

Screen out the Psychos - How to Spot a Toxic Hire

By

David Wilson

This article appeared in
www.theage.com.au - 28 May 2010.

So you think you are a good judge of character. If you go hunting new recruits, emboldened by forecasts of better times, you can and must raise your game because even professionals get burnt.

"Any recruiter who tells you that he or she has never been tricked is lying," says executive recruiter Bruce Hurwitz. Countless applicants interview well but go rogue, according to Hurwitz. And who has not worked at a firm where everyone is secretly sickened by the wiles of X, the resident hire from hell?

You need to stop toxic applicants at the door, an especially hard ask if a) the applicant has plenty of guile and b) like most entrepreneurs, you lack interrogation practice.

According to Hurwitz, the key to screening out dire hires is old-school rigour: repeat interviews bolstered by references from at least two supervisors. Trust your gut at your peril. According to a recent science-grounded broadside against the self-help movement, we are generally stupid, rating our intuitions as "fantastic" when in fact they are "terrible".

Consider a range of strategies for stopping that Slimy Simon or Toxic Tammy who could do your business irreparable harm. Learn how to slice through the charm and avert staffing disaster.

How to spot and block a harmful hire: 10 red flags

1. Ensure your job description is accurate and clearly outlines specific job requirements. The description should contain both technical and "interpersonal" requirements, says Linda Pophal, the author of *A Small Business Guide to Employee Selection*.

2. Cross-check references and, in the process, be alert to "subtle signals", says Pophal. An applicant who wowed her panel and won its vote later had to be "terminated", she says. When conducting reference checks, Pophal had heard nothing bad or good, she adds. In hindsight, the non-committal response should have triggered warning signals.

3. Make your questions behavioural, Pophal advises. Ask candidates to prove their assertions, giving them time to think, especially if you ask what their greatest weakness is. If a candidate admits to none, that is a red flag because we all have flaws and "interpersonal pet peeves".

4. Avoid candidates who use absolute terms in their statements and never hedge their assertions, says organisational psychologist Christopher Shen. Terms such as "always", "must", and "should" rather than "sometimes" may reflect narcissism.

5. Avoid candidates whose goals concern what they want to achieve in status, power, or accomplishments rather than skills and development. Research shows that these individuals learn less frequently and are more defensive, according to Shen.

6. Do not trust your first instincts. Often, the most inappropriate, charismatic, and unethical candidates seem the most appealing hires in the first 10 minutes of an

interview, says Shen.

7. Do not move too fast - let the natural interview process enable the candidate's personality to surface, says recruitment consultant Lori Gale. "Don't ignore any red flags." If the candidate "rubs you wrong", you may well have picked up on a toxic trait.

8. Find people who have worked with the candidate, other than references supplied. Find former colleagues who have nothing to lose by giving "the straight scoop", says Gale. "Ask them what it was really like to work with your candidate, find out the inside story. Do your research."

9. A glaring resume gap is widely agreed to spell trouble. Ask why it exists. Did the candidate omit an employer who might make unflattering comments?

10. If the candidate bags old associates, that is a final classic red flag. Watch out because, in a future interview for another job, your reputation may be skewered.

* * * *

Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers.

Website: www.christophershen.com.au