



Tamara Sallis and Elizabeth Howells are business psychologists with PeopleCentric Associates. They provide flexible, valid and innovative business consulting solutions at the individual, team and organisational level and specialise in assessment, engagement, development and strategic HR. Email: info@peoplecentric.co.nz

how to spot the golden goose

In a flock of graduates, with similar qualifications and limited work experience, how do you spot the golden goose? How can you tell which graduates are likely to be most successful? Which graduates will be motivated to perform their job well? Which graduates will fit into your workplace culture?



Most organisations undertaking a graduate recruitment process will adopt a multiple hurdle approach, whereby graduates are screened contingent on passing a sequence of selection hurdles. This short-listing process is often portrayed as a funnel. No criticism here, it's just symbolic, but it isn't like that

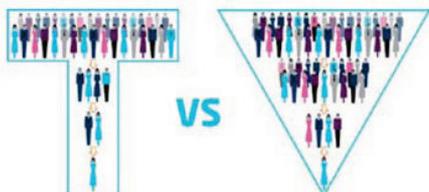
in reality. Instead, the short-listing process is more like a 'T', with a very large number of applicants at the top, which get reduced quickly. Short-listing is no easy matter when it comes to graduate recruitment because it is very difficult to predict how a graduate will turn out as there is very little information to go on.

The 'T' shows that the real work needs to be done right at the start of the selection process. After that, the incremental value of additional selection hurdles is an exercise in diminishing returns. In fact, once you move from the cross-bar of the 'T' to the vertical, there are many temptations to make the process more costly and less efficient than it needs to be.

Are you selecting for eligibility or suitability?

If we source well and employ effective self-selection techniques, it goes without saying, our applicant pool is worth gold. We should do everything to maximise its value and select wisely from it. In alignment with the 'T' model, as the initial short-listing exercise is the most drastic, it is of critical importance to adopt a short-listing technique that is as accurate and efficient as possible.

Selection criteria fall into two broad categories: eligibility or suitability. Eligibility refers to the things you 'must have' to do the job – the right qualifications or a driving licence for example. Suitability refers to



the personal attributes that will maximise your chance of success on the job. For example, you could be a well-qualified lawyer, but your behavioural style means you are a poor advocate. Often eligibility criteria are over-emphasised at the expense of real suitability.

Traditionally, applications are culled on the basis of broad eligibility factors (e.g. educational attainment) rather than suitability. Research has shown that such eligibility factors have very poor reliability, as some applicants have a tendency to exaggerate their achievements. This poor reliability, together with the relatively poor predictive power of educational attainment, can result in screening out good performers and selecting in poor performers. Once you have screened a good applicant out, you have lost them for good. A poor applicant short-listed to interview has a greater chance of slipping through to appointment and then failing on the job.

Screening effectively and efficiently

By effectiveness we mean accurately screening out applicants with a lower chance of success and selecting in applicants with a better chance of success. The only way of determining how effective your selection processes really are, is by knowing the validity of the selection methods you adopt. The effectiveness of a selection method is measured by criterion validity. Criterion validity is the relationship between the ratings from the assessment method and the performance of the individual on the job. The greater the relationship, the greater the effectiveness. Validity is very easy to understand – the higher the validity of the selection method, the more good performers you will select in and the more poor performers you will screen out. All selection methods can be evaluated in this way, including: application forms, telephone screening, interviews, educational qualifications, simulation exercises and psychometric assessments.

Selection methods also differ in terms of their efficiency – some are quick and inexpensive, others are slow and highly labour intensive. For example, imagine trying to dry your hair with a 500 watt hairdryer compared with a 2,000 watt hairdryer; the 2,000 watt hairdryer will be much more effective and less time-consuming and labour intensive (i.e. efficient) at drying your hair. When you know the 2,000 watt hairdryer does a better and quicker job, why wouldn't you use it?

There is a tendency for adopting more and more expensive selection methods, that do less and less of the real work

as you progress through the selection process. For example, interviews, simulation exercises and assessment centres tend to be the final stages of the selection process. There is considerable variation in practice here, with many of these methods adding very little additional information beyond that already collected.

How selection methods stack up

CVs and application forms: If you rely on CVs and application forms too much for screening, it is often the case that good applicants are lost to the process and poor applicants are screened through. Even if you only check eligibility criteria at this point, it will take significant time and resource or service provider costs, which provide you with very little information on the applicants' likelihood of success and consequently provide very little return on investment. The same is true of telephone screening.

Aptitude screening: Aptitude screening is about assessing suitability and has become increasingly popular with the advent of internet delivery. Supervised aptitude assessment is preferred, but not always practical. Unsupervised versions are available for this purpose. There is no doubt whatsoever that aptitude testing delivers an effective and efficient outcome. So why not use aptitude testing before eligibility screening? This would give you a better result and greatly reduce the risk of incorrectly rejecting good applicants. A note of caution – don't over-rely on aptitude results. An outstandingly intelligent graduate with a low enterprising style and a dislike of teamwork is likely to do less well than a graduate of above average intelligence combined with above average behavioural style.

Behavioural style screening: Also tapping into applicant suitability, personality questionnaires have not been used as often as aptitude tests for early screening. This is a hang-over from the 1980s and 90s, when the validity of questionnaires created was low and their content lacked job relevance. Given the advance in psychometric science in the early 2000s, there is no longer contention among experts regarding the value that personality assessments can add. The fact that personality assessments add incremental validity over and above aptitude tests, is well established. More organisations are now utilising the additional power of good personality assessments to select even better performers and qualify their short-lists at a much earlier stage of the process. If you leave personality assessment too late in the process it is a wasted opportunity – you will have already

diminished your pool of good prospects. Clearly the greater the validity of the tests you use, the greater the benefit will be. Of particular note is the Saville Consulting Wave® Styles questionnaire which exceeds the criterion validities of other questionnaires to offer even greater effectiveness.

Simulation exercises: Assessment centres are often highly regarded, but it should be noted that simulation exercises do not usually share the same correlations with actual job performance as aptitude tests and personality questionnaires. Assessment centres are less reliable and prone to greater bias and subjective interpretations. Moreover, assessment centres are considerably more expensive and resource intensive. Simulation exercises have their place, and there is no need to put large numbers of people through an assessment centre. It is smarter to let more efficient and valid methods do the heavy lifting.

Interviews: Interviews are known to suffer from bias and subjectivity, with different interviewers rating from a different perspective. Interview ratings are hard to standardise. By structuring interviews, their effectiveness can be improved, but remain expensive in terms of the time and resource involved, which is often overlooked. Interviews have an important role to play, and like simulation exercises, there is good scientific evidence for using them more wisely.

Caring for your candidates

We do not advocate an uncaring and inhumane technocratic approach to graduate selection. In fact most graduates will appreciate not having their time wasted in an interview or assessment centre for which they are unsuccessful. Providing applicants with a written feedback report from their personality assessment can be highly beneficial, as it is something they can take away, value and use for their own professional development.

In conclusion, recent developments in psychometrics are helping to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of selection processes, thus enhancing the quality of graduates selected. Re-engineering your selection methodology by positioning the most valid and efficient methods upfront, you will save money, enhance the efficiency of the process, enhance effectiveness and candidate care by reducing the number of candidates required to go through interviews or assessment centres, and ultimately you will be able to spot the golden goose amongst the flock. ■