

When Hiring, Look Beneath the Surface

You can't judge a book by its cover when making hiring decisions

By **Bonnie Cox**, founder and vice president of organizational development, Power Training Institute

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT PEOPLE form first impressions within the first seven seconds of meeting someone. That sounds a bit unfair, don't you think? It's especially unfair if someone is uncomfortable in a new or social situation or is more focused on content and context than on external appearances.

The problem is, though, that many hiring managers make decisions based on their first few minutes with a job candidate. Unfortunately, these biases can be blinding, and good candidates may be lost.

Consider this example. Two candidates applied for the same job. The first candidate was young, had a perky haircut and was dressed in Dockers, a dress shirt and a tie. He was engaging and animated during the brief interview. The hiring manager was impressed.

The second candidate, although equally qualified, was almost the opposite. Dressed more conservatively, she was not as engaging or outgoing. She was quiet, and it was more difficult to draw information from her. Her answers were short and crisp. The conversation didn't flow easily and felt uncomfortable. All these factors made it more difficult for the hiring manager to see this applicant's value.

Managers face these kinds of decisions every day. And they are important decisions. Hiring the wrong person for the job is painful and costly. Hiring the right one makes life easier.

There are three key things on which to rely when making hiring decisions in the mortgage business: 1. the application; 2. the interview; and 3. references.

Application

The screening process should start with a com-

pleted employment application. All prospective employees, regardless of the position for which they are applying, should fill out an application completely. It should have all the blanks filled in, every section signed, and it should never say, "See résumé."

There are so many ways to uncover erroneous information in an application if one just looks closely enough. Red flags include blanks, gaps in employment, dates that don't match and unsigned release statements.

Review the content of the information provided as well. You may come across statements that make no sense. In the mortgage world in particular, content and context are both critically important. Refuse to hire anyone with an incomplete application.

Interview

It is not good enough to simply look for the proper skills, experience or good fit of an applicant. Employers must also determine if there are reasons *not* to hire someone. In the mortgage business, in which employees have access to customers' confidential information, it is especially important to be thorough.

In addition to verifying names of references, dates of employment and any unexplained gaps, you should use the interview to probe deeper into past performance. For example, behavior-based interviewing is a technique that probes below the surface. Ask questions like, "Tell me about a time when applicants came in for a loan and on the surface didn't look like they could qualify. How did you handle your own bias?"

Even candidates who are well-practiced and adept at answering typical interview questions will have to reach deep to come up with specific

examples for you. As they do this, you can see how they could be expected to act in a similar real-life situation. It is especially important that you hire people who can be fair with the public and set aside personal biases.

References

Checking references not only verifies that applicants are who they say they are, but it also helps you eliminate candidates who have given you false information. It is much better to discover this information before you hire someone rather than after.

Check all references. Start with previous employment. If possible, talk to a previous supervisor or manager. If a candidate does not have previous work experience, talk to a former professor or coach. And call personal references.

Leave no stone unturned. Past performance is the best indicator of future performance. It will be worth the extra effort.

Remember, when all is said and done, and the interview is over and references checked, many candidates will turn out to be legends only in their own minds. For example, titles and salaries are often inflated, as are education levels. While most people do not blatantly tell lies, they still can be tempted to embellish the truth. After all, a job offer is usually at stake. And many employers do not check out the facts before they extend an offer.

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So, which of the candidates in the previous example was hired? After the hiring manager talked to previous employers about work history and reliability, the company hired the second candidate. She turned out to be solid as a rock and a great fit for the organization. Time proved that it was the right choice. See, you really can't judge a book by its cover.

To save time, money and months of agonizing grief over poor hiring decisions, follow these recommendations. Always get a completed application, conduct a behavior-based interview and check every reference. **!**



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