

Recruiting for cultural fit

Copyright © August 2008, Ian Foster and Jonathan Meyer, People Assured Group, Inc.
Contact: info@peopleassured.com

Why focus on 'fit'?

Companies that emphasize cultural fit during hiring increase the chance of securing employees who will be more effective and create greater value over a longer tenure. Recruiting for fit is about hiring the *right* people for the organization, not just good people who have the required skills, experience and leadership potential.

In this article we discuss how to leverage culture as part of the hiring process, covering the following:

- Why corporate culture can be difficult to define
- Increasing your understanding of your company's culture
- Applying cultural fit when hiring

Why is corporate culture difficult to define?

Experienced staff understands corporate culture and how to act appropriately within its boundaries, but can have a difficult time explaining it to outsiders, as it is embodied in unwritten and unspoken rules. Several definitions help remind us of the lack of documentation surrounding company culture:

"Culture encompasses the shared, taken-for-granted assumptions that a group has learned throughout its history - values held in common that extend beyond the framed mission statement hanging in the lobby." (Zikakis, 2007)

Culture relates to "the values and norms shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the firm" (Wikipedia, 2008)

Leaders realize the importance of understanding and defining culture; but in a world of international business that encompasses multiple generations, remote employees, contract workers, and increasing diversity, defining a culture has become more complex.

Increasing your understanding

Understanding your company's culture can be improved by observing the different ways in which work is planned, communicated and conducted.

Company values

Each culture has a set of supporting values that guide the organization and help to maintain its identity. It is worth reminding yourself of your company's mission and values as potential hires who research your company will seek to understand them, observe them and ultimately see if they can relate to them.

Work environment

"Once, it [culture] might have simply been the way employees treat and trust each other day-to-day. Now overall culture includes many more specific types of behavior, from the way people dress to their computing habits." (Stern, 2008)

Look at your work environment to get a better sense of the type of employee who may fit in. For instance:

- What does the dress code say about the culture? Are you more of a formal or informal environment and does that affect how people interact?
- Do a large number of the people within the company have fifteen years of service and are they highly valued? How many of your recognized employees have less than five year's tenure?
- Do employees spend some time working out of a home office or largely work together in a centralized office?

Leadership style and attributes

- Does your company govern via strict lines of authority or through more of a collaborative environment focused on leading by example, by argument and teamwork?
- Are managers given clear accountability and latitude to perform the work with their team, or is the environment more task oriented with higher degrees of management control
- Does the company encourage and reward risk taking and innovation or is it more focused on operational efficiency and minimizing errors

Structure

- Do you work in a centralized environment where decisions come from the corporate office or a more decentralized environment where local managers are decision makers?
- Is the company international and if so what role does the corporate office play relative to the regions and individual countries?

Personal qualities

- Can you identify the specific qualities that a candidate will need to be successful in your environment?
- What leadership and communication style is demonstrated by your most successful employees? These individuals are respected not just for their knowledge but their ability to navigate the corporate culture.

In a number of cases, work style and communication are related to how products are made and how customers are served.

Applying cultural fit when hiring

In this section we focus on practical steps to help ensure a successful hire.

Do some upfront work

“An applicant experiences a sense of your culture, and his or her fit within your culture, during the interview process. An initial opinion of your culture can be formed as early as the first phone call...” (Heathfield, 2008)

Giving potential hires an accurate sense of who you are will help create the correct impression. Ahead of interviews, ask the interviewers for input on what they are looking for in a candidate. This will ensure that the initial screening has the correct filter and avoids a later disconnect.

Articulate and share your company's values

The process of articulating your company's culture begins with the first phone call. In addition to discussing skills and experiences, spend time during the first discussion explaining the company values and culture, how the department operates, and the qualities that make for a successful employee.

This type of information is invaluable in ensuring that the candidate has a good overall feel for the environment before they are brought in. It will also allow them to self select out if it isn't right for them.

Include interviewers from outside your department

Interviewees will go through a number of interviews within the department or group that is hiring them. However, this leaves aspects of the overall company cultural unexamined. Interviewers from outside your department are important in terms of cross-functional interactions and to give candidates' a steer on relationship between departments. Culture is fluid and may vary within a company. Panel interviews can be used to incorporate different viewpoints and identities within a single meeting

Allow candidates to be exposed to the company's diversity and uniqueness. For example, if you are an international firm, include interviews with colleagues from other countries. If you have a differentiating product, give them an opportunity to speak with someone about it.

Design and execute a consistent process

It's helpful if everyone in the interview cycle is provided with the same background information and understands the list of core attributes and qualities the *team* is looking for. A group discussion or even a simple email chain ahead of interviews can be used to capture this. Sharing these attributes before interview makes the process more focused and easier to conclude. Including feedback on 'cultural fit' post interview ensures it is taken into account can be evaluated.

Using behavioral interview questions (i.e. citing real examples of management issues faced by your firm, asking how a candidate would solve them) will help provide a sense of cultural fit. There may be no 'right' answer but this will help elucidate if a candidate has a particular approach or style which may be incompatible.

Use different settings (formal and informal)

Some people do extremely well during a formal interview. The reality is that your hire will have to work with people in different capacities which don't mimic a typical interview scenario. Using different interview formats may help you get a better sense of the individual. An informal meeting – breakfast, lunch or dinner – may provide insight into how the person would react in a less formal setting.

Make it two-way; Provide adequate time for questions.

During the interview process, it's important to ensure that the candidate understands as much about the company as you know about him/her. Make sure that the candidate has a significant amount of time to ask questions. Not only will they gain a better insight into the company, but a candidate's question can often guide you regarding their priorities and preferences.

Build a successful induction

Build an orientation program that reflects and reinforces culture, and assign a successful employee as a mentor to help the incoming hire navigate the organization and aid their success. If people get off to a good start they will be encouraged, take on more at an early stage and accelerate their performance.

Summary

Leveraging key aspects of an organization's culture during the interview process helps to ensure a successful hire. While culture can be intangible there are attributes you can define that can be evaluated during interview. Doing upfront work to define and communicate company and team values, your environment, and different stakeholders' needs, as well as creating an interview process that represents your company's diversity, will help you objectively evaluate if your candidate is a good fit.

References

Zikakis, Damian (2007) "Finding the Cultural Fit." Detroit Regional Chamber

Wikipedia (2008) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corporate_culture

Stern, Michael (2008), "Defining culture is difficult." Financial Times June 04, 2008

Heathfield, Susan (2008) "Culture: Your Environment for People at Work." www.about.com

Bibliography

Gensing-Pophal, Lin (1999) "Hiring to fit your corporate Culture." HR Magazine, August 1999

Watt, Busine, Wienker (2005) "Recruiting for Culture Fit." Development Dimensions International

Hunt, Steve (2008) "Culture Based Recruiting."
http://hiring.monster.com/resourcecenter/resource_center.aspx

Curry, Myron (2004), "Hiring and Retaining Good Employees." BusinessTrainingMedia.com.
www.business-marketing.com.