

McCarthy Strategies March 2009 Newsletter

What the NCAA Tournament teaches us about hiring and getting hired

Office productivity drops each year in late March as workers spend countless hours discussing the NCAA basketball tournament brackets and related office tourney pool. It seems nearly every office in America has an office pool, with workers debating the merits of each team while attempting to pick the overall winner. Most people choose to use, but often ignore, the work of the selection committee as represented in the ranking of each team.

In choosing and placing teams, the NCAA selection committee uses multiple factors including record, strength of schedule and performance in recent games. The committee also uses what is called the RPI (Ratings Percentage Index) which is a weighted factor combining each team's, and their opponents', winning percentages. Undoubtedly, the personal judgment of committee members plays a big role. In spite of this admirable attempt at objectivity, the selection committee's top picks are frequently upset. Highly rated teams are often eliminated early, while "Cinderella" teams generate huge excitement with unexpected success. These surprises are a big part of the charm and excitement for sports fans in what has become known as "March Madness".

There is a great deal of similarity between the tournament selection process and the hiring process at any company. Both should attempt to use objective factors to make good choices. Generally, hiring managers attempt to be objective in their selection criteria and overall process. Multiple inputs are often used. Those being interviewed know this and attempt to be as positive as possible, to give hiring managers what they are looking for.

Is there any way that hiring managers can learn from the NCAA's selection process? How can hiring managers avoid the later surprises that represent fun for fans but calamity for companies? Can job seekers also learn from the NCAA in order to put their best foot forward?

To be successful in hiring a solid employee, the essential ingredient in the process is a thorough and comprehensive approach, similar to the NCAA's procedures. The diligent use of selection criteria is critical. For companies, the criteria should include both essential attributes ("must have" characteristics which are more easily quantified) along with desirable attributes ("nice-to-have" characteristics which are typically more difficult to evaluate).

These "essential" criteria should include the knowledge, skills and necessary experience to be considered for a position. The "desirable" criteria include intangible factors, e.g. attitude, habits, etc. that often lead to later success. Hiring managers can use an acronym - KASH (Knowledge, Attitude, Skills, and Habits) as a reminder in the selection process.

Essential criteria to get selected	Desirable criteria to be successful
Knowledge	Attitude
Skills	Habits

Just like teams in the tournament, some highly touted new hires sometimes disappoint while others excel. New hires may have the “essential” criteria to perform effectively. However, it is the criteria I have defined above as “desirable”, those that are hardest to quantify upfront, which often separate successful teams, and employees, from those that disappoint. I believe that by focusing on these desirable, but difficult to quantify, criteria we can gain an edge in the hiring process.

The NY Times journalist, Derek Willis, may have some clues for us in pinpointing some key desirable traits. In a recent article Mr. Willis wrote about his winning selections in last years NCAA tournament. He said, “Learning on the job is not something I’m looking for in a tournament”. In other words he quite predictably placed great stock in the “essential” attributes of skill and past experience.

Most importantly for us, Willis also mentioned “the ability to make adjustments’ as a key attribute for a winning team. This ability to adjust to changing circumstances is an intangible, a desirable trait we should also investigate in all potential new hires. Most people believe that they are adaptable to change but generally people are reluctant to do so.

The tournament selection committee undoubtedly tries to place high value on this ability to adjust to changing, difficult circumstances (e.g. performance under adversity, winning on the road, success in spite of the absence of an injured star). It behooves hiring managers to explore this same trait in those being interviewed. But how can we best explore this attribute which is so hard to describe?

I believe that the key to exploring all of these desirable, but hard to quantify, traits lies in the use of methodical techniques in our hiring process. Again an acronym may help: SAR (situation, action, results). During interviews, hiring managers should be careful to ask prospective employees about situations when the interviewee had been surprised by events, or were required to adapt to unforeseen or changing events. Then in follow-up questions it is critical to clearly understand the situation being described by the interviewee, along with the specific actions performed, and the results achieved. This methodology is useful in all interviewing, but is especially helpful in probing the difficult “desirable” traits we have discussed. Although some results may not be quantifiable, with patience and skill they can be clearly described.

Similarly, those being interviewed can best respond to questions by using the same acronym. The best way to really nail an answer is to carefully describe situation, action, and result for each question being asked. Interviewees should be prepared to discuss their adaptability and demonstrated capacity to manage the unforeseen. Those being interviewed must be specific, and the acronym SAR can provide a useful technique in doing so.

So whether the discussion is on picking winners in NCAA brackets or on picking winners as potential employees, particular attention must be paid to those intangibles which separate winners from losers. While adaptability is especially critical, for teams and individuals, some other intangibles include:

- Ability to work as part of a team
- Ability to work independently when required
- Capacity for work under pressure
- Adaptable approach to work
- Maintaining high-level of performance for extended periods
- Personal initiative

Picking winners in basketball and in hiring must be free of biases and personal feelings. Bracket picks that focus on ones' alma mater, favorite conferences, and popular players usually don't do well. Choosing the better team, and better person for the job, depends on using a comprehensive, objective, and methodical selection process. While some traits may be impossible to quantify, that should not prevent us from being methodical and detail-oriented in probing the all important intangibles.

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