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By Laura Fowlie

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High employee turnover is costly and frustrating for employers and employees, so companies are being urged to train managers to make optimum hiring decisions

One hiring manager at a large office products company recalls completing a rigorous search for two new customer support managers - the people who would ensure client satisfaction and provide product support after the sales staff had closed the deal. After conducting dozens of interviews, checking references and negotiating compensation packages, the jobs were offered to two experienced individuals.

" We saw right away - during the training period, in fact,-that one of the new hires would be fine, but the other simply wasn't cut out for the job" the manager says. "Then your stuck with a tough decision -do you give that person a chance to get used to the system, and waste more of your time, or cut your losses and end your relationship as soon as possible?"

Like a honeymoon, the euphoria of

starting a new job is something that can last for weeks or months, provided the employer and new hire are well matched. But a mismatch means the honeymoon can be over almost before it begins.

Recruiters and human resources staff say hiring mistakes, whether they are immediately apparent or take longer to identify, are far more common than most employers would like. When they result in high employee turnover they can be costly, frustrating for the manager and a source of consternation for other employees and customers. Poor hiring decisions can reflect badly on managers and the company at large, making it more difficult to attract high-quality candidates down the road.

"What we are hearing is that more frontline managers are becoming responsible for the hiring process and human resource departments are taking less responsibility for it" says Chris Peacock a program manager with the Canadian Management Centre in Toronto which offers two -day interviewing seminars for hiring managers." In some cases it's because the organization has become flatter and that responsibility has been pushed down, but we are also seeing managers wanting to be more involved in the hiring process."

Few managers, however, are well trained on how to hire employees, nor do they have the chance to hone their hiring skills, says recruiter

Frank Bruni, president of Toronto based Career Lab Inc. (formerly Independent Management Group.) If their experience is limited to one hiring session a year or less, they will have little opportunity to improve their processes.

One of the biggest mistakes that hiring managers make, for example, is not taking the time to create a job description or profile. Creating a job description can be as simple as looking at the best qualities of your most successful employees and trying to match those qualities in your new hire.

"Employers often say to themselves they will know the right person for the job when they meet him or her" says Mr. Bruni. " But they can save themselves a lot of trouble by having a clear idea what they want and committing it to paper. Gut instinct plays a role, but its usually not enough to get the right person every time."

Simon Ouellette, chairman of the Human Resource Professionals Association and vice - president of human resources for vacuum cleaner manufacturer Phantom Technologies in Welland Ont., agrees job descriptions can be an invaluable resource during interviews, when managers can target their lines of questioning to seek out specific qualities. " But managers have to remember that nothing in enterprises is static, including what people do in their everyday jobs." Mr. Ouellette points out. "A job

description on paper is fine, but managers have to update that profile in their minds every time they meet new candidates."

There are several other systemic factors that often cause companies to overlook perfectly qualified candidates. Mr. Bruni says. For example, many companies use a team of three or four managers to conduct interviews. If any are unsatisfied the candidate will be disqualified. " This sets up a situation where the weakest hiring person on the team makes the decisions for the company. Sometimes this can't be helped because politics plays a role, but if three of four agree that a candidate should be considered, then they should go for it."

Similarly, Mr. Bruni warns companies to avoid "the Prince charming syndrome" of always assuming that a better candidate is waiting just around the corner. This can stall the process unnecessarily, and in fact can cause perfectly qualified candidates to find employment elsewhere if the wait is too long. "Employers forget that candidates are evaluating them just as they are being evaluated," he says. "It's important to be diligent and take the time to make good decisions, but be reasonable. How candidates are treated in the interview process says a lot about the company."

The Canadian Management Centre offers instruction to employers on behavioral interview techniques,

often touted as an extremely useful but underused recruitment tool. In a behavioral interview, candidates are asked to describe real work situations in which they have demonstrated skills such as leadership or juggling priorities. Too often, experts say, interviewers ask hypothetical questions that give candidates the opportunity to speculate.

“ Concrete examples of past conduct provide a window to the person's behavior, and provide a solid basis for reference checks - another important step that employers often skip.” says Mr. Ouellette. “ It is not an invasion of privacy to call former employers to ask them about the candidate, to confirm your hunches about their strengths or weaknesses. Former employers are usually forthright, because they expect the same in return.”

Behavioral interviews can also shed light on a person's ability to adapt to corporate culture, says Mr. Peacock of the CMC. Experienced candidates with all the requisite technical skills who are used to working in a very regimented environment, for example, may have trouble communicating with others in a more relaxed working atmosphere.

“ People usually get hired for their expertise and get fired for their lack of ability to work with others,” Mr. Peacock points out. “In most cases it's easier to train employees in the ‘hard skills’ rather than the softer ones such as interpersonal

relations.”

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