

HAVE YOU HIRED A BRILLIANT JERK?





An oft-heard refrain that is both industry and geography agnostic is how companies hire an executive because of his or her experience and background, but then eventually fire them because of a lack of fit with the company. How is it that in spite of executive search company interviews, hiring committee interviews, psychological assessments and referencing, more than an acceptable number of hires fall into this category? How can this be avoided? What are the best of breed companies doing to avoid this serious issue that sets their agenda back by years? To delve deeper into the matter, Kingsley Gate Partners organized a series of roundtable discussions across three cities in India – Bengaluru, Mumbai and Delhi, which included chief executives, country heads and HR leaders from prominent companies across various industries including financial services, pharmaceuticals, healthcare, technology and consumer goods and services. The theme of this year’s conference was “Have you hired a brilliant jerk?” The sessions provided a unique lens on the topic, uncovering some of the best practices adopted by top companies as well as insights into the pragmatic methods adopted by industry veterans to overcome the challenges of hiring a ‘brilliant jerk’, a term popularized by Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix in his 2009 presentation, “Netflix Culture: Freedom & Responsibility”. This paper attempts to encapsulate the discussions from these conferences.



What defines someone as a jerk at the workplace?

According to the CEO of a renowned general insurance firm, jerks are made, not born. More often than not, companies hire brilliant people and make them jerks by appointing them for certain roles, but later engaging them in a role completely different from what they were initially hired for. In addition, the fundamental relationship between organizations and employees today is shifting. The KPI timeframes used to judge employee performances are too short, which also serves as a contributing factor for creating jerks. Therefore, it's very important to ascertain whether a candidate is hired for a particular role or from the perspective of his association with the organization. Organizations today do not do enough to hold accountable the people who are responsible for hiring these candidates. According to the Chairman of a large multinational conglomerate, the term "brilliant jerk" is relative and its perception could vary according to the situation. For instance, in a purely results-driven environment, it is essential to have such folks who could shake things up. Managing them is similar to riding a tiger and it will always do good to have the next plan of action ready once they have delivered on their purpose.

The President and Chief People Officer of a major Indian pharmaceuticals company remarked that most organizations are still biased about skills and keen to hire employees who would hit the ground running from Day 1. "Companies really do not own the success of assimilation of employees into the organization once they are hired; they take it for granted," he said. Sometimes jerks are deliberately hired to bring change in the team's work culture, but once they display their natural behaviour, people complain about difficulty in dealing with them. 'Jerkiness' has to be seen in term of specific contexts. It would be interesting to isolate a brilliant employee's jerkiness and direct it where it works to his/her strength. Since different context evokes different responses and behaviours, it makes sense to look at ways that enable a brilliant jerk to not be dysfunctional, but instead, be someone who brings in value. According to the Chief Human Resources Officer of a major pharmaceuticals company, jerks multiply in a low feedback culture, but find it difficult to survive in





companies which deploy multiple feedback mechanisms such as 360-degree feedback, psychometric tools and other robust processes. The CEO and MD of a reputed insurance firm, who has worked with large MNCs in his career, stated that large business players spend more time on getting things done than following a process. While hiring senior candidates, the experience of the candidate usually outweighs their cognitive abilities as a parameter. A good successful track record is imperative to consider when getting a candidate on board. However, while a good track record is a necessary, it is not a sufficient parameter for hiring a person. Senior level hiring, when done under pressure, is bound to compromise the quality of the hire and can adversely affect the organization. Over a third of the participants admitted that they focus primarily on the functional skills of a potential executive and do NOT spend sufficient time on defining the ideal values and attributes when determining the position requirements of the hire. Another senior leader remarked that she had hired candidates for specific “needs” throughout her career as opposed to having a cultural fit in mind. Interestingly, some of the best hires have been the ones who did not fit well culturally into the organization. Their competencies were evaluated on the basis of business needs. Sharing an example of her experience, she cited the Managing

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Director of a very 'conservative' company who decided to take a chance on a flamboyant candidate for the position of the Chief Marketing Officer based on his work history, reputation and competency. Contrary to the expectations, the candidate proved to be stellar. The Managing Director continues to be happy with the candidate, thereby making the decision a great one in the long run. Having a proper procedure only helps the hiring process, and no single tool can be used to make the final decision to bring a candidate on board—tools and processes can only add value to the overall course of action. Brilliant jerks however produce incredibly stellar results and that makes the decision to fire them extremely difficult. The HR Head of a leading Indian biopharmaceuticals company mentioned that it always bodes well to have at least four skip-level managers with complete consensus amongst themselves when they are hiring a candidate for a senior level position. He described how recruiters in their company deliberately try to be provocative during interviews to observe how the candidate deals with disagreement. He also recommended



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conducting a lot of informal intelligence assessments - making calls to the right individuals who are likely to provide an honest opinion about the candidate. For instance, one should dig deeper beyond what the candidate says during an interview to understand the reasons behind his exit from his previous organization. He also stated that a new senior level hire should not be expected to hit the ground running from Day 1 or exceed expectations during the first three months of his association with the company. It is important to give the newcomer enough time to absorb things and get accustomed to the organisational ecosystem. Many businesses that are in their nascent stages and are struggling to find their place in the market consciously hire candidates who they know to be cultural misfits. They do so as their credentials, performance records and feedback are too good to ignore. The whole idea of hiring them is to have things done differently. Initially they hurt, but in the long run this method has worked well in several cases.

While all agreed that hiring has become quite complex today, due to the number of stakeholders involved across geographies and diverse cultural mindsets, the HR head of a leading management

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consulting firm remarked that they usually do not rely on assessments while hiring in their organisation, but prefer to rely solely on the experiences of the leaders who are involved in the hiring process, in addition to the calibre of the references shared by the candidate. Surprisingly, less than 50 percent of the participants acknowledged that a standardized scoring methodology was applied to ensure consistency in the measurement of skills, values and attributes among all stakeholders during the interview process. He also stated that hiring candidates, particularly at the senior levels, should be an 'organization-wide obsession' and should not gain momentum only when a vacancy comes up. HR should co-own the responsibility of hiring and evaluating new hires - especially at senior levels.

A very interesting observation was shared by a senior leader, who said that in his personal experience he found employees who were the 'only child' in their families were usually more self-focused, whereas those who were the 'middle-child' in their families were

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more accommodating. Another key point that emerged during the discussion was related to linking employee compensation directly to the value which the employee brings in. The Chief People Officer of a venture capital firm opined that compensation should be directly connected to the value that an employee brings to table. For instance, just because a person earns 15% of his CTC (cost-to-company) as his variable component, that does not necessarily imply that his performance is at par with his earning. The capability of an employee might not improve over the years even when their earnings increase. Supporting this argument, the Managing Director of a leading insurance firm said that the employees are used to getting a certain percentage in increment every year due to market conditions, which could often force companies to make compromises while linking an employee's variable component with performance. Interestingly, nearly three-fourths of the participants considered values and attributes as important components to consider while calculating compensation as opposed to simply complying with market levels



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for skills. The Chief Human Resources Officer of a large Indian conglomerate opined that there is nothing wrong in hiring people you like, since if you do not like the people you work with, their competencies do not matter. Another HR Leader from India's leading IT company shared an interesting point to consider from an organizational culture's perspective – Can the boss work with someone who disagrees with him? It has been observed that for mid-level and senior-level positions, skills precede values as a hiring criterion, especially in sales roles where it has been observed that people who were star performers in their previous companies find it very difficult to work with their new boss in the new team or organization.

Another industry veteran narrated his experience about the hiring process at one of his previous organizations, a leading global financial services firm. They generally had a plan and procedure for recruiting right from college which was always followed to a T – so the science part of the hiring process was taken care of. For them

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the most important thing was to always ensure the inflow of candidates with the right “fit”, and as a result, recruitments were never rushed. Even when a candidate was a star performer, if he did not appear to fit with the organizational culture, he would not be taken on board. This stringency ensured a “No Jerk” culture within the firm. Ensuring an ideal work environment for a candidate who has been hired for a particular role is extremely important for him/her to thrive.

A senior HR leader of a large Indian multinational conglomerate asserted the importance of assimilating newly hired employees into the culture of the organization, especially because the ecosystem they enter could either “enable them or pull them down”. Sometimes the newcomer is expected to arrive into the organization and bring change, but the organizational culture should be conducive enough to allow the possibility of enacting that change. A person’s ability to challenge the status quo needs to be clearly differentiated from the conceived notion of a jerk. One should be careful to not be conformist to a pattern that has always been successful. It’s very important to ensure an ecosystem that gives the new hire adequate space to be ‘different’ and exhibit their uniqueness. This reinforces the need to have a mechanism with relevant attributes that define the environment where the ideal candidate would flourish naturally.



Determining the right professional capabilities and aptitudes are key factors in the initial levels of executive hiring. The Chief People Office at a renowned venture capital firm claimed that there are no “ideal” candidates out there. He also emphasized that it always makes sense to hire a candidate if they come across as a problem solver, thinker and communicator. At his firm, candidates are required to come up with solutions to realistic problems during the interviews, and case studies are a pre-requisite for the hiring processes. They observed that employees who usually get hired quickly in the initial stages of the hiring process do not last long, and generally find it difficult to scale up later. He also explained that his organization employs a ‘transition expert’ who holds a one-to-one conversation with a potential candidate, usually for an hour, to get a sense of the candidate’s ability to blend well with the culture of the new organization. However, he believes these are all experiments, and that the tacit knowledge of a person is something that usually remains masked and not easily deciphered. Hence, the chances of finding the ideal candidate who would fit the bill entirely are miniscule. Nearly two-thirds of the participants believed that a good fit for them meant conformity between the behavioral values of their companies and an executive, as opposed to just filling a gap within the company.

One of the senior bankers present at the conference championed the dictum “hire in haste and repent at leisure” - something he diligently abides by. He stressed that it was crucial to subject potential hires to multiple levels of assessment which included observing the body language under stress interviews; and more so, asking unexpected questions to test their ability to think out-of-the box. Having a disparate mix of people from different sectors (as opposed to sourcing from the same sector) is akin to “having an emotional bank balance with credits in place”, thereby having key employees working together in sync with the expanding demands of a company. In these scenarios, a structured framework which determines a candidate’s professional capabilities and aptitudes may be crucial in the initial hiring stages for screening the right candidates.



Eliminating the unconscious bias is also crucial to determine the right fit for the candidates with the right values. 100% of the participants agreed that an individual interviewer bias exists between different leaders within a company when all of them interview the same candidate. A senior HR leader with a major Indian conglomerate stressed that senior interviewers with an 'I know-it-all' attitude is prone to making faulty hiring decisions. He emphasized that experienced interviewers must possess the humility to acknowledge the need to acquaint themselves with deeper insights about the position for which they are hiring. Another senior leader with a top management consulting company affirmed that reaching out to candidates directly always came with its own share of biases. She espoused her faith in search firms due to the data element involved and the science employed in the entire process. She accentuated the fact that she would never hire in haste, especially for key positions, and would rather prefer the succession planning process for as long as the organization was comfortable with it. "The whole should be more than the sum of the parts", she said. Over 50 percent of the participants admitted that science is not applied to the process of defining the position requirements before any attempt is made to contact a potential candidate. The importance of reference checks is paramount when validating a candidate's skills, attributes and values. Although approximately 80 percent of the participants affirmed that there is sufficient focus on values and attributes while identifying high potential or successor talent, only 50 percent of the attendees conceded that science was applied to determine the potential value and attribute shortcomings of the finalist candidate which were then used as clarifying questions with their references prior to making the offer.

Talking about CXO hiring, the potential candidates are usually known in the circles so it's easier to get to know about them through mutual connections. One industry veteran remarked that he prefers not to go to the references furnished by candidates, preferring instead to obtain information about the candidate's attitude instead of skills through mutual connections that are acquainted with the



candidate in some way. In this manner, some background knowledge about the candidate can be obtained even before meeting them in person. The HR head of a leading management consulting firm stated that as long as he trusts the person, he can tolerate him or her; the moment that trust goes, it becomes a matter of cultural misfit for him. There seems to be a general consensus that 'brilliant jerks' will always be part of the system whether we like it or not. Furthermore, a person's actions in the past need not necessarily determine his actions in the future. A person's behaviour varies with the context. There are times when a brilliant jerk acts as a disruptor and brings in a totally different approach to a conventional setting, shaking up the status quo for the greater good. However, it is essential to get the HR aligned to hiring and retaining candidates and making the hiring process a passion for the recruiters.

Hiring managers and search partners must come together to develop a process that is an optimal blend between human insight and science & technology in order to mitigate the risks of hiring a brilliant jerk.



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