

Hire the Best Available Candidate; but not Based Solely on “Cultural Fit”

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Abstract

The culture of an organization has a tremendous influence on outcomes. Culture drives strategy, operations, execution, and priorities. However, when it comes to hiring, culture is often prioritized over more objective criteria. There is a perceived need to make certain everyone hired “fits in.” Achieving workplace diversity begins with recruiting broadly. This paper describes why hiring focused predominantly on cultural fit is misguided and short-sighted. We describe why organizations should keep an open mind about what makes someone the “right” candidate, and why it behooves organizations to hire a few “square pegs.”

Keywords: culture, hiring, diversity

Any student of management is familiar with Peter Drucker’s well-known catchphrase, “culture eats strategy for breakfast” (Shryock, 2021). In essence, Professor Drucker implied that culture, more than business planning, influences outcomes by driving the organization’s strategy, goals, operations, execution, and priorities. Everywhere we look, employers are talking about their culture. What are the hidden references, why is it important to understand and what does this really even mean?

Practically, directly or indirectly, what culture really means is, “the way we do things around

here!” (Martin, 2006). It is no wonder so many of today’s workplaces are obsessed with hiring and promoting people who “fit the culture.” One Google employee represented their culture in this way: “people are cool”. Unfortunately, this subjective criterion is often prioritized over greater objective measures such as skill, knowledge, and ability. Being smart, experienced, accomplished, and talented may not be enough to get a job. The subtlety is that you must “fit in” to the organization.

In the face of today’s spotlight on diversity, the ideal of cultural fit may be found in phrases such as “connects with our values and vision” or “demonstrates the right characteristics”. Yet, all too often we hear cringeworthy statements such as “he’s the wrong ‘fit’ for the role,” “she is the wrong fit for our team,” “we have to hire for the right “fit,” or “it makes sense to promote internally. We know them. We trained them.” The benefits of “more like us” are touted as greater retention, cohesive teamwork, more effective communications in the workplace environment. Proponents of creating a positive culture often refer to the synergy that ‘fit’ creates.

Fluency heuristic is a cognitive bias whereby we prefer (value) information that is easier to process or recall (Rosenbaum, 2021). Working among homogenous teams just feels easier. It feels more effective. People understand each other. Collaboration flows smoothly. We get a sense of progress. As one CEO of an extraordinarily successful family business expressed “employees need not be homogenous, but they must be well-suited to dedicate themselves to supporting our core missionthey must be smart, service oriented and kind”. Another CEO of a renowned communications group phrased cultural fit as “they get us and come with the same core beliefs” – a tricky ideal that may result in cohesion at the expense of exclusion. People believe diverse teams breed greater conflict. Dealing with outsiders causes friction, which feels counterproductive. Adding outsiders feels harder. But people overestimate the amount of conflict on diverse teams. Diversity produces conflict if people bring different *values*, rather than simply different *ideas*. It is difficult to overcome differences in values. (Rock, 2016)

Yes, we need to be cautious. Organizations that rely on perpetuating ‘fit’ may be threatened by hiring someone culturally different than their existing employees (Rodriguez, 2015). And that is when the definition of culture may become an extension of maintaining the status quo.

An outdated and narrow-minded perspective of cultural fit has myriad negative effects on all stakeholders. For employees, the situation mimics that described in Romans 13:1-7, in which Paul exhorted the members of the Roman church to “*go along, to get along*” (McCullough). Employees will just go along with the status quo in their attempt to get along with the group, to “fit in.” They will stay in their comfort zones and conform. They will hide their real selves, not bringing their whole selves to work. They will try to cover up what does not fit the norm. They do not speak up, believing that their views do not fit. As one CEO recently stated, “culture is our way of showing who we are”. And it is exactly this issue that must be a concern – ‘looking the part’ is the problem. As a byproduct, unique ideas and valuable contributions are lost to the organization (Miki, 2016).

Many organizations seek to hire and promote humble people, people who do not seek the

spotlight (Shellenbarger, 2018). They place a high value on humility (Nasher, 2019). Some go so far as to have a unique cultural quirk whereby they deliberately set out to recruit “insecure overachievers,” candidates that are exceptionally capable and fiercely ambitious; yet driven by a profound sense of their own inadequacy. This keeps them humble, always expressing humility (Empson, 2018). This may work well in a ‘command-control’ top-down leadership model, but it is not empowering. In fact, Zappos promotes this concept openly by adding the very word ‘humility’ to their values. Yet, the “cultural fit” approach to hiring reflects a distinct lack of humility. It suggests your culture is perfectly right, and all you need to do is bring in more people ‘like you’ to perpetuate it.

Instead, in order to thrive, organizations need to be more self-aware and open. They need to ask: what is lacking in our existing culture? Where do we want to go? What do we want? What do we need? (Rodriguez, 2015). The goal should not be finding and promoting people who clone our culture. The goal should be bringing in people who cultivate, stretch, and enrich the existing culture by adding elements that are missing (Grant, 2018). To evolve and maintain sustainable competitive advantage, organizations must remain creative and innovative. This requires hiring diverse people that will bring a broad range of new and different knowledge, experiences, ideas, and viewpoints back to the team; candidates who might make a positive future contribution, even if they do not seem appear to be mainstream employees today (Rodriguez, 2015).

Companies with a strong culture or legacy have a harder time recognizing the need for change. The IBM ‘blue suit’ brand still resonates as an example of strong culture with limiting concepts and far-reaching consequences. These organizations are more likely to resist the insights of those who think differently (Grant, 2016). Without the diversity of thought and background that comes from hiring broadly, we get narrow-mindedness, uniformity, and groupthink (Gino, 2018). Teams do not learn how to work well with others who are “different.” They judge those who do not fit, rather than trying to understand them. People who do not fit are not hired or, if hired, simply overlooked. When different perspectives are rejected as not fitting, organizations do not disrupt, trailblaze and evolve. Unhealthy cultural norms do not get challenged. We end up working only with people we get along with, people who agree with us, people who do not challenge us; people who are just like us. (Miki, 2016).

Culture is influential because it fosters pleasing “socialization” within an organization. On the other hand, it becomes difficult to challenge cohesion. People who are selected for positions based on fit become indoctrinated with the reinforcement to assimilate. There is a strong pull to *fit in to stay in* (Kotter). Just listen to the phrase “our Culture” to know that in the broadest sense it aims to be consensual. Those who do not fit in with the inherent status quo may be alienated and therein lies the potential issue.

Differences are good, and necessary to grow and innovate. True, people with different personalities create the potential for challenges. Capitalizing on diversity requires highlighting the value of different perspectives, not glossing over differences to maintain harmony. It also requires a strong sense of inclusion. People must feel welcome and respected

before the benefits of their unique perspective and experience are manifest (Rock, 2016). Inclusion is challenging, requiring learning to work with people who may not ‘fit’. Not learning to work well with difference limits our ability to work well with different customers and different experiences - which affects sustainable competitive advantage. It is worthwhile to work through these initial differences in the short-term in search of greater long-term benefits. (Prath, 2016)

Culture obsessed search committees struggle to identify who will do a good job. Rather than work through the challenge, they take the easy route, they make the conservative choice. They simply hire from within (Chamorro, 2020). And therefore, the systems, traditions, and goals stay constant. And yet, as business evolves, so must hiring systems.

Hiring for "cultural fit" may invite unconscious bias and may also be a more deliberate excuse to reject someone who may actually be a qualified, accomplished asset to the group. In order to remain objective and minimize bias in hiring practices, the best practice is to create a detailed job analysis and description of the core qualifications a person must have to do the job, develop objective pre-employment assessments, and define the key requirements the new hire must bring to the team, *prior* to commencing a search. Create a vision. Analyze where your new hire might complement or fill gaps in your existing team. As Transformational Change Consultant Kathryn Clubb, stated, look for more than just fit, keep an open mind, seek adjacent experience and style to be a source of new ideas. The constant need to innovate requires considering someone that can provide new skills, perspectives, and viewpoints. (Power, 2021)

Culture establishes a social order and collective identity that powerfully bind the ‘members of the club’ together often in symbolic ways. But with this sense of identity, comes underlying expectations, norms and assumptions that may be harmful to positive change, particularly to those who want to be a catalyst for conflicting, forward-thinking new ideas (Cameron & Quinn, 2011).

The canary in the coal mine for hardened advocates of cultural fit is, “business is great – everything is working well. Why change?” However, Baron (2002) showed that hiring for cultural fit only works in the short-term. Silicon Valley tech start-ups that performed best early hired for cultural fit. Later however, firms with cultural fit approach grew stock value 140% slower than those hiring "stars" and 25% slower than those hiring for skills. In the long run, firms hiring for fit have more difficulty attracting, retaining, and integrating a diverse workforce.

While not hiring for cultural fit has long-term benefits, there is an important caveat ... “avoid hiring jerks” or, as Stanford professor Robert Sutton calls them, “A**holes.” Sutton’s (2007) scathing, *The No A**hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t* concludes that no matter how much money they might make for your organization, apply the “No A**hole rule” in hiring decisions. Screen them out. They leave colleagues demeaned, belittled, deenergized, oppressed, bullied, and emotionally drained; especially in smaller companies where there is no place to hide. A 2015 survey (Ovans) found that the biggest drain on employees’ resilience reserves was managing difficult people or office politics.

Toxic attitudes and behaviors erode the customer and employee experience, corrupt team morale, affect customer service satisfaction, and negatively impact the business bottom-line (Dimmock, 2018; Kusy, 2009, 2017).

Organizations love to talk about their culture as if it is a brand. For example, the former Zappos CEO was known for his quote “Culture is our #1 Priority”, with an emphasis that the criteria included “people are a little quirky”. And while that may be better than hiring A**holes, it is not exactly an objective model. Yet creative organizations successful at disruptive innovation are not afraid to take the risk of hiring qualified, proficient people that may shake up the organization. They are willing to take a chance promoting employees with great potential rather than always trying to optimize for fit into an existing culture.

Greater workplace diversity (race, gender, experience, background) correlates with innovation, improved performance, better outcomes, and greater business success. As such, many companies are trying to recruit a more diverse workforce. We know that unconscious bias significantly impacts hiring. Successful hiring portends benefits for all stakeholders - the organization, its employees, and their customers. Finding the right people is not a matter of “culture fit.” It’s not about who you want to go out to have a drink with. People with myriad personalities can be great at the job that you need done. Hiring for cultural fit is a misguided hiring strategy, and one that contributes to lack of diversity (McCord, 2018). The people we enjoy spending time with are typically the people just like us. Sure, it is easier to work with people just like us. Yet, it turns out that this is a very short-sighted strategy. Keep an open mind about who may be the “right” candidate. Given our “disrupt-or-be-disrupted” times, it behooves organizations to hire a few square pegs (Nickless, 2016).

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