How Can I Hire The Right Employee?

Many small businesses frequently hire employees. Others seldom hire and then only for part-time positions. Think of fast-food emporiums and home-based daycare providers as extreme examples. One business owner gets too much practice at it and the other gets almost none, but both face the possibility of hiring a dud.

Some owners get really good (or really lucky) and almost always hire fine workers. Others of us seem never to get better at choosing workers. Let’s resolve to improve our hiring processes. Look at this list of pointers I’ve recently gleaned; they may help you the next time you are looking for a new worker.

First, consider whether to hire your own employee or to get help from a temporary employment service. If you need someone less than six months, a temp may be perfect. This approach can give you flexibility. You can also evaluate the worker before hiring her permanently. In addition, for a specific project, you can get a special skill you don’t always need.

This approach can have drawbacks such as training each new temp or dealing with morale issues when temps and regulars work together. Also safety can be an issue since workers learn safe practices over time. And you have to be careful about the legalities of temporary worker contracts and how you treat temps on the job. Some experts cite temps’ reliability as a negative as well, but studies show they are generally more reliable than regular employees.

Whether you hire someone or get them from an employment service, you should conduct an interview. Most jobs require intellectual, mechanical, or technical skills. These are usually the easiest things to assess and, therefore, the things we focus on. Other things, however, are often more important in determining whether the applicant will make a good employee. At the interview consider both the non-verbal signals and the verbal responses.

Most of us have heard about reading a person’s “body language.” Some advocates insist it’s a sure-fire way of telling whether an applicant will make a good worker. While I have doubts about that, overwhelmingly positive or negative body language might well suggest the applicant will be a good or poor fit for your business. Consider the following things, but remember that you are the final judge about whether this person will be an asset on the job.

Try to get a look at the applicant before the interview. Does he or she look pleasant and approachable? When she comes into the room for the interview, is she enthusiastic? Does he show confidence? Is her handshake firm? Does he smile and look squarely at you? Does she sit straight in the chair, leaning forward and ready to participate?

Does the applicant look you in the eye during the interview? Body-language experts say that people who do not may simply be nervous or introverted but they may also lack interest or be dishonest. Figuring out which, if any, is true is too much for me. I do agree, however, that, if an applicant’s gaze turns into an unblinking stare, that’s a negative sign. Whether a stare signifies aggression or fear or being hypnotized by your monopolization of the conversation, I leave to you.

Does the applicant’s face show the nature of his response before he speaks? This may reveal an open, honest personality. But breaking into a smile only after responding to your pleasantry may show simply that he is a serious listener or was unsure of your point before you finished. If he turns directly toward
you when speaking, it may show that he is confident and proud of what he is saying.

Experts can read much in applicants’ gesturing, listening with crossed arms, and crossing their legs. While I couldn’t trust myself to base a hiring decision on those things, I don’t think I’d hire a wild-hand-waver to take my most important accounts. I might give him those accounts, however, after training him to make more controlled and artful hand gestures.

Read the body language, but don’t think an interviewer can interpret everything only one way. If overall, the body language is positive, focus on the applicant’s skills and the verbal part of the interview. If overwhelmingly negative, consider whether her wonderful skills and verbal responses are enough to overlook what the body language might have revealed.

Use part of the interview to find out if the applicant has the interpersonal skills and positive motivation to be a successful employee. Learn whether he can take direction and feedback to make improvements in his work. Explore whether she has the maturity to handle her emotions on the job in a positive way and to help her coworkers with theirs. See whether he is sufficiently motivated to be fully successful in this job. Evaluate whether her temperament is suited for the job and working conditions.

Seek this information by simply asking questions during the interview. For example, ask the applicant to tell about something a former supervisor told him that he needed to improve and what the applicant did about it. Or ask him about a situation where he had to take on a new role. Ask how successfully he thinks he made the transition.

In assessing her emotional intelligence, ask about her conflicts with coworkers. How did she make the situation better? How does she build relationships at work?

To judge his motivation, ask what his short-term and long-term goals are. Ask for an example of setting a demanding goal and overcoming obstacles to reach it.

To judge the suitability of temperament, you must first list what is required for a person to be successful in the job and in the workplace. Include problem solving, decision making, communication, leadership, interaction with co-workers, motivation, organization, planning, and influencing others. Then tailor your questions for the applicant to your analysis of the job requirements.

If you decide the job requires a specific managerial style, ask her to describe her style and to list the traits she feels are most important in a manager. If you decide the job needs superior organizational skills, ask how she would approach organizing work for the job.

Don’t forget to ask the applicant what he expects of the company, the job, his supervisor, and you. It is as important that the work meet his expectations as that the worker meet yours. He may expect too much. He can also expect so little that you must question his desire and motivation.

Throughout the interview never forget to consider appearance, body language, education, skills, experience, attitudes, and interactions displayed. Imagine this applicant in the job. Can you see her there? Will you feel comfortable, positive, and confident knowing she is in the job? Note the things about her that aren’t exactly as you’d like them to be. After the interview ask yourself whether you can live with those things. You’re not likely to get her to change them.
But you will have a great influence on each new employee. Once hired, employees respond well to a
good, predictable mixture of kindness and toughness. Treat them well, but demand their dedication on
the job. Praise them for a task well done, even small ones that are part of their everyday work. Correct
them when they make small mistakes or are sloppy on the job, but never attack them personally. When
they make big mistakes, ream them out in private. Then assure them that you have confidence they will
be better workers for the experience and send them back to the job. Whether her first job or his part-
time spending-money job after retirement, employees respond well to honest assessments of their work.

For more advice about hiring, go to www.businessknowhow.com and look at articles by Patricia
Schaefer (“The Pros and Cons of Hiring a Temp,” “Read Body Language to Improve Job Applicant
Assessment,” and “Avoid Hiring Failures: Assess Interpersonal Skills and Motivation Levels”). While
there look at Greg Smith’s article “What Good Managers Must Do.” You can also visit Greg’s website,

You can make an appointment with a SCORE counselor to assess your need for employees and your
interviewing skills. Contact us at (507)288-8103, info@score-rochester.org, or www.score-
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