

Looking beyond specific skills

# Are you in a hiring box?



By Steve Wilson

## Why attitude counts when hiring the right candidate

If you're like most companies Willow Creek Consultants works with, there's a good chance you're having trouble recruiting and keeping qualified employees. When I study the way companies recruit, looking at their advertising and job requirements, I usually find a tendency to rely too much on skill and experience.

Think about the last time you hired an employee and the "help wanted" ads you used. How often did you use the word "experience" or "skill"? If you have job descriptions, are they just a list of tasks, skills and qualifications?

Granted, it's essential that a job applicant possess the basic skills and credentials required for the job. For example, a delivery driver certainly needs a driver's license and a data entry operator needs basic keyboard skills.

Unfortunately, most help wanted advertisements and job descriptions focus too much on precise skills and years of experience. I rarely see such qualifications as "willingness to smile when talking to a customer." But how many customers are lost to a so-called experienced sales clerk with a bad attitude?

In order to enlarge your pool of applicants and bring diversity to your workplace, you need to change your emphasis from skill and experience to attitudes, behaviors and interests. A published study by the Harvard Business Review analyzed more than 350,000 employees in 14 industries. These employees came from all age groups, sexes, races and levels of education and experience.

The study found that "it's not experience, age, race, gender or college degrees or other accepted factors; success hinges on how well their attitudes, behaviors and interests matched the job." (Greenberg, Harvard Business Review, 1980) This ties in with the expression that I'm sure you've heard: "We hired them for their experience, and fired them for their attitude."

About fifteen years ago, I founded an engi-

neering company that became one of the fastest growing companies in the country. We were located in a small town in Iowa, not exactly the high-tech capital of America. We had state-of-the-art computers and software. We worked on a wide variety of projects for many different companies. We had a culture that focused on flexibility and customer service. What we didn't have was a large, experienced labor pool to draw from.

At first, I sought out experienced technical people from across the country, relocated them

*In order to bring diversity to your workplace, change your emphasis from skill and experience to attitudes, behaviors and interests.*

to Iowa and paid them a high salary. Most of them had gained their experience working for a few large companies in a narrowly focused technical field. Most of them were not up-to-date on the computers and software we used. We had to do a lot "refresher" training before they were productive. More than one-third of those highly paid, experienced people quit within a year. We were spending a lot of money to hire and train experienced people, and still had high turnover.

### Hire for attitude, train for skill

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, we made a strategic decision to completely change the way we hired people. Under the requirements of ADA, we reevaluated all of our jobs looking at the "essential functions" of the job. The new job descriptions addressed only the minimum skills and credentials needed to accomplish the

essential functions of each position. Then, we used psychological assessment tools to identify the *thinking styles, behavioral traits* and *occupational interests* possessed by our top performing people. As a result, we began to hire relatively inexperienced people and teach them the advanced skills they would need to grow with the organization.

Our first "test" of the new hiring program was in the sales department, which happened to be all male at the time. We didn't have the best hiring record in sales. In a typical year, we would hire five new salespeople and three people would quit! So, we began recruiting people who had little or no sales experience, but possessed the same personality characteristics as our successful salespeople. The first "match" we found was a young woman, just out of high school, with no technical or sales work experience. With just 10 weeks of training, she was successfully selling our services, and is today one of the top sales representatives in the company.

The new selection program for salespeople, including the price of assessments, cost us less than \$700 per hire. Turnover disappeared and we did not lose one person in the sales department for more than three years. This saved us more than 10 times what we spent on the hiring process.

Based on the incredible results in sales, we expanded the program to the entire company. Since the program was launched in 1992, more than 93 percent of all the people hired still work for the company and outperform the industry averages by 300 percent.

If a job applicant meets the basic requirements for a position, they will be then evaluated for a "match" to the position, without regard to race, age, gender or experience.

For example, one of our fastest and most accurate data entry operators has only one hand. One of our best computer drafting tech-

nicians is an African-American, ex-Detroit police officer in a wheelchair. We hired them for their attitude, and trained them for their skill.

The next time you have a vacancy on your staff take some time to give serious thought to exactly what you're going to look for in an employee. A little time spent analyzing your needs will pay big dividends by opening you up to a larger pool of applicants, a better selection process and fewer hiring mistakes.

### Are you ready to hire?

In fact, save yourself some pain later by updating your job descriptions now for your most critical positions. You don't want to end up like one employer who got so desperate to fill a critical position that they were about to hire any candidate that had a heartbeat. Plus, it will help you and your employees have an objective idea about the requirements of each position.

With all the tools available today, and at little or no cost, you can do a pretty thorough job analysis and create a job description in less than 30 minutes. Be sure to review your job descriptions with the people currently filling the positions to make sure you haven't overlooked anything important. You'll have a good job description that will allow you to write better employment ads. Plus, it will make the interviewing process a bit easier since you will know ahead of time some of the key elements of the position.

With a clearer definition of the basic skills and credentials required, you can focus your interviews on the attitudes and behaviors of the qualified applicants. Knowing that an applicant has the essential qualifications and is a "match" for the job will give you confidence about investing in your workforce and bringing diversity to your workplace.

### So, how do you do a 30 minute job analysis?

First, let's go get the FREE stuff. Nearly 1,000 job descriptions are available via the Internet, at no cost from the United States Department of Labor. Go to <http://online.onetcenter.org> (O\*Net™). For example, if you're in the salon industry, click on "Find Occupations" and type in the keyword "Cosmetologist." Next, click on "Hairdressers, Hairstylists, and Cosmetologists."

Now you have everything you need for a job description. You'll notice that skills, abilities and activities are addressed first, with interests and work styles covered toward the end of the report.

You should also notice the "Wage and Employment Link" at the bottom of the page, where you can get information on salary and job forecasts by state. If you want to convert the job-related information on this page into an actual job description document, click on "CareerInfonet" or go to <http://www.acinet.org/acinet>. In the Career Tools box, locate Job Description Writer and click on it.

In the Keyword box, type "Cosmetologist," and follow the instructions to write a job description. Remember to keep your focus on minimum basic skills. With a little practice, you can create a superior job description in a matter of minutes.

Since Willow Creek believes that the "soft skills," like work styles and interests are vital to job success, they have developed an additional FREE tool you can use to enhance the O\*Net job description. Willow Creek has taken all the personality-type information for these job descriptions and converted them into an easy-to-read graphic format, with simple text explanations.

You can easily modify these generic graphs to your particular location and culture by completing a 57-question survey. You can fax Willow Creek the survey and they'll send you a Job Analysis Report to incorporate into your job description. If you plan to do several job descriptions, they'll explain how to use their Web site, [www.willowcc.com](http://www.willowcc.com), to enter the survey results and prepare a job analysis report in less than 10 minutes.

In addition to O\*Net, you can find other free job descriptions online using your search engine. Most colleges and universities and government offices also make their libraries of job descriptions available for download. The Job Accommodation Network offers an excellent "primer" on developing job descriptions at [www.jan.wvu.edu/media/jobdescriptions](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/jobdescriptions).

One of the best software programs on the market for developing your own job descriptions is "Descriptions Now" from KnowledgePoint at a cost of around \$150. Visit [www.knowledgepoint.com](http://www.knowledgepoint.com) for details. Many corporate human resource departments and most human resource consultants use "Descriptions Now."

All of these tools can be used with Willow Creek's job analysis report to help you identify the basic skills and credentials required for the job, and identify the thinking styles, behavioral traits and occupational interests necessary for top performance. If you reduce your reliance on skill and experience, and shift your emphasis to identifying people who possess the basic skills needed and are a natural "fit" for the job, you'll expand your recruiting pool.

In the short-term you may invest more time in training, but you'll reduce your turnover and increase your productivity in the long-term. Study after study proves it, and I guarantee it. ■

*Steve Wilson is president of Willow Creek Consultants, which specializes in teaching companies to use a seven-step system to build a high performance organization. He is also the founder of Mid-States Technical, an INC 500 engineering services firm in the Midwest. For further information, e-mail him at [steve@willowcc.com](mailto:steve@willowcc.com) or visit [www.willowcc.com](http://www.willowcc.com).*

## Hiring Tips

**Keep in mind the following suggestions to help ensure that you're hiring the best people for your business.**

1. Think about your hiring policies and practices before you even have the need.
2. Web sites, colleges and universities and government offices can be valuable resources.
3. Develop job descriptions that don't just look at skill, but also include behaviors, attitudes and interests. Think about intangible areas such as people service skills, creativity, financial or administrative ability or how enterprising a candidate is.
4. Look outside your usual concept of who would be qualified for a position.
5. Don't discount an applicant based on gender, race, disability, weight or other external characteristics.
6. Be willing to spend time training employees.