

“BIASES CAN AFFECT THE QUALITY OF YOUR HIRES”



Leslie Rose McDonald
President, Pathfinders CTS, Inc.

Hiring is a subjective process, and as human beings we are vulnerable to inadvertently allowing our previous experiences and biases to affect our judgment in evaluating candidates. It is critical that hiring managers be aware of their own limitations and blind spots, so as to give all qualified candidates the full and fair consideration that they deserve. Here are some of the common mistakes that managers make when interviewing that can result in eliminating a valuable potential employee:

"Clone" hiring: this occurs when the manager selects someone who is very much like him or herself in personality, style, or background. For instance, a manager who is extraverted and enjoys risk-taking will feel attracted to and comfortable with candidates who exhibit similar qualities, and tend to rate them more highly. Some men will have a preference for hiring male associates, or women will feel more comfortable hiring female colleagues. As a result of clone hiring, the workgroup will likely suffer from a lack of diversity in perspective.

Overcompensating for previous employee shortcomings: this is where the manager has had so much pent up frustration about a deficiency that when the employee finally leaves, she puts a disproportionate emphasis on finding the opposite quality. For instance, a former administrative assistant had a negative attitude and seemed to always focus on why things couldn't be done. When the hiring manager met an optimistic "can-do" candidate, she was so relieved to find someone positive that she didn't sufficiently probe for other critical job skills.

Halo effect: this happens when there is an aspect of the candidate that is so appealing that the hiring manager seems to be blind to the potential downsides of hiring that person. One way this plays out is when a manager meets a candidate with whom they have something in common, such as having graduated from his or her alma mater. Once that common bond has been identified, the manager lets his or her guard down. Feeling the halo effect, the manager may not screen adequately for possible deficiencies.

Generalized assumptions: this is where the manager may eliminate a well qualified and suitable candidate due to previous bad experiences with an employee who had something in common with the candidate. For example, a manager had an employee who was a single parent who had a high level of absenteeism. When the hiring manager met a possible replacement who was also a single parent, he immediately disqualified her as a candidate, making the generalized assumption that she too would prove to be unreliable.

Outdated preconceptions: this includes having a set of general assumptions from which a manager automatically eliminates otherwise well-qualified people from consideration. These unproven or outdated beliefs include, for instance, that someone who comes from a long tenured position in a large corporation won't "fit" well into a smaller entrepreneurial environment; that someone who has had three employers in the past five years is a "job hopper"; or that someone who is over fifty will expect too much salary or won't be computer savvy.

Good employees are hard to find. A responsible manager attempts to identify and minimize his or her assumptions and biases so as not to over-glorify some candidates and overlook or dismiss others who may in fact be just the right-fit employee.

Adapted from the author's column, previously published in the Syracuse Post Standard