to do our job. Titles don’t necessarily motivate people; the function of the job does. If people are reasonably happy with the job they have and what they’re doing, they don’t even entertain the idea of leaving. (We know this, because we’re recruiters. If people are reasonably happy with their job, they don’t entertain leaving even when we come up with an



apparent dazzling opportunity. Looking for a job is a pain in the butt and emotionally stressful. People don't like doing it and won't do it unless there are a number of things wrong with the job they have.)

**“We want to hire someone we like.”** This is grossly overrated. It's a business, not a social club. We discussed in another chapter that being “liked” accounts for 40% of a hiring decision. We realize that companies really don't want to hire people that don't “fit in” their company. But so often this likeability factor is put above all of the other qualifications that a candidate might have. The key is to look beyond the person's personality and judge them on the ability to get the job done.

**“Women with small children have attendance problems.”** People who have attendance problems have attendance problems. Small children may be their excuse, but it will always be something.

**“People who aren't born and raised in our area will likely move back to where they came from.”** There's absolutely no evidence of this anywhere. Back in the late '70s when the Dallas-Fort Worth area was really growing we made an interesting observation. There were some companies who didn't want to hire people who had moved here from the North or the East because they claimed that when the economy got better they would move back from where they came. There was another group of companies that loved to hire people that it moved here from the North and the East claiming that if those people had the courage to move here and start a new life they would make really committed employees.

Surely, some folks did move back to Ohio or the East but boatloads of them stayed and thank God they did. Lots of them



brought their companies with them and are still doing that today. Amen. God bless Texas!

**“We need to see resumes and we’ll know if the candidate is fit.”** There’s no way anyone can tell this or many other things from looking at a resume. Ok, an accountant won’t make a good engineer. We get that. Many good candidates get eliminated because they’re poor resume writers.

Most resumes don’t get read, they get scanned. The key is to scan a resume and get a feel for where the candidate has worked, what they’ve accomplished, etc. Most hiring authorities eliminate way too many good candidates because of not “seeing” what they want. When they are in doubt, they eliminate the candidate. This is a mistake.

We recommend to be more inclusive in a resume review. If a candidate looks reasonably viable, at least devote a 10 to 15 minute conversation with the candidate over the phone. This gives the benefit of the doubt to both the hiring authority as well as the candidate.

**“People out of work aren’t as good as the people who are presently employed.”** Again, we’ve heard this from hiring authorities before, but their tune changes once they become unemployed. No logic to this.

**“I never heard of the companies this candidate has worked for.”** We have to admit that this is one of the most amusing comments we ever hear. There are 7.4 million business establishments in the United States. No one knows all or even most of them.

In spite of this, some hiring authorities will claim that they know their market so well that if they hadn’t heard of the company on the person’s resume, it can’t be much of a company. A



comment like this demonstrates a pretty hefty ego. Also, a bit of ignorance.

### UTTERLY STUPID STUFF WE'VE HEARD

“I really only hire people who I know or people who have been referred to me by somebody I know.”

“I only hire salespeople who are 6' 2” tall or taller because they demand more authority.”

“We'd like to hire an overweight, older woman so the guys in this trucking company won't flirt with her.”

“He can't be a man 'cause he doesn't smoke the same cigarettes as me.” —Mick Jagger

Successful hiring authorities interview as many people as they can within reason. They realize that they're going to have to interview at least nine to ten initially to appreciate the candidates that are on the market or available. This is true even with narrow parameters. They also realize that they may have to start all over and maybe even change the parameters.