



THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Public-sector hiring: ferreting out ‘false positives’

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In December 2013, a succession of world dignitaries gave tribute during Nelson Mandela’s memorial service. The South African government hired Thamsanqa Jantjie, a sign language interpreter, to ensure inclusiveness on the international stage. Experts later described his signing as complete gibberish. Public officials responded with appropriate horror and launched an investigation that revealed his murky credentials, unstable personality, and troubled past.

This international fiasco is a reminder that hiring decisions are fraught with risk and that one of the biggest challenges in hiring is to ferret out “false positives” like Jantjie—applicants who excel in interviews but don’t do so well on the actual job.

In contrast to how Jantjie was (presumably) selected, public-sector hiring tends to proceed cautiously and conservatively. But false positives still often go undetected. Here are some tips for detecting them.

4 tips for catching false positives

First, you need to test not only the “hard skill” ability of an employee to perform technical requirements of the job but also “soft skills”—the personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, including teamwork (either as team members or team leaders), poise under pressure, creativity, and even compassion.

These skills can be tested through well-formulated interview questions, including hypotheticals and/or general questions eliciting how the applicant would handle a tough situation. Many disciplinary cases we’ve handled involved employees whose technical job skills were adequate, but their performance was deficient because they were unable to appropriately and effectively interact with their teams or the public.

“Hard skills” assessment, of course, remains equally important. For most positions that require special skills, it’s essential to have an expert who can probe an applicant’s true ability. Jantjie almost certainly would not have been hired if a qualified expert had the opportunity to interview him!

Second, interviews are notoriously susceptible to elevating false positives to the top of the class. Preparation, listening, follow-up questions, and careful assessment are all keys to avoiding false positives in the

interview setting. Preparation begins with a rigorous assessment of the hard and soft skills needed for the job, which in turn leads to formulation of interview questions that ferret out the candidate’s qualifications and avoid the public-sector trap of using canned questions without follow-ups. When properly used, the interview becomes an interactive fact-gathering exercise akin to an investigative interview, focused on listening more than speaking and following up answers with unscripted questions.

Third, you should have a comprehensive strategy for checking out an applicant’s background, not just checking references. Dig deeper than phone calls to references to find reliable sources of information about an applicant’s qualities. Especially for higher-level positions, you should conduct thorough investigations of candidates’ background and work history.

Review personnel files from the potential employee’s prior employment. They can expose and unlock mysteries about a false positive’s personnel record. Consistent with this, always get applicants to sign a waiver consenting to your checking their references and examining prior personnel records, which you can share with any prior employers to assuage concerns about disclosing private information. And beware the applicant whose employer declines to cooperate after receiving an effective waiver!

Fourth, incorporate redundancy into your hiring process. Recognize that once an employee is hired, she probably will become a permanent member of your workforce. Especially for higher-level positions, the most productive and innovative private-sector employers use multiple interviews—with future peers as well as supervisors and managers—and higher-level review of hiring recommendations. Exposing applicants to a broader range of the potential peers, supervisors, and managers allows for a more reliable assessment of hard skills and soft skills.



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Vetting your candidates with depth and rigor could help you prevent the next Jantjie from establishing himself in your ranks.

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