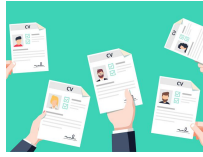


Great organisations recruit brilliantly

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Recruiting with care will yield long-term benefits | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

Knowing how to hire the right people has a direct bearing on workplace culture and institutional DNA

Thorough. Painful. Fun. Fastidious. Complicated. Interesting. Slow.

These are the responses I get when I quiz candidates who have gone through our hiring process. By the time they reach the final interview, they have gone through several meetings, made presentations to potential colleagues and peers, perhaps sat in a workshop, and maybe spent a day absorbing the sound and smell of the campus.

Our experience has shown that most of these steps in the recruitment process are essential. The one thing we must constantly monitor is the time taken between the various stages, find creative and effective alternatives to reduce it, and keep candidates informed of their application status at every stage of the process.

But why do we have so many stages in the first place? Simply because it is in the best interests of the person who will join us and the organisation. For the applicant, each interaction is an invaluable opportunity to evaluate the institution. Through the course of the selection process, the candidate will meet a diverse set of people — potential peers from his/her own domain as also cross-functional; some members of the organisation's core leadership group, and many times possibly the CEO too.

The way different people express themselves provides opportunities for applicants to assess whether this organisation will be suitable — for their temperament, beliefs, values, and their career aspirations. They get to hear and absorb the vision, the work, and the values of the organisation, in multiple voices and on various occasions.

Symbiotic relationship

Why should an organisation care so much that candidates have all the information? Firstly, to ensure that they will join for all the right reasons, and secondly, it is an acknowledgment that it is a leap of faith that could have a huge bearing on their professional careers. If we help the candidate make the decision armed with as much information and understanding of the institution's values, purpose, and working culture, we also convey our concern for a candidate even before he/she joins us.

As for the employer, recruiting right is critical for work environment and culture. The vision of the institution is the overarching umbrella and therefore the key is how well the leaders of the institution communicate this vision. How much does the organisation's purpose mean to the candidate?

Are we drawing people only with individual career aspirations or do we have other considerations such as their resonance with the vision and the desire to contribute to building a fine institution?

By giving themselves the best chances of bringing in such people, by recruiting with all care, the organisation liberates itself to provide its members with autonomy and freedom. That in other words is an environment of trust. Autonomy and freedom encourage initiative and enable members to give expression to their ideas.

Over time, if the recruitment remains as thorough, ownership and belonging become a part of institutional DNA. What the institution achieves is a vibrant, creative, and collegial atmosphere. Cast your mind back to companies that you believe are excellent and you would find that they have the best people.

However, if the organisation does not invest this kind of time and effort in its selection process, it will be unsure of their recruits. That automatically brings caution into the working style of the leaders, as there would not be the same degree of trust and confidence.

With caution, bureaucracy and red-tape become an integral part of processes, which is a debilitating combination of risk-averse attitudes and initiative-killing procedures. When these kinds of operational constraints get built, the energy and can-do spirit is drained, leaving it to coast along instead of soaring to its full potential.

The right fit

I must also make it abundantly clear that recruiting people who resonate with the organisation's vision and purpose does not mean gathering a monochromatic group of people. Especially in social sector organisations, the dangers of ideological one-sidedness can be detrimental to maximising contribution. In the context of academic institutions, a rich and wide spectrum faculty would mean, providing students vital learning from a range of views, texts, and arguments.

By providing such a learning experience, students will acquire the rigour and discipline to marshal and analyse facts, evaluate all arguments, and form their own well-reasoned positions.

The principles that I mention above to argue the criticality of good hiring are obviously applicable to corporate hiring situations. For there too, such rigorous processes will bring people with complementary talent and attributes. The well-qualified, capable professionals who place value on business ethics, speak their mind, and place collegiality and collaborative work as high as their personal ambitions.

Wrong selections can have a toxic effect on the working environment and culture. A business downturn, a poor year, or a bombed capital investment — all these can be retrieved or corrected with sound strategy and strong execution. But the cost of retrieving this situation is much more complex when it comes to humans and their strengths and frailties. A vitiated atmosphere, because we brought people who are not suitable for the organisation, has the potential to damage the DNA and shrivel the soul of the organisation.

Having said this, the fact is that despite utmost care mistakes will be made, for only people hire other people. Perhaps because of this inherent human element, organisations try and mitigate this through a process where selections are made not by a small group of like-minded people but by a spectrum of people, with the top leadership fully invested in the entire process.

And finally, another dose of reality. As companies grow and try to meet their ambitious plans of scaling up, it will always be a wicked tango between speed, scale, and quality. How will 'quality' ensure it does not succumb to the pressure of speed and scale? How will 'scale and speed' ensure they do not get derailed at the altar of quality?

There are no easy answers. All that we will have to guide us, will be our continuous, honest, and vigilant introspection and the willingness to adapt processes as we go about building the institution. And to remember that great institutions recruit brilliantly.

(The writer is with Azim Premji Foundation.)