

HEAD START

Informing HR Professionals

Strengths based or competency focused recruitment – does it have to be either/or?

Organisations are constantly seeking to increase their competitive advantage and business performance. They have long been searching for ways to spot authenticity, passion and commitment in applicants; strengths which are inextricably linked to high achievement and drive.

The well publicised strengths-based approach to recruitment (SBR), is an approach developed to seek out and maximise these natural talents. It focuses primarily on firstly understanding what makes a great performer in a specific organisation, detailing their strengths, and secondly, identifying individuals with the right motivation and values for the role in question.

Candidates are encouraged to demonstrate and develop existing strengths rather than expending time and energy on areas which are less natural and in which they have little emotional investment. Crucially, SBR also relies on the capabilities of skilled interviewers to spot verbal and non-verbal indicators of engagement, interest and natural strength.

Back in 2008 EY announced they were moving from competency to strengths based recruitment for their graduate intake. They felt, even then, that competency based recruitment had become mechanical and that good recruitment should match the strongest candidates to roles and allow graduates to make informed and authentic career choices. They felt that, too often, poor recruiting fails to identify the inherent talent in graduates whereas the design of the strengths-based approach “gets to the heart of a candidate”.

Nestle UK & Ireland, after moving to strengths based approach in 2013, told the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), “The key difference is we are looking at strengths rather than competencies. When people are exhibiting a strength they enjoy doing it, are good at doing it and are energised by it.”

Just as importantly, many candidates appear to prefer the SBR approach, finding it fairer, more transparent and levelling the playing field; an important component in the drive for improved social inclusion and diversity.

Research indicates that the SBR approach has proved successful in many environments, with advocates claiming impressive improvements in areas such as staff retention & engagement and customer satisfaction. The AA, who brought in SBR towards the end of 2011, reported a conversion rate for job offers rise from 87% to 95% delivering a significant saving in both time and money (HRM Magazine 2014).

A few years ago, when looking for ways to improve the internal and external customer experience, Aviva determined that a critical first step was to hire people who had the natural talents to deliver results in a customer service role. “We’re delighted with our success in using strengths to help identify if someone is right for a role. Strengths interviewing allows us to focus on individuals, what they enjoy doing and what they’ll be good at.” (HRZone, 2012). In addition, Barclays, Morrisons and Standard Charter have all reported good results using SBR for graduate recruitment.

With such strong evidence and many publicised successes, does this mean the traditional competency approach is no longer valid or is there a way of using both approaches in a mature recruitment and talent management strategy?

References:

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Comment



Getting the balance right

For the most part, playing to someone's strengths appears to be sensible advice but this philosophy needs to be positioned within an overall talent management strategy. Equally, care must be taken to ensure that this does not become a simplistic response to a complex set of issues.

For many organisations, the inclusion of some elements of a strengths-based approach alongside more traditional approaches may prove to be the most satisfactory solution. This works by using strengths as the specific behavioural and motivational indicators for the role that sit under the more generic competency framework of the organisation.

There are, moreover, certain roles that require specific technical skills which may dictate the need for continued competency-based interview questions and organisations where skills transferability is paramount. In these circumstances the use of psychometric tools and management assessment centres may give a more detailed view of a candidate's abilities and potential.

SBR is likely to become increasingly popular particularly with organisations recruiting large numbers of graduates, apprentices and individuals with less employment experience. But, from our experience, switching over to any new recruitment approach cannot be rushed. We have found that the move to SBR does require a considerable amount of investment in terms of time and resources in order to fully maximise the opportunities it can offer.

The calibre and interviewing skills of internal recruiters, particularly line managers involved in graduate recruitment, may be inconsistent. Even where the tools and training required are implemented successfully, it is incumbent on recruiters to ensure that their internal stakeholders are engaged and sufficiently trained to spot often subtle non-verbal indicators of engagement in later face to face stages of the recruitment process. Line Managers can often appear reluctant participants in what may be seen as a time-consuming and unfamiliar process.

Equally, close examination is required as to how SBR processes transfer to increasingly remote and virtual channels used for selection, such as Skype, telephone and video interviews. Not all candidates express passion overtly and, for some, demonstrating the necessary enthusiasm across such media in comparison to more extroverted individuals, may be an additional challenge, resulting in decreased diversity.

Some of the recent negativity with competency based recruitment has centered on a candidates ability to prepare example responses against required competencies and the increase in coaching of candidates on these in advance of the interview. Likewise as SBR has become more popular there is increasing advice on social media and from universities advising candidates on "how to prepare for your strengths-based interview".

Other influences that effect the process (regardless of the recruitment approach chosen) include unconscious bias where the less experienced interviewer may make quick judgements and assessment of a candidate without even realising it. Our advice for organisations would be that whichever recruitment approach you choose you provide the interviewers with the skills and training to allow them to garner the right evidence to assess a candidate fairly and accurately.

In summary, with an ever tightening labour market, organisations must be willing to be flexible and use a range of interventions that both attract and identify recruits from a wide and diverse pool of potential resource. SBR is without doubt a successful way of identifying motivations and strengths for certain roles in an otherwise unskilled workforce or for entry level roles.

Focusing solely on one recruitment approach may leave organisations exposed further up the talent pipeline if leadership and management competencies are not included at certain levels in the process. Ultimately, what is important is that organisations challenge their existing recruitment processes to ensure they are appropriate to meet each and every business challenge and any emerging risks.

If you would like to know more about Kittermaster's work with clients on developing talent management strategies please contact Julia March, Lead Consultant, Talent Acquisition on 0203 053 8600 or email julia.march@kittermaster.co.uk

