Avoiding 'Talented Terrors': 20 Questions to Help You Hire for Attitude

“If you don’t have a good attitude, we don’t want you, no matter how skilled you are. We can change skill level through training. We can’t change attitude.” — Herb Kelleher, co-founder of Southwest Airlines

Figuring out if applicants have the technical skills to perform a job is relatively easy. You run a test and look at the numbers. What’s more difficult is finding out whether a person has the personal characteristics that would make them successful AND someone co-workers wouldn’t go nuts working alongside.

Nearly half of new hires (46%) fail within 18 months of being hired, according to research in Mark Murphy’s new book Hiring For Attitude.

Why do so many fail? It’s not a lack of technical skills (only 11% fail for that reason). Instead, 89% fail for attitudinal reasons—emotional intelligence, coachability, motivation and temperament.

You CAN have both. And while most companies do a pretty good job measuring the hard skills, they fall down when it comes to measuring the soft stuff. That means workplaces are strewn with, as Miller calls them, “talented terrors,” people who perform the job task exceedingly well, but are hell on rollerskates to be around.

If you’re looking for “positive” attitudes, there’s no single set of characteristics to hire for. You need to identify the core values that are important to your organization and ask questions that extract that value.

Example: Southwest Airlines employees are legendary for their casual, quirky manner with customers. Murphy’s book tells how Southwest once conducted a group interview for pilot applicants: After all the finely suited candidates arrived, the HR person brought out a bunch of baggy brown shorts and offered any of the applicants to change into the shorts if they wanted to get comfortable. The ones who didn’t change were shown the door.

“They were willing to turn down top gun pilots because the applicant wasn’t willing to have the company’s core value—fun,” says Murphy.

One of the key questions in any interviews, Murphy says, is to choose your workforce’s defining characteristics (creativity, intelligence, doggedness, etc.), then ask applicants, “Could you tell me about a time when you ______ (relating to that characteristic)?”

For example, “Could you tell me about a time when you lacked the skills or knowledge to complete an assignment?”
Tip: Avoid following that up with “... and how did you solve it?” The problem solvers are going to tell you anyway. The problem-bringers won't.

Bottom line: Once you establish that applicants have the skills to perform a job, the best interview questions are behavior-based inquiries that focus on HOW the person will perform those tasks.

Mindy Chapman, author of Business Management Daily’s Case in Point blog, suggests the following 20 questions to help you narrow in on a candidate’s temperament, as well as skill.

20 Behavior-Based Interview Questions

1. How can we best reward you for doing a job well done?
2. What have your mistakes taught you?
3. What frustrates you at work, and what do you do about it?
4. How do you like to be managed?
5. What kind of supervisor brings out your peak performance?
6. What is the most useful criticism you ever received? Given?
7. What one area of your performance do you struggle with?
8. Tell me about a time when you had to adapt quickly to change.
9. In your position, are you a risk taker or do you play it safe?
10. Describe a time you had to sacrifice quality to meet a deadline.
11. How do you stay current on industry trends and standards?
12. What do you think are key qualities for this position?
13. How has your current position prepared you for this job?
14. Have you ever been fired? Why?
15. What strategies do you use when you cannot solve a problem?
16. What are your three most effective business accomplishments?
17. What policies have you written and implemented?
18. Tell me about a time when your communication skills had an impact.
19. Tell me about a time when you missed a deadline.
20. Tell me about a time when you changed your plan mid-project.