

Avoiding Bad Hires: Using Emotional Intelligence as a Selection Tool

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How to avoid bad hiring decisions persists as a human resource challenge. The use of a role-customized interview panel designed to probe the subjective factor of behavior fit of managerial-level job candidates is a potential tool for addressing this challenge. This panel model is based on the integration of competency-based interviewing, behavior event interviewing, and the four dimensions of emotional intelligence. Details of the panel process, as piloted in five organizations, are presented, along with positive indications and cautions regarding the potential utility of such a hiring tool. Preliminary outcome findings collected between 2004 and 2006 suggest this may be a useful recruitment tool. Future areas for research are also identified.

Most hiring managers know how to assess a candidate's technical qualifications and relevant work experience. However, successful recruitment, especially at the director level and above, also requires the scrutiny of how people work, manage, and lead. This subjective behavior dimension is much more difficult to assess with certainty, and it is often the major factor in a poor hiring decision. Some suggest that more interviews are the answer. Others, including Adele Lynn, author of *The EQ Interview: Finding Employees with High Emotional Intelligence* (2008), contend that better interviews, not more of them, are the answer, a notion that is at the heart of this article. Focusing on a candidate's emotional intelligence (EI), as well as on critical technical and experiential data, can unearth the necessary behavioral data and round out a comprehensive hiring process that is much more likely to avert mistakes, particularly for managerial positions.

Although such an approach might appear patently obvious, it is not common practice to rate managerial behavior on a par with technical knowledge and relevant experience for a host of reasons; among them are that hiring managers fail to articulate essential success behaviors in the job specification, interviewers do not know how to probe an area as subjective as behavior, and interviewers can too often go into "sell" mode, especially with candidates who have impressive, hard-to-find qualifications and experience. Even seasoned managers and human resource (HR) professionals may feel ill equipped to probe effectively for behavioral information. This is one of the reasons that companies hire licensed psychologists to conduct preemployment assessments of managerial candidates (Tobias, 1990). Although this is an invaluable resource, it can be too costly for or dissonant to some company cultures.

As an alternative, consulting psychologists may assist companies by creating and

implementing an interview panel that focuses exclusively on the behavioral requirements of a role. In such a panel, the questions have been informed by the construct of EI, defined as the ability to recognize one's own and others' emotions and to use that awareness to achieve results and maintain satisfactory relationships. The author has coined the acronym SO SMART to represent the four dimensions and core capabilities of EI (Wasylyshyn, 2003):

SO	Self-Observation
SM	Self-Management
A	Attunement
RT	Relationship Traction

Table 1 provides a detailed look at the four dimensions.

Between 2004 and 2006, the author piloted the use of a role-customized interview panel to probe the factor of the behavior fit of final candidates for managerial positions in five organizations. Three of these organizations were global manufacturing companies hiring at the vice president or director level. One was a privately held insurance brokerage firm hiring business producers, and the fifth was a nonprofit university that used the EI panel process to select its academic provost.

Emotional Intelligence: Background

A growing body of research spanning 25 years makes the business case for the importance of EI in the workplace (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001;

Table 1
Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence

<p><i>I. Self-Observation (SO)</i> The awareness and understanding of our emotions and moods, as well as their effects on others Accurate self-assessment of emotional state Clear understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses Core ability: Perceiving emotions</p>	<p><i>II. Self-Management (SM)</i> The ability to control emotions and to channel them as a resource for achieving work and life objectives Self-control and discipline Resilience Motivation, bias for action Core ability: Managing emotions</p>
<p><i>III. Attunement (to others) (A)</i> A genuine focus on others' concerns; being tuned into organizational culture factors; the ability to use emotions in sound problem solving Focus on others Empathy Ability to build trust Organization awareness Objective problem solving Core ability: Using emotions</p>	<p><i>IV. Relationship Traction (RT)</i> The capacity to form relationships that are real and not just transactional; influential and consistent management or leadership; sufficient emotional understanding to build collaborative teams that deliver results Authenticity Influence Consistency Meaningful connections with others Collaborative teamwork Core ability: Understanding emotions</p>

Goleman, 1995, 1998; Wasylshyn, Gronsky, & Haas, 2006). Numerous research studies have shown that EI is a key factor for success among managers and leaders (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Because high IQ and technical expertise are threshold factors, EI can be the differentiating factor among high-potential employees. Bradley and Greaves (2009) make this point following on the research of numerous others. For example, a study by Boyatzis (1982) of more than 2,000 managers in 12 American organizations in the 1980s found that 81% of the competencies that distinguished outstanding managers were related to EI. Research in more than 120 organizations worldwide found that 67% of the abilities deemed essential for effective performance are emotional competencies (Rosier, 1994).

Jack Welch concluded a *Wall Street Journal* column (2004) with this opinion: “No doubt emotional intelligence is more rare than book smarts, but my experience says it is actually more important in the making of a leader. You just can’t ignore it” (p. A14). Jack Welch and Suzy Welch (2008) continue to underscore the importance of assessing EI when hiring: “Occasionally you bump into a talented and competent candidate, as we did not long ago, who’s so lacking in the EQ components of humility and realness that you can’t take a chance” (p. 80).

The EI Recruitment Interview Panel

The EI interview panel is based on the integration of competency-based interviewing (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999), behavior event interviewing (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001), and the four SO SMART dimensions of EI (Wasylshyn, 2003). This panel is positioned as a final step in the recruitment process of employees at the director level and above. The panel is convened for the final two to three

candidates, all of whom meet the technical and educational credentials and experience criteria of the role. Having fulfilled these prerequisites, these candidates are ready to be screened for behavioral fit with the hiring organization, as well as with the behavioral demands of the role, or how the individual needs to do the job and interact with all key stakeholders. These final candidates have been identified by an external search firm or through an internally driven (company-based) recruitment process.

The use of an EI interview panel is based on the following assumptions:

- ♦ The combination of competency-based interviewing, behavior event interviewing, and EI delivers considerably more behavioral information than other selection approaches.
- ♦ The elicitation of this behavioral information can help companies avoid poor hiring decisions.
- ♦ An EI panel is focused on the behaviors necessary for employees to assimilate well into a specific business or functional area.
- ♦ The interrater reliability among EI panel members is typically high.
- ♦ The increased alignment on candidate decisions is based on raters’ hearing the same information at the same time.

A number of factors suggest a sound value proposition for incorporating an EI interview panel into the hiring of managerial talent. First, behavioral information revealed through the panel is focused on specific behaviors that the hiring manager has identified as necessary for success in the role. Second, this behavioral information is more robust than data attained through the admin-

istration of an EI self-report psychometric. Third, hiring people who are emotionally intelligent can contribute to an organization's competitive advantage. Fourth, the EI interview panel is considerably less costly than securing the services of an outside psychological consultant. And finally, the use of an EI recruitment panel provides interviewers with a common language to use in their assessment of candidates on the subjective criterion of behavior. This common semantic as related to managerial behavior has further positive implications for consistent organization-based conversations about high-potential talent promotion, development, and success planning considerations.

The EI Interview Panel Process

The EI interview panel process consists of four phases:

1. Identifying behaviors essential for success in a role
2. Training panelists
3. Conducting the EI interview panel
4. Evaluating panel results

The following sections contain a description of the sequence of events as they unfolded in one of the pilot organizations. This global pharmaceutical company used the panel to appoint regional sales vice presidents from a cadre of talented people in the organization who clearly met the technical and experiential requirements of the role.

Phase 1: Identify Behaviors Essential for Success in the Role

The hiring managers, senior vice presidents of sales, had iterative conversations with their HR partners. During these conversations, they focused on answering the question, "What behaviors do we

need to have in an RVP for him or her to be successful in this demanding role?" They identified four essential behaviors: (1) motivating people to achieve tough stretch objectives, (2) flexibility in handling many priorities simultaneously, (3) connecting with field sales representatives rapidly, and (4) forming lasting and meaningful relationships with multiple stakeholders both internal and external to the company.

Once the panel identified and agreed on these behaviors, they sent them to the author (a licensed clinical psychologist), and she then wrote customized questions to pull for those behavioral data in the panel setting. These customized questions (see Table 2) were added to a standing list of EI questions the author had previously written that probed the four SO SMART dimensions of EI (see Table 3). The content of these standing questions was consistent with Goleman's formulation of EI dimensions. The standing EI questions and RVP-customized questions formed the interview protocol for the EI panel.

Phase 2: Train the Panelists

The author designed a two-hour training session for the panelists: the hiring manager and that person's HR manager. This session focused on the following factors:

- ♦ Defining and clear understanding of EI and its four SO SMART dimensions
- ♦ Ensuring alignment on the definitions of the essential behaviors for success in the RVP sales role
- ♦ Getting panelists comfortable with and grounding them in a common semantic about the behavioral requirements of the role
- ♦ Assessing answers in the panels

Table 2
Examples of Role-Customized Questions for Recruitment

<p><i>Pharmaceutical company: Regional sales vice president</i></p> <p>SO, Self-Observation: "How will your emotions be a resource in motivating this region's sales force and ensuring its maximum success?"</p> <p>SM, Self-Management: "How do you handle simultaneous and multiple demands at work?"</p> <p>A, Attunement: "Tell me about how your empathic resonance with others might help you motivate people in a region that's struggling."</p> <p>RT, Relationship Traction: "What are the key relationships you must form quickly in this RVP role, and how will you go about forming them?"</p>
<p>Insurance brokerage firm: Producer of new business</p> <p>SO, Self-Observation: "Tell us about a time when you lacked the confidence or courage to achieve an important work-related objective."</p> <p>SM, Self-Management: "Successful producers here are working in a demanding and highly competitive culture. Victories are celebrated, and mistakes are not easily tolerated. Describe yourself in terms of two things: competitive drive and handling criticism."</p> <p>A, Attunement: "Based on the conversations you've had in this recruitment process so far, what do you think are the most critical interpersonal behaviors for being a successful producer here?"</p> <p>RT, Relationship Traction: "Tell us about a time when you were not as persuasive and influential as you needed to be to close a deal. How would you handle this type of situation now?"</p>
<p>Academic institution: University provost</p> <p>SO, Self-Observation: "In the event you had to serve as president of the university—due to the illness or other unforeseen event that affected the current president—what would be the key factors in your doing this well?"</p> <p>SM, Self-Management: "Tell us about your proudest accomplishment in terms of working collaboratively with administration, academic deans, faculty, and students to achieve something beneficial for the institution."</p> <p>A, Attunement: "Based on the conversations you've had in this hiring process, what do you think are the most critical interpersonal behaviors for being a successful provost here?"</p> <p>RT, Relationship Traction: "What would you do to develop and deepen your relationships with key stakeholders on all three campuses of this university?"</p>
<p>IV. Global chemical company: Human resource director</p> <p>SO, Self-Observation: "What's the part of yourself that you've been holding back?"</p> <p>SM, Self-Management: "As an HR leader, how do you walk the line between maintaining the necessary degree of confidentiality and sharing what needs to be shared with senior management?"</p> <p>A, Attunement: "The people you'll be managing represent every global sector, and they've been led well by your predecessor for many years. What will it take behaviorally for you to get quick traction with this group?"</p> <p>RT, Relationship Traction: "What's the 'glue' (key factors) in a strategic, meaningful working relationship between an HR director and general manager of a corporation?"</p>
<p>Global manufacturing company: Human resource site director</p> <p>SO, Self-Observation: "Given the demands of the HR site director role, what are the major behavior characteristics of a boss who would be an excellent complement to you?"</p> <p>SM, Self-Management: "Successful HR site directors must juggle multiple demands; at times, this can make for conflicting priorities. In behavioral terms, how do you see yourself managing multiple demands for both resources and time?"</p> <p>A, Attunement: "As an HR site director, what are some of the issues that require empathy on your part?"</p> <p>RT, Relationship Traction: "Tell us what you would do to bring out the best in a team-based effort to drive and maintain success in this role."</p>

Table 3
Examples of Standing EI Questions

<p><i>SO, Self-Observation</i></p> <p>"On a 1–5 scale, with 5 being the highest, how in touch are you with your emotions and their effect on your behavior at work? Please explain your rating."</p> <p>"Tell us about a time when the use of your emotions had a positive effect on the outcome of an important issue at work."</p> <p>"Describe a work-related situation when your emotional reaction to something at work had an adverse effect on an important objective."</p>
<p><i>SM, Self-Management</i></p> <p>"On the 1–5 scale, please rate your ability to keep your emotions under control."</p> <p>"Give us an example of a time when things were tense, pitched, or contentious at work, but you were able to channel your emotions well."</p> <p>"Tell us about a time when you really didn't control your emotions so well—a time when, in retrospect, you even regretted how you reacted."</p>
<p><i>A, Attunement</i></p> <p>"On the 1–5 scale, please rate your ability to pick up on the feelings or concerns of others at work."</p> <p>"Tell us about a work-related situation when your ability to tune into others made a difference in an outcome at work."</p> <p>"Give us an example of a time when you missed important behavioral signals from someone and how that had a negative effect on something you were trying to accomplish."</p>
<p><i>RT, Relationship Traction</i></p> <p>"On the 1–5 scale, how would you rate yourself on forming lasting, trusting relationships with the various stakeholder groups you've had to influence in the job you hold now?"</p> <p>"Give us an example of you at your persuasive and influential best."</p> <p>"Tell us about a time when you were not as persuasive and influential as you needed to be. How would you handle this type of situation now?"</p>

Note: These would be used in every EI recruitment panel for the director level and above.

- ◆ Using the rating sheets to capture panel members' assessments of a candidate's answers
- ◆ Explaining what needed to be conveyed to candidates—that this panel would be focused completely on the behavioral requirements for success in the role and that they would be receiving feedback about their participation in the panel
- ◆ Deciding how they would debrief immediately after the panel with the goal of making final hiring decisions

Assignments were made regarding who would ask which questions. The author also emphasized that although the protocol was set, it was not cast in stone. In other words, the spontaneity of questioning was encouraged especially when a candidate said something that warranted further exploration. For example, any inconsistencies in answers would be probed for clarity.

Phase 3: Conduct the Interview Panel

The panel typically ran 90 minutes, and, as the EI content expert, the author was the facilitator. Given its user friendliness, after the initial panel, the HR

professional became the process owner and facilitated subsequent panels.

Candidates were welcomed warmly and reminded of the focus of the panel. Whenever possible, the panels took place in comfortable rooms with windows. In response to the first question in each of the four SO SMART dimensions as represented in the standing EI questions (Table 3), the candidate was asked to rate himself or herself on a 1 to 5 rating scale, with 5 being the highest. Raters either wrote their own ratings for a dimension after all the questions in that dimension were answered, or they wrote their ratings for each dimension when the entire panel ended. During the panel, interviewers had considerable space on their protocol forms to write their observations of and questions about the candidate.

At the end of the panel, the candidate was reminded to contact either the author or the HR panelist to arrange a feedback conversation. Also, the hiring manager gave the candidate some indication regarding the timing of a hiring decision.

All candidates who participated in pilot panels that the author facilitated were invited to call her for feedback. Typically this conversation occurred within a few days of the interview panel and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Candidates in subsequent panels received feedback from the HR panel facilitators.

The feedback they provided was modeled after the author's approach. It began by asking the candidate if he or she had specific questions about the panel experience. These questions were answered immediately, or answers were woven into the context of feedback elements. These feedback elements were (1) a review of the goal of the panel, (2) the definition of EI and its four dimensions, (3) the relevance of EI for the role the candidate was interviewed for, and (4) how the candidate performed, using specific material that emerged during the

panel. Whether the individual had been hired by the prospective employer or not, the tone of the feedback was developmental, that is, it was intended to support the ongoing success of the candidate.

If an individual was hired, the feedback focused on how the new employee could make a rapid and successful transition into the company. Given the author's familiarity with the hiring organizations, she was able to make helpful links between the panel and company culture data. For example, in the case of a very talented regional vice president, the author cued him about the priority his boss placed on RVPs' being attuned to and flexible about their sales representatives' work-family balance.

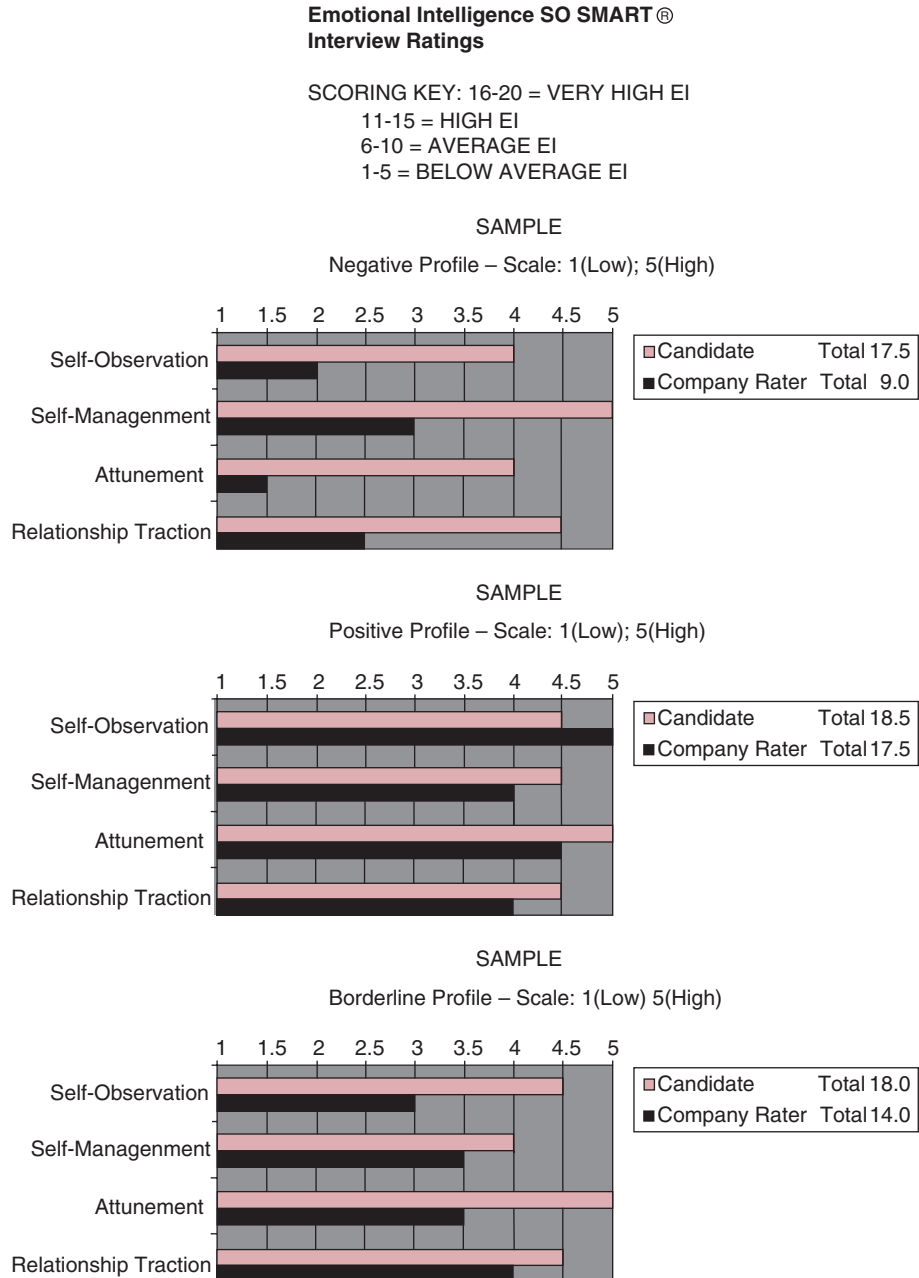
If a candidate was not hired, the feedback focused on why the individual was not considered a good fit with the company. The author emphasized the candidate's strong technical and experiential qualifications and then covered the culture fit issue, emphasizing the type of culture in which the person would likely thrive as contrasted to that of the hiring company. For example, one HR director candidate clearly preferred direct, transactional ("This is what I need you to do now") interactions. Given the premium the hiring company placed on forming solid networks of close relationships, it was unlikely that this blunt, task-driven individual would do well in this culture.

Phase 4: Evaluate the Responses

At the end of the interview, if they had not already done so, panelists wrote their ratings for each SO SMART dimension on the panel interview ratings sheet. They then individually tallied both their ratings and those of the candidate. Examples of positive, negative, and borderline EI profiles are presented in Figure 1.

Each of the four SO SMART dimensions was then discussed with each panel member stating the score he or she had given the candidate and why.

Figure 1
Examples of Panel Ratings



The candidate and rater total scores were then compared. Ideal candidates achieved total EI scores in the range of 16 to 20, with coherence between candidate and panelists' total scores. Candidates who did poorly had total panelist rater scores of 10

or below, and they usually rated themselves much higher than did the panelists. This was a definite red flag.

In general, interrater agreement among the panelists was high. This appeared to be primarily a

function of the 2-hour panelist training that preceded the panelists' first panel. This training emphasized alignment of understanding EI terminology and what constituted good versus less satisfactory responses.

Candidates with borderline profiles had total rater scores of 11 to 15. The debriefing on these candidates focused primarily on the degree of discrepancy between their own scores and those of the panelists.

As the panelists evaluated the quality of a candidate's responses, they kept in mind the behaviors that had been identified as critical for success in the sales RVP role: motivating others well, flexibility in handling multiple demands, connecting to people effectively, and forming relationships that were authentic and not just transactional.

Following are examples of the four SO SMART dimensions of EI, as well as the RVP sales core behavioral requirements. The answers given are examples that represented high, medium, and low ratings:

SO, Self-Observation

High: "My enthusiasm, confidence, and courage should all be helpful in releasing and sustaining the high levels of motivation we're going to need to make our goals in this very demanding business atmosphere."

Medium: "I guess my remembering to acknowledge the efforts that have been made would be helpful in keeping people motivated."

Low: "I actually think it's better to keep emotions out of managing. The more objective, clear, and fact based I can be as an RVP, the better the reps are going to be at delivering our objectives."

SM, Self-Management

High: "Discipline, anticipation, and planning are key. You also need enough personal flexibility to adjust to such a fast-paced and changing business environment."

Medium: "The pace of change and piling on of demands and other people's priorities can be pretty frustrating at times. I try to mask my own frustration, but it can break through. I also try to push back on senior management because there are times when they're just clueless about what's really going on in the field."

Low: "I don't think multitasking is a good or smart thing. A lot of people are proud of how they can juggle a hundred things at once—not me. You gotta take it slow, make sure you're focused on what you think is the right stuff, and then make sure you get it done before you're distracted by something else."

A, Attunement to Others

High: "Someone once said, 'People don't care what you know until they know you care.' This is the crux of it for me in terms of connecting to other people and showing empathy for what's going on with people at work, especially given the work-family balance tension."

Medium: "You just have to keep holding up the mirror to people. You have to keep them focused on the goal, support them, and make sure they have the right resources."

Low: "Too much empathy can be a problem. It can get in the way of saying what needs

to be said and can make people feel like they're doing a good job when they're really not."

RT, Relationship Traction

High: "There's a complicated web of relationships with this role. In the first 90 days, I think I'd have to think about this hard, meet with each of the key stakeholders, and make sure we're aligned on the strategy and key objectives. But I want to make sure we have a relationship before I start piling on expectations."

Medium: "Relationships are important, and you need to keep them going. You have to marshal all your people resources and ensure that everyone's accountable."

Low: "There are some major challenges in this region, so while I know I have to pay attention to the relationships, going in, I wouldn't get too bogged down in that."

Preliminary Outcome Findings

The author facilitated only the initial EI panels in each of the five pilot organizations. However, in her follow-up conversations with the panel process owners in each of the pilot organizations, some general findings emerged. A total of 102 job candidates participated in EI panels held in the pilot organizations between 2004 and 2006. The majority of those candidates who were hired after their EI panel (more than 70%) have continued employment in their roles. Of the remaining 30%, only two people failed for EI-related reasons. The remaining people who failed did so for different reasons: their inability to handle the technical content of their roles, the stress of work overload, or unforeseen family issues. Four of the five pilot organizations

continued to use the EI panel or some aspects of it, particularly the standard EI screening questions.

The EI panel did not carry out hiring decisions in the fifth pilot organization. In fact, the two people hired both left the company—one after less than a year. Although these hiring failures appear to have involved role and relationship complexities beyond EI, they also raise a question that warrants further exploration: Is it possible that someone who possesses strong EI would have difficulty assimilating into a culture in which such behavior is not fundamentally valued? This surely appears to be the case.

Furthermore, other cautions related to the use of an EI hiring panel must be stressed:

- ♦ Making certain that candidates fully meet technical and experiential criteria before scheduling their participation in such a panel
- ♦ The proper preparation of EI panel job candidates
- ♦ The neutrality of the panel facilitator
- ♦ The objective weighting of EI versus other role-related factors

Conclusion

Poor hiring decisions are very costly. Years ago, the vice president of talent management and development at a global consumer products company told the author that it cost the company more than \$750,000 for every failed executive hiring. That dollar amount did not factor in losses in productivity and morale. Avoiding bad hiring decisions persists as an HR challenge (Bielaszka-DuVernay, 2008). The description of this pilot project is offered in the spirit of sparking other colleagues' thoughts about methods to help companies address this

issue, especially in assessing the subjective area of candidate behavior fit.

This pilot was not based on the rigor of methodological research and analysis. Rather, it was the co-constructed effort of a senior applied practitioner and her clients to identify a potentially helpful recruitment tool. The critical questions raised warrant the scrutiny of future research. Among these is the issue of interrater agreement among panel participants. Another is the comparison of outcome data of candidates selected using an EI screening panel versus other types of selection procedures used by the same organization. Research focused on the limitations or drawbacks of this EI recruitment panel approach would also be helpful.

To summarize, an EI interview panel was piloted in five organizations: one academic, three global manufacturers, and one privately held business. The preliminary data related to the continued employment of people who were hired after their participation in the EI interview panel suggest that this is a potentially useful tool for averting hiring mishaps. This is especially true for organizations that are willing to invest the necessary time and to manage the logistics essential for this panel segment of a hiring process to work effectively.

Furthermore, a number of hiring managers acknowledged that the candidate ultimately hired had not been the leading prospect going into an EI panel. Specifically, they had been swayed significantly by the lead candidate's technical and experiential qualifications, at the expense of thinking through whether the person could assimilate well into the work setting. The EI panel experience revealed key behavioral information that illuminated risks associated with the lead candidate and underscored the better balance of technical, experience, and behavioral assets presented by another candidate.

Some hiring managers also reported that the EI panel had been a good learning experience that gave them a new and consistent semantic for discussing the subjective realm of candidate behavior. Furthermore, they speculated that this shared semantic, as related to behavior, had broad talent management utility. Specifically, it could help inform accurate conversations about high-potential individuals as related to development, promotion, and succession planning activities.

There are cautions as well, perhaps the strongest being that this methodology would likely add little value in organizations in which senior executives do not embody or value the importance of emotionally intelligent behavior.

One final thought: No one needs another job to explain on his or her résumé if behavioral fit was the reason a hiring went bad. In this sense, the use of an EI interview panel is potentially valuable to both hiring managers and job candidates. ♦

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