GETTING THE 'FIT' RIGHT

Understanding an organisation's culture is the key to successful recruiting.

By Tricia Reardon

In nearly every recruitment assignment brief, our clients tell us that regardless of a candidate's skill level, the most important thing is that he or she 'fits the culture'. Defining that culture however, can be a difficult task.

Authorities in the area seem to agree that culture is that difficult to measure, intangible characteristic, or personality of an organisation that reflects its customs, values and shared beliefs. It is often demonstrated through the way in which people behave, present themselves, conduct their working relationships and solve business issues. More often than not though, culture is intuitively known and felt, rather than overtly expressed.

Culture … Critical For Strategy Delivery

It has been said that culture is the 'glue' that bonds everything together and is critical for strategy delivery. If this is so, then the people within the organisation all need to be sticky with the same 'glue'! Recruiting new employees, who are capable of delivering on the objectives of the company's strategy, requires an understanding of the makeup of that 'glue'.

Given the importance of culture and the enormous amount of attention it has received from the business world over the last three decades, for many it still remains a subjective area. Yet, it would seem that the culture of an organisation is vital to its success. Culture impacts on how an organisation is 'viewed', even though that may sound like a contradiction, since culture is not something that is even easily described. However, it is largely an organisation's culture by which people in the broader market seem to determine whether that company is an employer of choice. The reputation of an organisation seems to grow from the manner in which the people in that organisation conduct themselves; how they behave and do business. Every single employee will spread something about the company's culture whenever he or she has dealings outside that company. All employees are therefore representatives of the organisation's culture; the message they send is quite subtle yet it is very powerful.

Culture therefore has an interesting two-way effect. Companies want to recruit people who fit their culture, yet people want to join those companies whose culture is attractive. Matching the two will go a long way towards staff retention. Research also clearly supports the notion that where individuals are well 'socialised' into an organisation, they are more likely to have longer, more satisfying and higher paid careers within that organisation. The process of socialisation or orientation ensures that new employees gain knowledge of and embrace the company's culture; history, goals, values, language, politics, people, performance requirements and the way things are done.

> **"Culture can attract good candidates…"**

Culture Shapers

In the early days of an organisation's evolution, the culture will most likely depend upon the personality and the operational ways of its owners or founders. Over time, other factors come into play that will impact on its culture such as history, ownership change, size, the formality required to operate, technology that may influence skill levels, goals and objectives that will influence the values required, the market in which the company operates, and people.

Another major area of influence over culture is the actual business the organisation conducts. For example, a company that is highly sales focused will have an outward looking culture, be highly customer focused and service oriented. It is therefore likely that the people this type of company employs will have these traits.

"pathways to future growth"

Of course there are also the physical attributes of a company that contribute to its culture. The presentation of the office environment and the way employees dress should not be underestimated. A person who prefers to dress casually, and has always done so, may not find it easy to adapt to a corporate environment that requires more formal attire. Employing someone like this could lead to that person being ostracized by others who consider him/her to be too 'different'. In addition, the company's communication style internally and externally forms part of its culture. The way in which a potential employee has communicated with customers for example, will be important to know in case it differs to the company's approach.

Culture & Recruitment

As the culture fit of new employees is critical, its definition needs to be incorporated into the recruitment process. Questions need to be considered that deal directly with a candidate's desired work culture and those they have previously experienced. While many aspects of culture fit are felt intuitively, it is still important to explore this at a formal level through careful questioning as well as observation. How candidates physically present themselves should be noted; how they communicate and like to be communicated with; whether they have a preference for team environments; their values, attitudes and goals; the people they admire and why they do so are just a few areas to consider relating to culture fit.

With the enormous costs of making a poor recruitment decision, culture match is being seen as an increasingly important selection criterion. In fact, the emphasis is now shifting away from job descriptions and toward person specifications. These focus on qualities and attributes that fit with the strategic direction and culture of the organisation rather than the initial job requirements. This being the case, it is worth the effort to define culture!

Defining Culture

Observing and therefore describing culture may take into account:

- What the organisation does and the manner in which it operates, e.g. a retail environment may be a low margin/high volume environment as opposed to a high margin/low volume environment;
- The market in which the company operates, customer profile and perception;
- The level of profitability and resources available;
- The organisation's values and objectives;
- Who the star performers have been in the organisation and why they have been successful;
- General performance measures and what will be required to achieve them;
- The physical presentation of the company and its employees, e.g. corporate vs. manufacturing;
- How people communicate internally and externally;
- Succession planning and career development;
- Systems and technology used; and
- What behaviours are rewarded.

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