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WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Responses to “Hire the Best”

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In the March 2019 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I presented the following hiring decision faced by an experienced actuary. Here are selected responses and excerpts, edited for space and clarity, followed by the real-life conclusion. Please note that inclusion of responses should *not* be taken as an endorsement by either the section council or the Society of Actuaries (SOA) of the positions presented. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to SteppingStone@JHACareers.com.

HIRE THE BEST

Mark interviewed two internal candidates, Brian and Beverly, for an open position.

Brian

- did not tell his manager in advance about the job application,
- took longer to complete the procedural steps in the process, and
- seemed to be applying in part because the role was a promotion.

Beverly

- had been in active discussions with her manager about her next career step, even before the interviews,
- was quick to complete each step in the process, and
- seemed more interested in the role on its merits.

However, Brian had interviewed better on competencies and skills such as technical background, communication style and ability to use and innovate with technology. When Mark asked the interviewers to rank them, overall feedback, such as rating by competency and total rating, consistently ranked Brian higher, but only slightly.

1. What weight should Mark give to Brian’s versus Beverly’s apparent motivations for the job, as opposed to their qualifications?
2. If he must make a decision based just on the interviews and information he already has, whom should he hire?
3. Is there anything else he should consider doing before making an offer?

What would you do?

Almost all respondents felt that Beverly was the preferred candidate, with these two exceptions:

I do not see it as a negative that Brian is applying for the role because it would be a promotion. Rather, I view this as a positive—he is career motivated and looking for upward mobility. To me, this indicates that he would work hard to deliver results and thus continue progressing in the company. I also do not see it as a red flag that he did not share the opportunity with his manager. In an ideal world, strong employees should be supported when they pursue internal moves, but this is not always the reality. Perhaps Brian’s current manager would have tried to block his move, and that’s why he wasn’t open about it. Given the fact that Brian scored higher with the interviews on the role competencies and appears to be a more qualified candidate, I would offer the job to Brian.

I would go for Brian, as he is slightly more qualified. He is not obliged to disclose his career plans to his manager, so this is not a problem. Regarding the longer time that he took to complete the process, he may not be as organized and diligent as Beverly, but he delivered. Last but not least, if his intentions were to get promoted, he did the right thing in applying. I see nothing anomalous in that. The slightly better skills shown by Brian, technical background, communication style and ability to use and innovate with technology make him my choice.

This response encapsulates the general preference for Beverly:

A hiring manager has a responsibility to look beyond just the technical skill set when considering candidates. The intangible elements of enthusiasm, attitude and desire have to play a role. A technically competent hire who is slow and unmotivated (the traits that would appear to be possible if hiring Brian) greatly diminishes the value of the technical skills. Given that the ratings for the competencies and skills are close, I would recommend hiring Beverly without hesitation. If there had been a large disparity in skills, then my answer might be different—or might even be to hire neither and keep looking for the best fit overall.



This respondent echoed how critical it is to have a motivated employee:

I view motivation as a critical factor in hiring. Beverly is highly motivated and excited about this opportunity; Brian appears not to be. I want to have achievement-driven people working for me. Assuming that Beverly has an acceptable level of technical and other skills, she would be the better long-term hire. A well-motivated person will work hard to improve on their deficiencies. The other consideration for Mark is if neither Brian nor Beverly would be considered a good hire. Mark should not settle.

This actuary expressed concern about Brian’s approach:

I would be concerned about Brian’s approach to the process—as he was secretive about it and was partly focused on the promotion opportunity. I would wonder if in another year or two he would act in the same way and leave the position for a different opportunity without giving Mark any advance indications. I would also be concerned if Brian was potentially creating a negative reputation due to his lack of communication with his prior department in looking for a new role. If I were Mark, I would question his integrity and true interest in the role.

This respondent emphasized the importance of motivation in a hiring decision:

Motivation is such an important factor for good performance; I’d give it a slight edge over qualification. Actuaries in general are good at learning new skills, and a motivated employee can bridge a knowledge or skill gap pretty quickly. On the other hand, an unmotivated employee may not perform at the level of capability.

Mark should hire Beverly. She has had a clear plan for her own career development and is motivated to do a good job in this role. Beverly’s competencies are only slightly below Brian’s, so she should be able to have a good start.

A potential additional question to ask Brian and Beverly is how this new role fits into their longer-term career goals. Their intention with the role might not match what’s needed. For example, Mark may look for someone for his own succession plan, but the applicant might consider this to be a quick rotation and plan to exit in a couple of years.

This actuary came down somewhere in the middle:

1. **What weight should Mark give to Brian’s versus Beverly’s apparent motivations for the job, as opposed to their qualifications?** I would give 40% weight on motivations. Hiring someone with the right intentions is always important, and technical skills can always be improved.
2. **If he must make a decision based just on the interviews and information he already has, whom should he hire?** He would need to hire Brian.
3. **Is there anything else he should consider doing before making an offer?** Mark needs to ask Brian why he didn’t tell his manager about his application, and the answer may uncover important insights. If it reveals issues with working relationships, then Mark needs to consider this carefully. A collaborative and easy-to-work-with team member is more important than slightly higher technical skills.

And, finally, this respondent gave a particularly thorough analysis:

In deciding between the candidates, there are a number of considerations:

- What is the urgency of progress in the role? Is getting this position filled critical, and does it involve high-priority tasks? If urgent, then getting results quickly may be of a greater concern versus being able to develop the individual over time.

- What is the company philosophy on longevity? Are people moved around relatively often? If the person is deemed to be more temporary in the role, that would alter the skills desired as they come into the role.
- What have been Brian's and Beverly's employment histories? Are there performance issues? If the desire is to have the candidate in the role for a long period of time, the length of time in prior roles may be important. And you may not want to inherit performance issues from another manager.
- What skill set is desired? Are there better candidates outside of the company who could be considered? This depends heavily on the company's desire to promote from within and the amount of time needed before the position should be filled. It will take considerable time to get an external candidate process completed.

What Mark felt he had learned was that he should definitely give more weight to the way candidates approach the process, as well as their motivations.

Without knowing the answers to these, my thoughts would be:

1. Motivation is key for how long I'd expect a candidate to remain engaged in the department and the work performed. Beverly seems to be the preferred candidate as she is more interested in the role, not just the promotion. Excitement does not equate to success, but given the only slight skill difference, I'd give the edge to Beverly as the more likely long-term candidate for the position.
2. The facts that Brian has not told his manager and is primarily looking at this as just a promotion raise red flags for me.

If there was a significant skill difference, I'd put less weight on these red flags, but my concern would be Brian either leaving the department or leaving the company to gain a promotion. I'm not opposed to individuals moving ahead in the organization, but they need to ensure a smooth transition within the company. In the future, Brian could decide to leave without adequate notice to prepare others for his role.

3. A critical step is if either candidate has the minimum level of skill needed for the role. Mark needs to determine whether looking at just these two candidates is sufficient. If neither candidate meets the need, he would be better off taking longer to find a better fit.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

Mark made the offer to Brian. Brian then spoke with his management team, who requested several days to pull together a counteroffer. This slowed down the entire process.

Brian accepted the counteroffer, and when Mark got back to Beverly, he found he had to do damage repair; she was apprehensive about being the second choice. This led to good and honest feedback on the interview process, which helped them have an open dialogue, and Mark made sure Beverly knew how enthusiastic he was that she would be joining his team.

She did great in the role, proving to be a self-starter, well qualified and super motivated. Brian continued to do fine in his higher role on his other team, so all turned out for the best.

What Mark felt he had learned was that he should definitely give more weight to the way candidates approach the process, as well as their motivations. ■



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