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Screening Out Applicants with a Bad Attitude

One of the biggest untruths in recruitment is 'We pretty much know the sort of candidates we are looking for'. In my experience, most employers think they do, but they don't and the reason why is obvious. Human beings are complex, diverse and contradictory animals. Appearances are deceiving which is why first impressions are so often wrong. Recruiters reviewing CVs have to make snap decisions about people from reading just a few flimsy pages. The surprise isn't that many organisations are poor at screening, but that any get it right at all!



From reading thousands of CVs and tracking the results over the years, I have worked out that the most effective screening criteria I can use to give me recruitment success are:

- A) Attitude
- B) Skills and Qualifications
- C) Practical and Cultural Fit

These of course are not news and they're often mentioned in HR books. The trick however, lies in the 'how'. Most recruiters have a tangible method for reviewing (B) and (C) but when it comes to (A) it's usually just gut feel. It took me a number of years of trial and testing, to work out that the key objective evidence to use to vet for applicants with great attitudes is:

- Job stability and early workforce participation.
- A pattern of completion.
- A pattern of demonstrated achievement.
- Community involvement (An adjunct - not relevant on its own).
- Speed and targeting of application

Here's how the criteria above, can be applied to candidate attitude, to screen CVs for the best recruits:

1) Positive work ethic – the most useful objective indicator for a positive work ethic is job stability. If someone has been in the workplace for 10 years but had a different employer every single year, this indicates a poor work ethic. It may be that they find it difficult to deal with authority figures, are argumentative with their workmates, or maybe they simply lack commitment or perseverance when the going gets tough. It doesn't matter what the reason, all that matters is that they are statistically unlikely to stay more than twelve months in any organisation. I had a 95% turnover of all recruits in this category, to the point that I now place them straight on the 'no' pile when screening, **regardless of their skill levels**.

2) Perseverance - to analyse people's past performance in this factor, I look at their completion history and tally up a score as I read through the CV. Did they complete high school? Yes, one point on the positive side. Did they drop out before finishing their university degree? Oh oh, a point to the negative. Do they have any long unexplained gaps in their CV? Another minus. Have they stayed with companies for eighteen months or longer? Yes, this is a plus. Have they completed things in their personal life such as attained judo belt, or reached a high piano grade. Yes, more

positive points. By the end of the CV, I will have a tally. The ideal recruit is someone with all pluses and no minuses. Those who have a lot more positives than negatives (eg seven versus two) are also OK. Anyone with more negatives than positives is a definite 'no' and I put their CV straight on the rejection pile.

You can see from this that patterns are the most important element when it comes to measuring attitude, which is why the strict rejection policy some companies have for one-off 'failures' can really impact on their hiring success. It doesn't matter if someone dropped out of a degree if they have demonstrated perseverance in other aspects of their life. For all you know the course might have been the wrong career choice for them and quitting was a necessary step. But if the applicant dropped out of college, and has moved from job to job every year for the last fifteen years, then it shows a real pattern that when the going gets tough, they move on.

The reverse is also true. Many people may show little evidence of achievement in their early life but examples of their perseverance will begin to show up over time. For instance, some of my best candidates were those who completed a university degree later in life. This demonstrates enormous determination as they often have to persevere through several years of financial hardship, whilst holding down a full-time job, to achieve their dreams. They then apply this same level of resolve to any challenges they might face within an organisation.

3) Demonstrated Achievement - this factor is perhaps the easiest one to gauge from a CV – you are looking here for a history of past achievements which can include such things as:

- General or sporting awards/prizes in early life eg. Under 12's rugby champion;
- Positions of responsibility at school eg. school prefect or house leader;
- Educational achievements at school and university;
- Awards/Prizes at work eg. Top salesperson in March;
- Promotions/ Position of responsibility at work such as assistant manager, manager or mentor;
- Stand-out workplace achievements such as managing a store that doubled profit in one year.

There are a couple of important points to note here. The achievements are only relevant if they are objective. For instance a prize for 'Most Popular' or 'Friendliest Employee' means very little. Also be wary of collaborative efforts – someone may have been a part of the 'Most Profitable Shop' but you may find that their only contribution was in the two weeks they joined before the prize was awarded. 'Most Profitable Salesperson' however, is a whole different ball-game. Similarly, general or sporting awards by themselves are not indicative, without a follow-on history of achievement. It is the pattern that is important. If the sporting award is backed up with other achievements such as a promotion at work, then it is useful as a measurement.

4) Demonstrated ability to work with people without conflict – The best way to identify a poor attitude here is through an unstable work history as the applicant repeatedly conflicts with co-workers and managers so hence has to keep changing jobs. This is also one attitude that is easy to pick up at the interview stage as people often reveal their negativity towards colleagues in their answers to interview questions.

Community or charity involvement, participation in work projects, or mentoring, can also be positive evidence here, though by itself it is not an indicator of a great recruit. It's only in conjunction with demonstrated achievement that it's relevant. Otherwise the candidate may be what I call the workplace 'coffee-maker' – the person who is always running around doing things for other people, to compensate for their lack of achievement in their actual job role.

5) Commitment to the job role/company - If a person is genuinely interested in a job, they will send their CV in quickly - my best recruits almost always applied in the first five days after the ad was placed. A targeted email/cover letter is also indicative of commitment. Compare this email where the committed applicant directly addresses the selection criteria:

Eg. *'You asked for someone with prior sales experience. I have worked for Jones Hi-Fi for 4 years and I have won their top sales award for the last two years in a row.'*

To this one where the poor candidate focuses on what the job will do for them, rather than the other way around:

Eg. *'I was very excited when I saw this job advertised. I've always wanted to work in the music industry and the interstate travel would be a fabulous way for me to see more of Australia.'*

I've attached an example CV screening checklist on the next page. It is important to screen for all the above criteria, no matter what job role is being filled. Whether the position is for a babysitter, a bar attendant, an IT Manager or a CEO, these attitudes are crucial to a candidate's success in the role. (The only exception is achievement, which is unnecessary if the role does not require further growth.)

Take job stability. Employers never want to believe this is important for all roles. When recruiting for a large cycling company, who were desperate for mechanics, the CEO employed a person who was highly skilled but had a poor history in this category, against my advice. It was a disaster. He repeatedly conflicted with staff and clients, was a performance management nightmare and was eventually sacked.

I cannot emphasise this enough. There is *always* a reason why people turn over in jobs on a continuous basis, and they will always be very high risk recruits, no matter what their skills. The only exceptions to this rule are young applicants less than five years out of school or university. For these candidates, a certain amount of job turnover is natural as they experiment with organisations, to find one that suits. In these cases, evidence such as early workforce participation, and patterns of demonstrated achievement and completion, are more important factors for determining attitude, than job stability.

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EXAMPLE CV SCREENING CHECKLIST

CANDIDATE	ATTITUDES				SKILLS	PRACTICAL FIT <i>Cultural Work Hours Salary Location</i>	PHONE SCREEN YES/NO?	INTERVIEW YES/NO?
	<i>Work Ethic Perseverance People conflict Commitment</i>	<i>Perseverance Achievement</i>	<i>Achievement</i>	<i>Commitment</i>				
Name	Job stability	Completion history	Demonstrated achievement	Speed, targeted email & CV	Skills & quals	Practical fit	Phone screen?	Interview?
John Day	Excellent	Year 12 Grade 9 piano	Supervisor w/i 12 months	Yes	Forklift licence	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mary Jones	Patchy - gap in CV 2000-2003?	BA	School captain	Yes	Forklift licence	Based in Vic but can reloc	Yes Why gap	No commitment
Emily Smith	Very patchy Chgd jobs each year	Year 10	Nil	No	No forklift licence	Yes	No	No
David Evans	OK	BBus Incomplete	Nil	No cover email	Forklift licence	No team exp.	No	No
Paul Wales	Excellent	Year 12	Employee of the month 5 x	Yes	Forklift licence	Yes	Yes	No - double the salary
Monica Sim	OK	BA	Nil	No	Forklift licence	No	No	No
Ben South	OK	Year 10, black belt judo	Awards & Mgr	Yes	Forklift licence	Yes	Yes	Yes