

**TALENT SEARCH 2000: AN EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY TO HELP  
STRENGTHEN SKILLS IN EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The activity expressed here, Talent Search - 2000, is generative and heuristic as it helps learners to form important questions and hypotheses about the screening and selection of job applicants. [note: in this work, "learners" is used to represent students, trainees, etc.] The questions and hypotheses created by learners in this activity are important because they directly influence knowledge acquisition and skill development. Also, the intellectual work required in the activity provides some foundation for continuous improvement in practices related to job applicant screening and selection.

**INTRODUCTION**

In our society today, talented people for jobs in "information work" are in relatively short supply. Many positions go unfilled for weeks or, in some cases, months. This means that important work isn't getting done, and, competitors may be hiring the very people one's organization would want to hire (see, Drucker, 1997). Perhaps, in a given organization, people are being hired who are not the best persons for the jobs and no one's interests are really being served. Pressure to find talented employees is mounting. Recruiting and selection in the U.S. is a very large business activity. Robert Gately, of Gately Consulting, says the expense of pre-employment testing, alone, amounts to nearly three billion dollars (personal correspondence).

There is little evidence to show that many organizations are doing much to assist staff who does the interviewing and the hiring to do a better job with these tasks. Regardless of pressure, shortages of talent and other issues, it

is important for supervisors, managers, and our learners to have some or additional practice and experience in activities focused upon the recruitment and selection of employees. These conditions correspond well with the ABSEL 2000 theme: Learning In and For the Future.

**How This Activity Can Be Helpful**

Nearly all supervisors and managers can benefit from enhanced knowledge and skill when it comes to screening and selecting people to fill jobs. Further, learners preparing for employment as supervisors and managers need realistic preparation regarding the technical aspects of recruitment & selection as well as sensitization to the subtleties of applicant-job-organization fit. It just may be that matters such as the job-skills match, and the individual - organization fit are more significant influences in selection, job satisfaction, and job tenure than are the more obvious aspects of compensation, benefits, advancement opportunities, and the like.

**Enhancing Learning Opportunities**

Talent Search - 2000 is intended for use in training and coaching managers, supervisors and others in some practices that inform worthy selection decisions. The activity has as its focus a short case, SIMM-RAM, in which a manager is faced with a staffing decision, that is, having to select a candidate from among several ostensibly competent individuals. The case provides a stimulus for dialog regarding screening and selection practices. Further, the case offers opportunities for study and application of various screening and/or selection tools.

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Talent Search - 2000 is grounded in the social science inquiry model where learners are forming and re-forming hypotheses, creating interpretations and definitions, identifying evidence via experience, testing hypotheses, and creating generalizations (see, for example, Joyce & Weil, 1986). Obviously, hypothesizing, defining, and interpreting require evaluation, questioning, and reflection and instructors can provide the stimuli for these events.

As mentioned above, Talent Search - 2000 creates many avenues for exploration regarding skillful screening and selection work and continuous improvement of skills related to this work. The range of skilled work in this domain is very broad. At one extreme, for example, is the actual preparation of the position announcement or posting. At the other extreme could be the performance appraisal or performance management system in place. The PM system will eventually greet the new hire. And, we have other events and conditions between these extremes, such as: identification of required skills and knowledge for the position, structured or unstructured interviewing to determine an applicant's fit with job environment, job fit assessment per applicant knowledge and interests, and the like. (see, for example, Schultz & Schultz, 1998).

As learners and instructor, we could commence study and skill-building with any of the above topics/areas. We soon learn, however, that the topics are interrelated as a system of components. To commence work in one area (e.g., preparation of a position announcement) raises questions and concerns about other components (for example, the use of a structured or unstructured interview format, or weighted application form or resume). The interdependence of topics and content creates a robust environment for learning and exploration. Learners and the instructor can pick and choose components for study within the framework of selection/screening processes with the realization that additional topics will be

accessed owing to the interdependence of the components.

### **Goals of Talent Search 2000**

Many goals can be expressed for the activity, however, the ones that have the most salience for learners are to:

- create focused questions about screening and selection activities,
- use these questions to shape needs for training, skill-building, and the like (this means that a needs analysis takes place and this analysis should result in the identification of concepts, tools, etc., for study),
- assist learners to identify and express the critical components of: "Are we hiring the right person for the job?" (this means helping learners to express their understanding of the elements of characteristics such as skills match, job fit, and, organization fit).

Worthy achievement for our learners would be represented by a set of practices used to skillfully accomplish a segment of screening and selection work. Existing concepts, literature, and observed practices can inform new practices.

### **PROCEDURES**

The instruction and learning may focus on any one of several areas as indicated in the above paragraphs. In keeping with the general features of the case, SIMM-RAM, used here, we may limit the topical areas as:

- structured interviewing to determine applicant fit with job environment
- skill assessment of job applicants
- specific job fit assessment as per candidate knowledge and interests.

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Ultimately, as the experiential component of the activity unfolds and wends its way toward completion, a continuous improvement approach is suggested for each of the learning topics. That is, the education and learning in each of the three areas is arranged around the responses to three questions: What are we trying accomplish? How will we know that a change in our behavior and/or practices is an improvement? What changes can we make that will result in some improvement? (see, for example, Langley, et. al., 1996)

Improvement as used here means better selection decisions and hires. We use the short case, SIMM-RAM, to give learners the same base of information to use for a target of their activity. For purposes of the session at ABSEL 2000, we will use the topic of :

### Structured Interviews to Determine Fit with Job Environment<sup>1</sup>

[note: To work with this particular topic may require an amount of time that is not practical given session scheduling limits. It may be that a different topic, e.g., Preparation of Position Announcement, will need to be employed in the interactive segment of the session]

#### The Process

1. Have the learners read the case. They may do this during the time period in which the activity is introduced or they could read it as preparation for that time. In addition, learners will also have been assigned reading in the content area regarding knowledge and skills. Content

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<sup>1</sup> Some resources to assist instructors and learners with this topic are as follows: Anderson, N. and Shackleton, V. (1986). Recruitment and selection. *Personnel Review*, 15(4): 19-26; Huffcut, A.I. (1990). Structured interviews emerge: The new technique of the 1990's? *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist*, 27(3): 83-84; and, Levine, E.L., Sistrunk, F., McNutt, K. & Gael, S. (1988). Exemplary job analysis systems in selected organizations: A description of process and outcomes. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 3, 3-21.

appropriate to this task can be found in work by Aamodt (1999), and, Wood, et. al. (1998).

2. Topic for Study/Practice: Structured Interviews to Determine Fit with Job Environment. Any of the following questions may be used to initiate discussion and the eventual preparation of a structured interview guide:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- Why is the investigation of candidate fit with job environment important?
- What is typically done to determine this fit?

Following these types of questions we can move into specific methodology that the learners adapt and apply to the extant case.

3. Suggested time. Assuming content reading assignments and case reading/study assignments are completed outside of group meeting time, the entire experiential activity could take from 90 to 110 minutes. In the steps of the activity, below, I list the suggested time periods.

4. Experiential Component. With guidance from the instructor, the learners create the format and template for interviewing candidates. Guidance may frequently take the form of questions with the expectation that learners will attempt to integrate content/theory in creating responses to the questions. Here is an example of an experiential component with general time requirements following in parentheses:

- How do we determine the critical environmental factors (CEF) that comprise the job environment? (for example, resource accountability, time pressure, expectations of senior managers, expectations of peers, complexity of the task environment, and so on. This particular aspect of the activity is most helpful in identifying the nature of managerial work, the roles of the manager and so on.

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- The case does not provide complete information; hence the work will contain some speculation about the accuracy of the environmental data. Learners can be encouraged to propose ways in which the environmental data may be obtained. (discussion, 15 minutes, or more)
- How do we shape the CEF into a question and survey format for use in structured interviews? (discussion, 10 minutes)
- Practice: the learners are grouped into small teams (n=3) to create ideas for preparation of the survey format and content. (15 minutes)
- How do we create a structured interview form (with or without weights per items)? (discussion, 15 minutes)
- Practice: each small team drafts some items for actual use with candidates. (15 minutes)
- Using the structured interview form with candidates. Practice. Here, the learners may use role-play to practice using the questions, etc., in an actual give-and-take dialog. The idea here is to field test the structured interview tool that has been developed. Note: Needs, areas of weakness, ambiguity, and the like could be identified. The needs should then be addressed. (20 minutes)

This work is challenging because the learners do not have all the information needed to make quality decisions. The lack of information is a powerful stimulant because it reinforces the idea that all of the recruitment and selection activity is interdependent as a system. For example, how useful is the unstructured interview activity

in the absence of information regarding job demands and required skill areas. The interpersonal skills aspect (of the job represented in the case, SIMM-RAM) may be very great in importance and knowing this, categorically, will be very instructive in the preparation of the structured interview guide.

- Reflection: Here is where the learners and instructors do some stock-taking relative to the matters of purpose, effectiveness, and continuous improvement. This activity is framed by three questions (see above) that are initiated by the instructor, following:

Are we accomplishing what we set out to accomplish?

How will we know that changes in our behavior or practices would represent an improvement?

What changes should we make? (20 to 30 minutes.)

This reflection is important because it serves to provide much feedback in the inquiry model that we are using for this activity. Learners will have formed hypotheses, will have tested them, and now are prepared to consider and perhaps make adjustments in their beliefs and attitudes as well as practices. This reflection takes the place, somewhat, of the traditional de-briefing. The continuous improvement overlay on the activity serves many of the purposes of de-briefing. Reflection is aimed at what was done or achieved, and, importantly, how might efforts for the future be improved.

5. Variations. We can use the same case material and content material for other learning activities regarding recruitment and selection.

### For example, we have:

assessment of skills of candidates  
specific job fit assessment as per  
candidate knowledge and interests

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These two topics and the one above, taken together as a set of learning activities, will help learners prepare to engage in more competent recruitment and selection work and the activities will also provide a framework for continuous improvement.

### **APPENDIX**

#### **Case: Simm Ramm**

Gretchen Golub is the Director of Human Resources at Simm-Ram, Inc., a computer memory manufacturing firm. The firm has 832 employees, most of them technically oriented, and is located in Walnut Creek, California. The president of the firm, Derek Jacobson, asked Gretchen to review the records, backgrounds, and performance reviews of three current managers who are interested in seeking a promotion to general manager in a product division. The firm is organized into product divisions and there is a general manager position currently vacant.

Mr. Jacobson expects Gretchen to get started on this assignment right away. He wants her to either recommend one of the three managers or commence with a search for outside candidates. Usually, the firm promotes from within. This is not always the case, however, there is an unwritten "policy" that encourages promotions from within. The candidates internal to the firm are Todd Horner, Tony Moninger, and Rona Alcala.

For each of the internal candidates there is considerable information available. The information was taken from official company records, performance reviews and evaluations, discussions with former and current supervisors/bosses of the candidates, and from interviews by Gretchen with each of the three candidates. Again, Gretchen must recommend one of them for the promotion or prepare to commence a search. A brief summary of the information for each one of them follows.

#### **Todd Horner**

Todd Horner has been the TQM manager for the past six years. He started out as a kid in a tough part of town where he had to learn to fight to survive. He wants very much to get ahead and be a success. Success and status are very important to Todd. He works extremely hard, is a workaholic, and is successful, that is, he gets things done and achieves the performance goals set for him.

Todd likes the best things in life. He lives in townhouse in a glitzy neighborhood, drives a Lexus 500, wears custom made suits and ties, and is a party animal.

He runs a very tight ship in his department. He believes that organizations are political landmines and he is always on the look-out to protect himself and his department from intrusions and attacks from others. He works hard to attack, discredit, and defeat anyone whom he perceives as a threat; whether it be inside or outside his department. Todd trusts no one, and he very closely watches the people who report to him.

#### **Tony Moninger**

For the past seven years Tony has been a production manager. He is a very funny guy, always telling stories and jokes. Tony is a firm believer in cooperation and teamwork. He does not like conflict and works diligently to find ways to quickly deal with conflict situations. He relies on smoothing, compromise, and avoidance.

Prior to becoming a manager, Tony was an informal leader in various work groups he was part of. He was always providing guidance, assistance, and information to employees who were less experienced or knowledgeable than he was. Tony demonstrated that he was not afraid of hard work and was willing to take on tough assignments and work late or on weekends on important tasks. He has always been regarded

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as a team player and one who has the best interests of the firm at heart. Tony enjoys this reputation.

In his current assignment, Tony believes that employees are doing the best, most productive job they can do given the limitations, reinforcements, and materials they have with which to work. He praises them often and uses positive reinforcement whenever he can. When money for raises, bonuses, and the like is available, he makes sure that each of the employees gets something. Tony wants all of his employees to like him. This is consistent with the reputation Tony works to cultivate.

### Rona Alcalá

The manager of the configuration engineering department [CED], Rona Alcalá, has been in her current assignment for four years. She got her present job because she had an exemplary record of performance as an engineer for the firm and had a similar record in the company she worked for prior to joining S-R, Inc.

Some people in the firm believe she got the manager's job because she is an Hispanic female and not because of her talent. Rona is aggressive, talented, and outspoken.

Rona likes the challenging nature of her job and the tasks it involves. She immerses herself in the most demanding work of the department. Sometimes this might be to her disadvantage and the disadvantage of the unit because she is often doing work that others could be doing allowing her to function more as a coach, mentor, and so on. Some of the department members feel they are dependent on her because she has so much knowledge and seems not to share too much of it.

Rona likes her current assignment because her boss understands her and leaves her alone to do things her way. She enjoys this autonomy. What she doesn't enjoy are company policies and regulations and the "performing" role of the manager's job, that is, having to do social and

ceremonial things. While not a loner, Rona prefers to work alone and doesn't have much use for team projects.

### In Conclusion

This [above] information is what Gretchen must consider. The information is not all we want it to be. There are gaps and questions. However, this is the way things are in life, we do not always have the luxury of abundant time at our disposal to gather all the information we need to make decisions. Given such limitations, what should Gretchen do?

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