

# Hiring For “Fit” Requires More Than Resumes, Job Descriptions, and Interviews

*A four-stage process for selecting employees, one that should replace the failing status quo.*

By James Pepitone and Robert Wyatt

Our article, “New Methods Are Needed to Improve Corporate Recruiting Effectiveness,” in the September 2011 *Journal for Corporate Recruiting Leadership* included two assertions that attracted questions from readers. First, what precisely do we mean when we use the term *fit* or *person-role fit* as the goal of hiring? Second, if resumes, job descriptions and interviews are outdated, ineffective, misleading and essentially not up to the task of hiring for fit, then what alternatives do we suggest? This follow-up article responds to these welcomed questions and strives to add clarity to future discussions on these topics.

We encourage readers to first read our preceding article, yet for convenience briefly summarize the relevant context within which we used the term *fit* and asserted the need for new methods to replace resumes, job descriptions, and interviews as the fundamental tools for hiring. The first article’s purpose was to introduce the nonprofit Humaneering Institute and its development for public benefit of humaneering technology — human-science-based principles, methods and tools for achieving maximum human effectiveness at work — to corporate recruiters who are positioned to capitalize early on humaneering’s potential. Humaneering is currently undergoing field trials (i.e., private beta testing) hosted by volunteering companies large and small. In trials related to the hiring and placement of people who are a good fit for job opportunities, we are finding that the use of

common resumes, job descriptions, and interviews are consistently so misinforming, while also void of the information actually needed, that they frequently do more harm than good. In field experiments that compare these common recruiting tools that haven’t changed much since the 1940s with simply crafted alternatives designed to provide more precise and accurate information, the alternatives consistently outperform.

The first article then goes on to explain that work, people, and our understanding of people have changed dramatically since the 1940s. If only for this reason, it should not be surprising that resumes, job descriptions, and interviews are ready to follow the adding machine, dial telephone, and other retired tools of an earlier time. Most important, subsequent development in the human sciences has given us a far deeper understanding of human nature and the conditions that enable people to be their most productive. The application of this knowledge has added new depth and importance to the concept of person-role fit, and will in time change the way people are selected for work roles, while also providing operations managers with the means for achieving substantial improvements in workforce productivity and resolving today’s people management challenges.

However, this progress will not occur quickly or without constraints. For example, most executives and managers are not even aware of the untapped opportunity to apply

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human-science knowledge for greater workforce productivity.

### Hiring for Goodness of Fit

The Oxford Dictionary defines *fit* as “having a suitable quality, standard, or type to meet the required purpose.” The closely related terms *goodness of fit* and *poorness of fit* speak to the extent to which the required purpose is met. This meaning is consistent across most applications, yet the determination of fit varies from one application to the next.

When referring to the domain of physical nature, fit is based on the exact match of an object with its specification. Whether specifying a grade of steel, size of tire, redemption amount of an insurance policy, cooling capacity of an air conditioner, voltage of battery, or size of clothing, an object fits if its grade, size, amount, or capacity is exactly (or equivalent to) the physical specification. [In statistics, fit is the extent to which observed data match the values expected by theory.]

This physical measure of fit was first used within organizations in the 1940s as companies began to identify specific traits of people as important criteria for job success. Examples include demonstrating a capability to lift a certain weight, being able to read and write, completion of specific training, having so many years of relevant experience, knowledge of how to operate a certain machine, living within a certain distance from work, being willing to travel, or any other criteria that could be objectively measured in advance of hiring. In all of these cases, fit could be determined by simply determining if the person had the specified qualification.

Beginning in the 1960s, coinciding with developments in systems theory and social psychology, the understanding of human fit within an environment (i.e., the domain of human nature) was reconceived. The prior mechanistic conception of people as simply physical objects (e.g., replaceable parts) with specific traits (e.g., knowledge, skills, and abilities) was exposed as insufficient to capture the substantial interaction between environment and person, and the impact of each on the other. Individuals were reconceived as complex adaptive

systems. Jobs were reconceived as open work systems that are substantially influenced by their environment (e.g., process, manager, culture, and support) to present individuals with specific demands, expectations, and opportunities. Most important, individual work behavior was reconceived as the individual’s adaptation to the work system and job performance was reconceived as a work system output that is based in part on the interaction between the individual and the work system. Accordingly, fit was reconceived as the matching of a unique whole person (i.e., not just specific traits) with a unique work situation with the goal of having that person’s natural ability, motivation, and temperament (i.e., the Right Stuff) interact with that situation so as to naturally result in the desired human behavior and performance outcome.

These new insights made it clear that selecting people for jobs because they possess an assortment of desirable traits will not determine a person’s fit for a job or resulting performance. It is quite possible that management’s persistence with this approach is a contributing cause to today’s low levels of employee engagement, increasingly frequent job changes, and workforce performance curves suggestive of random selection. Most hiring managers can confirm this based simply by reflecting on their hiring experience, or even their own experience of being hired. With the hiring criteria still in use today, new-hire performance

is far from assured. Managers and new-hires both readily admit that 30 to 90 days or longer is required in a job before potential performance becomes clear. We might speculate that this approach has survived as long as it has only because the associated costs (including opportunity costs) are not reflected or managed as a line item on company budgets.

Improving on this approach to selection is not difficult, but does require change. What’s needed is more precise and accurate knowledge of how people experience the work system and specifically what combinations of natural abilities, motivations and temperament result in employee behavior that creates desired performance outcomes. Good fit is exemplified by natural effectiveness and high

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performance. Western businesses are recognized globally for overestimating the impact of individuals in work systems, when in fact work systems have a much greater impact than individuals on job performance. Therefore, the challenge of achieving high performance is met by the selection of individuals who find their assigned work a good fit for their natural ability, motivation and temperament.

As summarized in our original article, good fit yields high performance, and poor fit yields low performance. The same person can be a good fit and high performer in one job, and a poor fit and low performer in another. If a person is performing poorly in a job, there is a strong probability that the person is a poor fit for the job. The suggestion that someone can be a top performer regardless of the job is easily disproven with placement in a job that is a poor fit.

Many organizations have employees who are in jobs for which they are a poor fit, which is evident by their work performance. Poor job fit results in maladaptive human behavior and eventually poor performance. These are not bad people; they are simply in the wrong jobs for their unique set of natural abilities, motivations and temperament. And by wrong jobs we mean work systems for which the people working in them do not have the right combination of natural ability, motivation and temperament to evoke effective behavior that results in the desired performance.

Generally speaking, there are three alternatives for correcting poor job fit. The option most often utilized by companies is to change people through training, external motivation or coaching in hopes that the resulting adjustment will improve their fit with the job by better equipping them to adapt more effectively to the demands, expectations and opportunities of their job. The second most frequently used option is to accept that poor performers are in the wrong job and attempt to reassign them to work for which they are a better fit. The third option, which is not often used but frequently very effective, is to change the job (e.g., processes, policies, support) in ways that give the worker greater flexibility and autonomy so as to give their unique combination of

abilities, motivation and temperament more opportunity to be effective and satisfying. Of course, the best option overall is to hire for good job fit.

It seems that people are able to do almost anything poorly and a few things exceptionally well. The challenge of hiring managers is to determine what people do exceptionally well, and then to put these individuals in jobs that capitalize on that combination of ability, motivation and temperament. Only a few companies are set up to approach hiring in this way. Most companies fill jobs simply by screening out the most obvious unqualified or problematic candidates and then determining if a person has a few traits (e.g., education, prior experience, certifications, bright) associated with performing the work. There is little or no focus on how good a fit the whole person is for the job, including its challenges and the features of the job that cause others to perform poorly or quit. Similarly, many jobs are offered to people if they just say they want the job (as they understand it) and are motivated to perform highly, with little or no focus on developing evidence to back up the claim.

While the responsibility for hires is shared by hiring managers and new hires, the greater responsibility falls on the hiring managers because of the costs associated with hiring people who are a poor fit for the work. We are working on sophisticated methods to assist individuals in determining work situations for which they are likely a good fit. Until then or until the availability of other professional support, most companies have to assume that individuals are not altogether good judges of work for which they are a good fit, and therefore must develop principles, methods, and tools that enable the company to select people who are a good fit for their job opportunities.

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### **Alternatives to Resumes, Job Descriptions, and Interviews**

Given the goal of hiring for good fit, today's practice of relying heavily on resumes, job descriptions, and interviews falls short. We are not the first or last to challenge these methods, whose greatest advantage is their popularity (i.e., everyone is using them), yet we have

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assisted a cross-section of field trial host companies in developing higher performing alternatives that are relatively easy and inexpensive to create. More sophisticated alternatives are also possible at greater expense, but sufficient improvement is possible with simple methods, so these will be our focus here.

The principle goal for these alternative methods is to discover the job and candidate information needed to assess job fit, which generally calls for greater precision and accuracy than currently provided by resumes, job descriptions, and interviews. This should not be surprising, as resumes, job descriptions (plus job postings), and interviews are all designed for promotion (i.e., persuasion). Either the company or the candidate is selling something, which immediately suggests “buyer beware.” In other words, the focus of these popular methods is not on providing and acquiring the specific information that the company and candidate each need in order to determine if a job is a good fit, nor is the emphasis necessarily on factual or evidence-based information. Rather, the information is insufficient, incomplete, and self-indulgent. It would be virtually impossible for a manager to hire for fit using these methods. Even when augmented with additional methods, we consistently observe these promotional tools introduce misleading information into selection decisions.

The response of many companies to this predicament will be to forego hiring for fit, so as to avoid having to change methods. Companies more serious about maximizing workforce performance and reducing the costs of low performance and turnover should consider the following applicant-to-hire process.

To receive expressions of interest in employment, we strongly recommend that companies develop and shift totally to an electronic method for receiving applicant information. Major companies already do this to some extent, but typically enable applicants to still submit resumes. To avoid the undesirable effects of resumes, we encourage companies to communicate that resumes are not reviewed. Even so, we suggest that received resumes are keyword scanned so as to intercept high-potential applicants for

follow-up contact. To be clear, we are suggesting that all applicants follow this same path . . . even high-potential and passive candidates . . . so that all hires are made based on a determination of job fit. The reason for strict adherence to this process is to assure that even the most attractive candidate is hired for a job for which she is a good fit. Going around the process for special cases only re-injects today’s high level of uncertainty into the hiring process. If special handling is appropriate, recruiters can work with candidates to facilitate the process. If applicants do not have enough patience for this level of thorough consideration, we have to wonder if their motivation is sufficient to follow other processes once hired.

Regarding the required information technology, there are several products and services available to provide this online capability, depending on the company’s size and specific needs. In situations involving small companies where the cost may be prohibitive, we have been able to adapt free or inexpensive survey software to provide the data-receiving functionality and inexpensive database software for applicant inventory management.

Though every company’s situation is somewhat unique, we generally recommend a four-stage process for acquiring information and screening candidates. The application step noted above can be an effective first stage in this process, if the information requested goes beyond basic job-application data to begin the screening of candidates. For example, this might include information that is helpful in selecting people who are a good fit with the company overall (e.g., culture, industry, strategy, management style, defining policies). Preferably, this initial information will result in a first sorting of applicants, potentially screening out applicants perceived as unattractive or problematic, and automatically generating a timely response. Simultaneously, other applicants can be mechanically assessed as attractive or a probable good fit with available jobs, thus automatically triggering appropriate communication to launch the second stage assessment. Whether unsolicited or solicited, candidates can this way provide the initial information that the company needs to hire and place people based on job fit.

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It's logical at this point to empathize with the applicant who, for whatever reason, is applying to many companies for consideration. Is a company making its recruiting even more difficult by requiring applicants to invest the time and effort to input substantial data that is similar to the data these applicants are required to submit to other companies? Doesn't a resume just make this much easier? The answer would be yes if resumes contained the precise and accurate information that companies needed. But as long as resumes are essentially promotional brochures, they do not provide companies with the information needed. Applicants are unfortunately faced with this chore until people fine-tune their judgment of jobs for which they are a good fit, companies make available precise and accurate knowledge about their jobs, or entrepreneurs step in to create job search tools that are based on the right information accurately represented. A good approach for companies to take in this situation is to be as responsive to applicants as reasonably possible (e.g., timely communication, don't waste their time).

A helpful second stage in the applicant-to-hire process is a more extensive gathering of information, typically in the form of online survey/test questions and related assignments. The goal here is to identify what the applicant does exceptionally well and to match this to the company's job openings or future hiring needs. At the conclusion of stage two, applicants are notified of the company's interest in more fully considering the candidate for one or more specific jobs. By this stage, resumes should not appear in the process. They are not needed and their misinformation only confounds the hiring manager's attempt to hire for fit.

The third and fourth stages we recommend are company-invited opportunities for face to face contact with the applicant and first-hand representation of her work. Stage three events are conducted in-person or virtually, and typically include relevant challenges in which one candidate or several candidates together have the opportunity to perform activities that display features of their ability, motivation, and temperament that are critical to the job or jobs under consideration. This stage should also include one or more informal opportunities

for recruiters, peer-level employees, or hiring managers to interact with the candidate(s) and submit feedback regarding their personal judgment of potential job fit. Stage three concludes with notification to the candidate of their status and, if still a candidate, additional company provided information on the job or jobs for which the candidate is being considered. It can be helpful for this communication to include straightforward feedback on the ability, motivation, and temperament that the company perceives in the person, along with honest rationale for how these personal qualities suggest a good fit and enable high performance. The purpose for disclosing this information is to give the candidate an opportunity to clearly understand why she is considered

attractive for the job(s), which in turn enables the candidate to confirm or clarify the company's perception and to reflect on her potential for job fit.

Stage four takes one more step in the direction of enabling the candidate to demonstrate her ability, motivation, and temperament by performing activity similar to the actual job. Work simulations, assessment centers, and contract work are among the possibilities, and we have witnessed all of these and other approaches conducted both in-person and virtually. Because job fit is ultimately revealed through the candidate's interaction with the actual

work system, the preferable way to predetermine fit is to figure out a way to have the candidate perform (as naturally as possible) in a situation that is as close to the actual job as reasonably possible. In addition, stage four should include opportunities for additional informal interaction with recruiters, peer-level employees, hiring managers, company executives, or others who symbolize the company or the job for candidates, and whose personal assessment, however casual, of the candidate(s) contributes valuable personal insight and judgment to candidate consideration.

The typical resumes, interviews, and job descriptions are discouraged throughout this process. Our research reveals that no amount of restraint in assessing persuasive resumes will lead to the acquisition of the required factual information. Furthermore, no amount of interview

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standardization or technique, or number of amateur interviewers, is capable of determining job fit. At best, formal interviews, like resumes, inject misleading information into hiring decisions. With all due respect for the substantial qualities of people, we are simply not good natural judges of other people and their fit for a particular job, especially when informed primarily through intentionally persuasive resumes and formal interviews.

However, for especially important hiring decisions, we do recommend that a licensed professional industrial-organizational psychologist be engaged to interview each candidate receiving serious consideration. Such interviews are conducted more to identify elusive and problematic characteristics than to determine if a candidate is a good fit for the job.

Typical job descriptions and job postings are also not included in this process. Though we have not yet

formalized a specific alternative, we assist field trial hosts with transforming today's job descriptions and job postings into more complete, factual, and revealing tools that better help a prospective applicant or candidate to

understand the job for which they are applying. This includes substantial additional up-to-date detail on the specific roles, responsibilities, and challenges that make a job the work that it is. The goal is not to attract or discourage applicants, but to equip them with information for assessing potential job fit. The additional information provided to candidates goes even further to reveal the true nature of the job and what it is like to work for the company.

If the hiring manager is reluctant to share the truth about the job or company because it sounds discouraging, the solution is not to color

the truth but to hire people who are a good fit for the job, warts and all.

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