



BUSINESS CREATIVITY & THE HIRING PROCESS

by Craig M. Cortello

Organizations often struggle with a difficult dilemma when targeting college graduates for hire. Do you place greater credence in academic excellence, or look for the well-rounded mediocre student? Do you hire the 4.0 GPA candidate who served as student body president or the 2.9 student who carried a full-time job as a retail manager to subsidize tuition? Do you hire the dedicated research assistant or the fraternity president who organizes the keg parties and knows everyone on campus? The answer is balance.

Success in the 21st century will increasingly demand a greater mix of skills and the ability to think and react independently to respond to market challenges. In conducting interviews and assembling staff members, I've tried to look beyond the obvious credentials and to look for unique perspectives and experiences.

The assemblage of a melting pot gives access to a broader pool of ideas in a business world that increasingly demands creativity and innovative solutions. Our diminutive office consists of expertise in swing dancing, triathlons, independent film, and jazz guitar, in an industry typically characterized by "left-brain" or analytical thinkers.

It is said that you'll get nothing original from an echo. If you ask only standard interview questions that solicit canned responses, you'll likely assemble a team adept at implementing prescriptive plans by the book, lacking independent thought and seeking constant guidance from above.

One question I ask is, "If you could have dinner with any person living or dead, who would it be and why?" I also ask questions like, "What do you do when you're not working?" and,



“What are your hobbies and interests and what appeals to you about them?” There are no right answers.

I’m only seeking to fill in gaps in the resume. For instance, if you interview a 4.0 student, you have a pretty good sense that they are diligent, intelligent and hard-working. Your concern is that they might be more comfortable hitting the books than interacting with people. I’d prefer to find that they played guitar in a reggae band, enjoyed surfing off the coast of Maui, acted as a volunteer for Junior Achievement, coached the intramural softball team, or organized a campus fund-raiser to get wireless internet service and a new sound system for the university center on campus. I’m looking for something that demonstrates social skills or runs counter to the overly conservative nature of the stereotypical serious student. I prefer to hear that they would like to have dinner with Jimmy Buffett or Jerry Seinfeld rather than Albert Einstein or Sir Isaac Newton.

The reverse scenario requires the same attention to balance. With the marginal student who is the campus socialite, you’ll want to look for dissimilar responses. Interests such as volunteering as a counselor for a Special Olympics camp, an internship with a professional service firm, reading books on leaders such as Winston Churchill or Mahatma Gandhi, or an active role in a church or civic group are appropriate. A hobby that reveals diligence, organization, or a serious side of their personality is preferable.

These questions aren’t deal breakers, but rather additional data points beyond the standard, “What are your goals, strengths and weaknesses, and reasons for wanting to work for our firm” queries. They can act as differentiators when you have difficulty separating candidates. You might also consider the current makeup of your staff. If you feel as though your office is getting conservative or “stuffy” based on the personalities of your employees, you might look for candidates that can lighten things up, or vice-versa.



Some interviewers intentionally present an intimidating façade, in order to see how a candidate handles a stressful situation. Interviews are awkward enough, however, and not at all indicative of the true work environment. Once a candidate becomes guarded during the interview, it becomes more difficult to get an authentic assessment.

I prefer to put the candidate at ease, allowing them to show their true personality. I find that I also get more revealing and honest answers when a candidate lets their guard down, allowing me to truly assess what makes them tick and whether or not they would be a good fit for our firm.

As we develop educational curriculum to prepare students for success in the 21st century, we must resist the temptation to identify them as either left-brain or right-brain students and to polarize them. We must rather move toward more balanced programs that integrate elements of each, in an effort to produce more complete or “whole-brained” professionals. And we must assemble balanced workplaces as well.

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