

Talent Magnetism



Early in my career as an HR Manager I was chatting to Cherie, the supervisor of our desktop publishing team. She'd just made a job offer to a candidate who had described her aspirations as 'a tight butt and abs of steel'. This had impressed Cherie who was into serious fitness.

This ability of some candidates to match their self-presentation to the preferences of the interviewer is an example of what researchers into psychic phenomena call 'cold reading'. A good psychic is able to pick up on the clues provided by the 'cold' member of the public and so make apparently incredibly perceptive statements about the 'cold' person – 'You're a Kiwi right? You may have had your Christmas at the beach recently?' Possibly Cherie had mentioned her lunch-time running, or her netball team. We had another conversation a bit later, as you might imagine, about how to handle some performance problems with her new hire.

The conventional remedy to the risk of hiring a person for the wrong reasons is competency-based selection. Choosing people based on whether there is evidence they can do the critical parts of the job (desk-top publishing skills for example).

There is good evidence that selecting people for their cognitive ability and

'integrity' leads to hiring better performing people. Presumably this is because these 'competencies' are important for almost all jobs. There is also good evidence that competency based interviewing techniques also do a good job of helping to choose good performers ('Tell us which of your achievements demonstrate your capabilities for this aspect of the job').

These lines of evidence are of most relevance to 'on-task' performance – doing the work described in the job description.

EFFECTIVE SELECTION PROCESSES – ENABLING YOU TO CHOOSE THE CANDIDATE MOST LIKELY TO DELIVER THE GOODS – ARE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF MAKING RECRUITMENT WORK FOR YOU

Increasing attention is being paid to 'contextual' performance – helping or coaching work-mates, improving work-processes, going beyond the job description. Intriguingly there is evidence that the

competency-based approaches are not so good at predicting this sort of performance. Similarly the competency-based interview may not pull out the relevant information as well as (structured) interview approaches that allow for exploration of motives and values ('tell us about why you decided to take that job?').

Effective selection processes – enabling you to choose the candidate most likely to deliver the goods – are an essential part of making recruitment work for you. But they

rely on you having a pool of candidates to choose from. As a Director of a Project Management consultancy said to me, with feeling, 'I'd like to have a candidate, any candidate, that I could consider hiring!'

Having better staff than your competitors relies on not just being able to pick them, but to have candidates coming down the recruitment pipeline.

To be getting more than your fair share of the talent you need to be managing a bundle of practices – what we call Talent Magnetism. A critical aspect of the bundle is communicating a strong proposition to the people that you want. The best way to understand this is in terms of your Employment Brand. An effective brand will positively distinguish you from your competitors. You need to provide incentives that are meaningful, and that your competitors are not providing, to your 'target market' of candidates. This means that they see your offer as a great offer. McDonalds won a HRINZ award for providing staff with cell phones. Another example – New Zealand research indicates that the following aspects of the employment relationship are important to most employees, and yet more than half of Kiwi workers report that their employers are not delivering in these areas:

- Employees are involved in important decisions
- Promotion processes are fair
- Few status differences between managers and employees

Have these benefits on offer and you have the beginnings of a strong employment brand.

Now for the hard bit – you have to not only talk about these benefits, but also deliver on them. The irony is that a lot of your selection process is around asking the candidate to 'prove it' by asking them for evidence of their past track record. In a competitive market for talent, the balance shifts – now the employer needs to 'prove it' by demonstrating their capability to be 'on brand'. Some employers suggest that candidates do 'reverse reference checks' – ringing current employees to check on their experience of employment brand.

Less obvious to being a talent magnet is having excellent systems. Imagine these scenarios:

- You have a great interview with the hiring manager, you hear nothing for over a week, and finally you call his secretary, only to be told that you're off the list. Then you're rung back by the manager who wants to make you an offer.
- You really enjoy the phone communications and interviews – the folk

you make contact with really seem to be people people (as they claim). They send you their offer – several pages of legalese and the least attractive employment deal you've ever come across.

Talented people have choices. They may not go with the first offer, but they won't bother with a business that doesn't have this important part of their operation running as smooth as Pinot Noir. Our second scenario is also an example of mismatch between brand promise and delivery – not walking the talk.

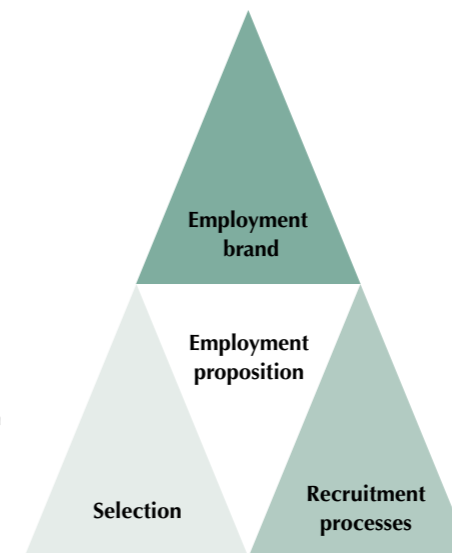
The Auckland Police have introduced Account Managers into their recruitment process – people that have little to do with selection but stay as the contact point for each candidate to tell them what is happening.

We have talked about Talent Magnetism – what does this bundle look like?

The illustration shows the three critical aspects that make up the package. Be very clear about what KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities and other competencies) make for effective people. Train your interviewers to identify these competencies. Validate the tests and other tools that also help.

Identify the incentives that will attract and retain people. Build a suite of such incentives that are hard to copy and will give long term competitive advantage. Work hard on your recruitment processes – this is an area where you can squeeze cost and time out through using online and other applications.

Finally – link these parts of the bundle to your brand. Your systems should deliver on your brand promise. Your incentives should reinforce your brand. Your competency model and selection processes should incorporate your brand. ■



Learning Selection Skills

FX Consultants has trained over 120 people in interview skills and other aspects of Talent Magnetism in seven organisations. Follow-up of trainees after 3-5 months indicates positive impacts on these skills:

- I keep a list of good candidates for when I might need to fill jobs in my team
- In the interview I succeed in getting the candidate to describe examples of their experiences or achievements that are relevant to the job's key tasks

Candidates would consider that my interviews are comprehensive and demanding

Some of their comments:

- 'Used STAR technique. Very good in narrowing it down to an "I" experience rather than a "we" experience'
- 'I used the tele-conferencing technique to interview a candidate'
- 'Called unsuccessful candidates – difficult but successful'

The trainees rated the impact of the course on their recruitment effectiveness around 70 percent.

Stewart Forsyth is Director of FX Consultants, an innovative people management consultancy (www.fxc.co.nz). Stewart will be running a University of Auckland Talent Magnetism Short Course 17-18 May. see details – <http://www.shortcourses.auckland.ac.nz/> – click on Human Resources and then scroll to Talent Magnetism

