Recruiting for Cultural Fit by Katie Bouton

Culture fit is the glue that holds an organization together. That's why it's a key trait to look for when recruiting. The result of poor culture fit due to turnover can cost an organization between 50-60% of the person's annual salary, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). But before the hiring team starts measuring candidates' culture fit, they need to be able to define and articulate the organization's culture – its values, goals, and practices — and then weave this understanding into the hiring process.

The process of defining organizational culture can take many forms, from working with an external consultant to staff-driven focus groups and discussions. And the result could be a formal statement from the CEO defining the organization's culture or a list of operating cultural norms that govern the way staff interacts with one another — or both. What's important is that hiring managers, interviewers, recruiters, and everyone at your company can identify critical characteristics that mesh well with that culture. For example, if a strong sense of entrepreneurism is one of your organization's cultural hallmarks, ensuring that potential candidates are entrepreneurial, with a track record of thriving in similarly entrepreneurial environments, will be imperative. This would be a key signal of culture fit.

Cultural fit is the likelihood that someone will reflect and/or be able to adapt to the core beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that make up your organization. And a 2005 analysis revealed that employees who fit well with their organization, coworkers, and supervisor had greater job satisfaction, were more likely to remain with their organization, and showed superior job performance.

There has been a lot of talk recently about how looking for culture fit can lead to discrimination against candidates and a lack of diversity. It's important to understand that hiring for culture fit doesn't mean hiring people who are all the same. The values and attributes that make up an organizational culture can and should be reflected in a richly diverse workforce.

For example, if collaboration is a key organizational value, people who have a genuine, authentic belief in the value of collaborative work will be a stronger culture fit than those who are more comfortable as individual contributors. This doesn't mean that only people who come from one particular background or have one particular set of experiences are collaborative. A savvy hiring manager knows that a deep-rooted belief in collaboration could just as easily be found in a candidate with a corporate background as a candidate who has worked in the nonprofit sector or a candidate who has spent most of her career in the military.

Here are some questions that will help assess culture fit in an interview:

• What type of culture do you thrive in? (Does the response reflect your organizational culture?)

• What values are you drawn to and what's your ideal workplace?

• Why do you want to work here?

• How would you describe our culture based on what you've seen? Is this something that works for you?

• What best practices would you bring with you from another organization? Do you see yourself being able to implement these best practices in our environment?

• Tell me about a time when you worked with/for an organization where you felt you were not a strong culture fit. Why was it a bad fit?

You can assess the candidates' work ethic and style by honing in on the following: whether they succeed in a virtual environment or with everyone in the same space; if they're more comfortable with a hierarchical organization or can they thrive with a flat structure; and if they tend to collaborate across teams or operate in a more siloed approach.

Finally, expose your candidates to a larger picture of what it would be like to work at your organization. Give him or her a tour of the office and a chance to see how employees at all levels interact with one another at meetings or during lunch. Pay attention to the candidate's comfort level and gather feedback from staff. The candidate whose behavior and values are consistent with your organization will naturally rise to the top.

If you assess culture fit throughout the recruiting process, you will hire professionals who will flourish in their new roles, drive long-term growth and success for your organization, and ultimately save you time and money.