

# A Holistic Approach to Assessing C-Level Candidates

By Doug Reiter

The success of any organization is closely tied to the performance of its chief executive officer (CEO) and other top-level executives. Few would debate the validity of this statement. But what is being debated more and more these days in corporate HR departments is how to improve the process of hiring – or promoting – individuals into these critical positions.

Assessment of the right talent to bring into an organization – or to promote from within – remains one of the biggest challenges of HR executives. Without the right people in the right positions at the right time, an organization is destined to produce mediocre performance or may even falter so seriously as to be no longer viable.

The challenge with improving corporate recruiting is that candidate assessment is both a science and an art. The scientific aspect of the process includes the careful assessment of the skills, experience, and education of potential candidates, using scientific-based assessment tools, testing, and then matching those tested attributes with the requirements of the position and the culture of the company.

But, as anyone who has been recruiting for many years knows, interview style and methodology, intuition, and hunches also play a

major role in deciding who would be the most successful in the organization. Another way to explain this is to think of recruiting as police detective work. The really good recruiters – just like really good detectives – use their gut feelings and hunches to guide them. They then support their hunches with processes, investigation, follow-up, and logic. Finally, they connect the dots that eventually solve the crime, or, in the case of recruiters, identify the right candidate for the job.

Assessing a candidate, therefore, is more than just checking the facts; it is a holistic exercise that blends scientific analysis, gut feelings, and an assessment methodology that delves deeply into the candidate's knowledge, qualifications, skills, and personal characteristics. In other words, if you want to understand who those people are who will end up sitting across from you during an interview, you need to use many approaches to find out things about them beyond their education, experience, and professional successes. You need to know about their personal history, their values, their personalities, their life experiences, their failures and successes, and their interests and passions. You need to find out what makes them tick. If you know these things, you can predict with much greater accuracy how they will fit



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in your company and perform on the job.

I have been a successful executive search consultant for 32 years. During this time, not surprisingly, my interviewing style and techniques have evolved. Through this process, I have been able to meld my gut and intuition with an assessment process

yielding successful outcomes 95 percent of the time or more.

By the time I sit face to face with a candidate, in almost all cases, their technical competency is not in question. Everything else is. My in-person interview/assessment process, therefore, is designed to elicit a continuous flow of meaningful and disparate information from the candidate—information that I can turn into data dots. The conversations in which we are engaged help them reveal who they really are. These discoveries, then, reveal more data dots that can be connected. Once connected, these pieces of information eliminate a lot of the guesswork in assessing the qualifications and cultural variants of candidates.

In addition to treating the executive candidate interviews in a holistic fashion, there are several other lessons I have learned from my career helping many companies find their successful C-level executives. These lessons revolve around the following elements.

## **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

This is not often mentioned as a critical aspect of the recruiting process, and some hiring managers or HR managers may even view this as a threat. But unless in-house interviewers understand their own biases and prejudices, they will not draw accurate pictures of the candidates.

The opportunities for one's own issues to seep into and taint the interview/assessment process are endless. For example, the simple phenomenon of transference (the projection of one's feelings onto another) can severely distort an assessment process and result in a flawed outcome. To avoid this prejudicial outcome, individuals need to be able to put biases aside and focus on the person in front of them. In other words, the more comfortable you are in your own skin, the more effective you will be in understanding your biases and taking them out of the equation.

Pop psychology aside, you can only understand another person as much as you understand yourself. Therefore, the first – and maybe most important – assessment is your own personal assessment.

One of my recent interviews of a candidate for a high-level manufacturing position demonstrates this point of self-awareness. He was a principal in a consulting firm formed by ex-employees of a large (and failing) manufacturing company. His firm was selling consulting services to manufacturing companies in the same industry. I mentioned that I was aware of his previous company's failings. After he defended his former company's record, I asked him: "But how do you know you're right?" He appeared confused and defensive. I moved ahead. "Since you have been with the same company, or people from that company, your entire career, and you have no experience outside of this circle, how do you know you're right?" He was dumbfounded, and had no answer. In fact, he became so upset that he left the meeting within five minutes. My analysis was that he lacked self-knowledge, possessed an unrealistic view of himself, and blew the interview.

Human resource executives, more than executives in other disciplines, need to be on a lifelong quest for EQ--emotional intelligence. Some recommendations for this are:

- Get a coach.
- Take tests from Hogan Assessment Systems, Eji, or other providers.
- Ask for feedback from the CEO, chief operating officer (COO), direct reports, clients, and peers.
- Understand your strengths and weaknesses.
- Build on your strengths; learn skills to mitigate your weaknesses.

## **COMPANY KNOWLEDGE**

Understanding the culture of your company, the informal power

structure, the characteristics of successful people (from the mail room to the boardroom) will help you accurately describe the organization to a candidate and assess whether that candidate is a good fit. In addition to the traditional ways of knowing about your company's culture, it's a good idea to interview successful people throughout the organization to get their take on how the organization really works.

Work to understand the formal and informal power structure in your organization. The accuracy and depth of understanding of your environment not only puts you in good stead with the individuals who work in your organization, but also provides a framework for a discussion with potential employees. Your knowledge of your company's values and practices will help you ascertain whether a candidate's values and practices blend with your company's.

Remember, too, that an "A" candidate will be evaluating you and your company. Be conscious of the types of questions candidates ask. The questions they ask and comments they make will give you insight into how they think and what makes them tick. The more competent and knowledgeable you are about your organization, the more comfortable they are. The more relaxed they are, the more they reveal of themselves to you.

I was conducting a search for a plant manager for one of the largest manufacturing facilities of its kind in the world. The plant was extremely complex, with a series of vexing, unresolved manufacturing problems and no solutions in sight. The general manager (GM), vice president of HR, vice president of manufacturing, and I were meeting about the type of candidate we sought for the position. The GM, to whom the position reported, was seeking solutions but was out of ideas. He complained that the CEO would not permit him to tour non-company industrial sites to identify solutions to these nagging

problems in his facility. I knew this to be false. Before the search project was concluded, he was fired.

He failed on a number of fronts:

- He didn't take the initiative to solve problems. The CEO places a high level of importance on taking initiative.
- He complained. Complaining is counter to this company's culture.
- He was out of ideas. He had no solutions. The CEO expected him to generate ideas and solutions.

## THE RESUME

I use a resume for at least three things:

1. As a framework for the interview,
2. To gain insight into the candidate's writing skills and how he or she thinks, and
3. To gain an understanding of the continuity of his or her life and career.

First, I must admit to a pet peeve. I do not accept functional resumes. Functional resumes are designed to obfuscate instead of clarifying who the person is and what he or she has done. If there are gaps or events requiring explanation, so be it.

The resume is step one in my assessment. Is it clear, concise, and readable? Is it grammatically correct? Can you spend a few minutes reading it and have a sense of what this candidate has done? There is no good reason for a poorly constructed resume.

Social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn are important and are becoming a substitute for a resume. In some disciplines such as advertising, public relations, and technology, these online sites may provide enough information for a candidate search. My view is that candidates for a vice president, director, or C-level position should always have a resume.

NORTHEAST CORPORATION	
Job Title:	Vice President, Manufacturing
Reports To:	Jonathon Spirling
Location:	Cleveland, OH
Direct Reports:	4 total: 2 division managers, 1 manager of research and development, and 1 manager of central engineering
<b>SUMMARY</b>	
Manage and direct manufacturing activities for the company. Profit-and-loss responsibility. Oversight of all aspects of manufacturing branches, including safety, production, quality, maintenance, sales, resource acquisition. Work with the sales and distribution divisions to increase company profitability.	
<b>ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provide leadership and management practices that support company goals and objectives</li><li>• Develop and implement plan for efficient use of materials, machines, and employees</li><li>• With the CEO, identify and execute capital projects designed to make company a leader in manufacturing.</li><li>• Set goals and objectives for operations, monitor their progress, and make necessary changes to ensure their achievement</li><li>• As a key executive, work with management team to increase profitability of the business</li><li>• With CEO, develop and execute a strategic operating plan for company manufacturing activities</li><li>• Build and maintain a cohesive team dedicated to and achieving excellence</li></ul>	
<b>REQUIREMENTS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ten-plus years minimum in key operating position in industry, preferably with multi-plant and profit-and-loss responsibility</li><li>• BS degree</li><li>• Technology literate</li><li>• A demonstrated track record of progressive responsibility and success in management of increasingly complex manufacturing organizations</li><li>• Demonstrated success building and operating high-performing teams</li></ul>	
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	
Northeast Corporation was founded by Jonathon Spirling. This is a newly created position; Jon would like this person to take control of the manufacturing part of the company, making it a leader in its field.	
As founder and CEO, Jon is very involved in the business. It is his intention to remain very active in the business for the foreseeable future. The incoming vice president of manufacturing must be respectful of the company, its employees, history, and the way in which this new position integrates with Jon, the organization and its operations.	

*Exhibit 1. Sample job description.*

## THE JOB DESCRIPTION

Just as resumes are still required, so is a comprehensive job description to:

- Focus attention on needs and requirements,
- Get buy-in from the principals involved, and
- Convey "soft" value-driven data to promote discussion with the candidate.

The job description and resume, in tandem, are part of the assessment process. Candidates will focus on the aspects of the job description most important to them.

The discussion section of the job description at **Exhibit 1** was written to convey two things: (1) Jon is the

founder, and (2) founders rarely let go. An incoming executive would not likely become the CEO. An essential ingredient of success on the assignment associated with this job description was to hire an executive who understood the dynamics of succession with a founder and accepted it. Failure to deal with this single issue would have sunk the project. Further, the potential effects on the company as a result of not dealing with this issue ranged from loss of focus to an existential threat to the company's future.

## A HOLISTIC INTERVIEW PROCESS

I don't remember exactly when I had this "aha" moment, but early in my career I realized that one's personality

characteristics are the same in adulthood as they were in high school. By the time individuals reach high-school age, they are the sum total of their genes, early life experiences, family upbringing, familial relationships, and early successes and failures.

I'm not referring to how well individuals were liked or disliked by others in high school but what they personally liked and didn't like in high school. High school is the first environment where individuals are free to make decisions about their classes, extracurricular activities, and friends. They can pursue their interests with little accountability for long-term outcomes. Therefore, high schoolers focus on activities in which they have natural talent – activities they like. They are drawn to things they are good in and that make them feel good.

The psychological community generally agrees that the basic personality is formed quite early in childhood. By the time you are 12 or 13 years old, much of your personality is fixed. Your personality traits are well established. You are drawn to certain types of activities and enjoyments. When you interview a candidate for a position, in many ways you are meeting that 12-year-old child!

The famous author, Tom Clancy, was interviewed on CSPAN a few years ago. A caller asked him for career advice. Tom advised the caller to think about what he was like in high school, to consider what he was drawn to, where he excelled.

I was privileged to attend the last and final UCLA Extension Seminar led by the late Peter F. Drucker, the father of modern management. He said, "Don't make a trumpet player play the bass. He won't like it, and he won't play it very well."

We all excel in certain areas. Here are the two most important discoveries about any candidate:

1. Is the candidate operating in his or her area of talent?
2. Does he or she know it?

To uncover the answers to these two questions, my initial interviews last about two hours. I ask, in general chronological order, the following questions:

- Where did you grow up?
- How many kids in your family?
- What did your father do for a living? What did your mother do when you were growing up?
- What types of activities were you involved in grade school and high school?
- Describe your high school experience.
- How did you make the decision to go to college?
- How did you choose your major?
- How long did it take to finish college? Who paid for it?
- Describe your college experience.

I then move to the resume, asking more traditional questions about work history, job performance, successes, failures, etc. This part of the interview, in the context of what I've learned about candidates personally, is more valuable, and allows me to draw a picture of who they are and what drives them. This holistic view gives me a better ability to predict whether they fit the client or the position.

All of these questions are open ended, relate to early, non-work life, and yield mountains of information about who is sitting across the table from you. Open-ended questions almost always result in more information or data dots. Open-ended questions reveal what is important to the person. The direction of the answer tells you about his or her core. Follow-up questions flow from answers to open-ended questions. The query, "Why," is quite powerful. I use it often.

Here are two instances in which the interviews uncovered significant characteristics about the candidates:

- When a candidate in the Midwest, who was applying for the position of vice president of communications, was asked to describe the environment of her upbringing, she spent the next 45 minutes describing her relationship with her parents.
- A COO candidate, when asked about his upbringing, told me he grew up on a military base. His father, whom he never knew, did not return from Vietnam. This candidate went to work at age 12 and gave his mother the money to help support the family. I asked him whether he ever resented it. He immediately said, "Absolutely not. It was my responsibility." Resentment never crossed his mind.

Assessing candidates' external and internal qualities is a combination of art and science. Generally speaking, if someone displays certain behavior traits in one part of his or her life, those traits will be expressed elsewhere. For example, people who routinely lie in their personal lives are likely to lie in their professional lives. Likewise, people who are able to put a friend's needs before their own are likely to have the capacity to do the same in the work environment.

People will reveal themselves by their actions and deeds. You want to know what experiences they had and how they responded to them. What decisions did they make, and how and why did they make them? How did they execute them? With this knowledge, and a traditional assessment regimen on work history, references, and testing, a clear picture emerges.