

Have you got the right staff in your IT function?

By David Parmenter

The composition of the IT team is critical to the many deliveries made by the team. The IT team is very much like the midwife bringing many “treasures” into the world much wanted by the corporate parents. IT teams, like midwives, should be selected carefully.

Busy IT managers are often pressured to limit the recruitment process to structured interviews and reference checking. The references process is often undermined as the current employer can not be contacted (notice has not yet been given).

This selection process can lead to trying to fit round pegs in square holes. The cost in terms of team morale, wasted time, poor productivity and potential redundancy costs make this “short cut” an expensive option.

Some participants* in our better practice study have found there are better ways including:

Better selection processes

- behavioural based interviews
- psychometric testing
- simulated exercises
- using team members on the interview panel

Behavioural based interviews

Sounds rather threatening, but in reality the IT manager is expecting to purchase a package of behaviours that will fit with the team’s and project’s needs. To conduct structured behaviour based interviews you will need core competences for the job in question. If you have not yet set down your core competencies for all IT positions do not fear. You may be able to purchase a template from another IT function rather than reinvent the wheel. In many cases the core competencies may not be too dissimilar from other IT shops in other sectors.

Psychometric testing

Psychometric testing is available at large recruiting agencies or from registered psychologists and cost between \$300-900 per candidate. The results can often be available by the next day. Such testing is a powerful predictor of performance. Companies using such tests have found some very plausible candidates rate poorly and are saved from a potential poor recruitment.

If you are new to psychological testing it is frequently useful to put some of your high performers through the chosen tests to build some in-house norms. Once started you will soon find that you cannot do without psychometric testing.

There are tests designed specifically for IT staff:

1. Tests which measure the symbolic reasoning ability are relevant to jobs which require the capacity to work through a complex problem in a systematic and analytical manner.
2. Fault diagnosis tests measures the ability to identify faults in logical system.

Simulated exercises

Participants* are preparing small simulated exercises, which may only take 15-20 minutes, to test the capability of candidates. Correcting a simple error in a program, writing an amendment to a program, handling a customer query, presenting an IT proposal to management etc are examples that can be set up easily yet provide valuable information about the candidate’s abilities.

Where a particular skill is critical a longer situation exercise should be set up for the short listed candidates.

One participant* asks the applicant to diagnose and remedy a carefully prepared fault in a programme. This is then followed by a 10 - 15 minutes long written test listing the steps that the applicant would take in a problem solving exercise. The objectives of these simulations is to test both the potential employee’s methodology as well as their problem solving ability.

Another participant* tests help desk applicants’ ability by placing them in front of a PC while fielding a “test call”.

Using team members on the interview panel

One participant* ensures that the IT team is involved in their “team member” selection process. The applicants undertake psychological testing and a panel interview. The panel include an HR team member, the IT manager and a member of the relevant IT team. This process ensures that a new employee is not only matched with the job but also fits the team. This is particularly useful where questions need be asked about particular knowledge and skills where the manager maybe less knowledgeable. As one participant put it “IT teams are frequently small, closely knit, with a high degree of interpersonal dependence and mutual respect - any new addition is a potential threat to the performance of a high performing team, unless carefully selected.”

Last words

- recognise the danger of a poorly planned interview (you will, at best, recruit in your own image and at worst, a silver tongued misfit)
- do not rely solely on the recruiting agency to short list candidates (here is no science to this process, you may see potential that has been missed by the recruiter)
- take action to reduce loss of good staff so less recruiting is required

* waymark solutions limited run a study on Information Systems functions every six months.

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