

IF THE JOB COULD TALK

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What would a job say to us about superior performance if it could talk? Would it clearly define the hard and soft skills needed for superior performance? Would it describe the necessary behavior of a person who will always be able to deliver superior performance? What would it say about the attitude of the people doing the job? How intelligent should the people be to be superior performers?

We all know jobs can't talk, but we can talk to superior performers. If only we knew what questions to ask. They would give us all the information needed to identify someone who could achieve superior performance in every job.

It seems like it should be easy to identify superior performance but its not. One of the problems is in definitions of superior performance. The "best performer" in one organization would be classified as average at another.

We try to benchmark superior performance using current "team members." But, even on a sports team not every number one draft pick makes it in the pros, let alone becomes one of the superior performers. You can't benchmark superior performance if your top performers are average compared to the top team in your industry.

Many organizations hire for skills and fire for attitude.

Our own biases about skills and knowledge keep us from understanding what the job would say about what is required for superior performance. If skills and knowledge always lead to superior performance, every nurse, medical doctor, lawyer, engineer, CPA, or any person who has passed a certification exam would produce superior performance.

Perhaps the reason so much emphasis is placed on skills and knowledge is because they are the easiest components of performance to define. Many organizations hire for skills and fire for attitude. In these organizations, it is ironic that their recruitment, selection, training, and performance management processes focus primarily on skills and knowledge but rarely address "attitude," even though there are valid assessments available.

Our biases inevitably keep us from listening objectively to the voice of the job. There are three voices we hear when analyzing performance in jobs. One voice tells us how the job should be performed. The second voice tells us how we would like to do the job, and the third voice is how the job has always been done. Most people are not aware of which voice they are listening to relative to performance requirements. The most unbiased voice is the job telling us how it should be performed.

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Behavioral event interviews and focus groups have been some of the practices used to define performance in jobs. However, behavioral event interviews and focus groups need to be facilitated by individuals who have been trained in the process. The process requires countless hours of data collection and analysis. This is why many organizations only use these methodologies to develop performance requirements for general roles such as leader or team member.

In the end, the value of the results of behavioral event interviews and focus groups is contingent on having the right process, facilitation and input from the right people. The right people are people who are currently performing at superior levels in the job and others who have a thorough understanding of the job. When organizations select people to be involved in the process of determining the performance requirements of jobs they need to ask:

- 1) Who is currently performing the job at a superior level?
- 2) Who formerly performed the job at a superior level?
- 3) What, if any, changes are impacting the job that have implications for performance?
- 4) Does the manager/supervisor/leader understand what constitutes superior performance in the job?
- 5) What are the measures for superior performance in the job?

Many organizations have almost given up hope of finding short cuts to defining the requirements for superior performance. Behavioral event interviews and focus groups are simply too labor intensive, cumbersome and expensive to use for every job in an organization. Even more daunting is the time they take to implement. The changes in market conditions, industries or technology are impacting jobs so rapidly that performance requirements can very quickly become obsolete.

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Defining superior performance in jobs is increasingly contingent on “soft skills.” With information services driving the economy, performance will increasingly depend on our thinking and relationship abilities. Daniel Goleman addressed the emerging imperative for soft skill competencies in his best selling book, “Emotional Intelligence.” Goleman’s studies revealed that some emotional intelligence competencies are at least twice as important as technical skills.

However, the standards for measuring soft skill requirements are more difficult to develop than hard skills. Bricklaying knowledge and skill are obvious requirements for bricklaying. It is a fairly straightforward process to determine how many bricks a

bricklayer must lay each day for superior performance. But, how do you determine just how much consulting a consultant needs to provide to achieve superior performance?

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Skills-training works best when it relates specifically to the performance requirements of jobs. Soft skill competency training must also be related to the most important performance requirements of jobs.

But, if you don't know the soft skill competency requirements of the job, how can you design the training so it relates? So, if you don't know the soft skill competency requirements of the job, how do you know what to look for in applicants? Therefore, if you don't know what to look for in applicants, you won't know which applicant to hire. Even worse, if you hire “ding bats” and train them, you get “trained ding bats.”

Training the right soft skill competencies is a formidable challenge for any organization. For years we've been training sales people on how to deliver superior presentations. All too often this results in superior sales presentations being made to unqualified buyers. We should also train sales people on how to prospect and pre-qualify buyers so they don't waste the presentation time. A poor presentation to a qualified buyer will produce more results than a great presentation to an unqualified buyer. Salespeople need to be trained so they can tell the differences.

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One of the challenges we face in understanding the nature of superior performance is communication. Most people process what they see more easily than what they hear yet, all we do is talk to them. Abstract concepts like soft skill competencies can be difficult to understand.

Television has trained the human eye to process image changes and information every few seconds. We need to add visual components to our communication to enhance understanding of abstract concepts like competencies.

Proficiency in multi-dimensional communication is required if we wish to advance the learning and capability in organizations. If we truly want to identify, define and produce superior performance, we must use visual models to communicate with a variety of audiences; therefore, providing a broader vehicle for understanding.

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We must get out of the training “event business” and into the process of action-based competency development. We need to assist and support people in the development of

the competencies required for superior performance. “Team building” training has been offered in many organizations with negligible results. Here are just three of the reasons why it hasn’t worked:

- 1) Team building efforts often attempt to turn “work groups” into teams without any understanding of the differences between “work groups” and a team.
- 2) Team building training often teaches people about teams but not how to behave as a successful team member. Trust is a key issue in team building.
- 3) Some team building is nothing more than entertainment.

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Perhaps the biggest challenge in defining superior performance is overcoming our personal biases. In discussions about superior performance, it is difficult to distinguish the difference between real performance issues and our personal biases. For instance, classic thinking about successful sales performance suggests that persuasiveness is the most important soft skill competency. In fact, empathy is more significant than persuasiveness in many sales positions today.

The reason is that people buy from people who understand what they want. Today, people don’t need salespeople to inform them about products. All the information is available to savvy customers on the information highway. Savvy customers don’t want to be sold or talked into anything. They want to be understood and served, this takes empathy.

This type of shift in what is required to produce superior performance is happening in many jobs. Without methodologies that challenge traditional thinking and biases, endeavors to define and produce superior performance will surely miss the mark.

How do you compete for top talent against organizations offering stock options and BMWs as sign on bonuses when all you have to offer is a paycheck?

In order to compete successfully today, companies must produce more with fewer resources for customers who demand more for less. To do this, they must fill each position with a person who has the potential to be a superior performer, but who may not even possess the minimum qualifications. There aren’t even enough workers to fill available positions today. How do you compete for top talent against organizations who offer stock options and BMWs as sign on bonuses when all you can offer is a paycheck?

So what is the solution? Organizations must hire the right people for the right job and create the right environments to produce superior performance. But that can only be done if organizations understand the “job” in the first place.

Those who are involved in best practices are using assessments to analyze the soft skill competency requirements of jobs.

Now comes my bias. I believe in using assessments...assessments that have been validated over time...that can be trusted to identify and measure the real performance issues. But first, we must start by choosing the right assessment to analyze the job. The right assessments measure:

- Hard Skills
- Soft Skills
- Behavior
- Attitudes
- Intelligence

In choosing assessments, organizations face another challenge. No one assessment company has expertise in each of these areas. It takes expertise and deep pockets to develop, validate and market assessments.

We have spent a significant amount of both time and money trying not to jury rig biases into our assessments. The best organizations know that one of the most valuable aspects of assessments is in collecting data. Those who are involved in best practices are using assessments to analyze the soft skill competency requirements of jobs.

The crux of the problem is this: if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

Our tendency to dive towards solutions, before we understand the problem, prevents us from resolving issues. A classic example is when an organization's performance lags, the training development rushes in with a training solution. Or, marketing rushes in with a marketing solution. A doctor shouldn't prescribe treatment until the patient has been examined and tests have been administered. Many organization initiatives fail because they are implemented before problems have been adequately diagnosed. The crux of the problem is this: if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.

Defining the soft skill competencies that are required to produce superior performance takes a good detective. To identify what it takes to produce superior performance, we must ask the right questions of the right people to be sure we are putting real issues on the table. The best detectives locate the best sources of information to find eyewitnesses. The job is the most credible eyewitness to superior performance. When we listen to the job talk, we will discover the clues we need to follow to produce superior performance.

If you want the job to talk to you, put all your biases on the table and listen to the job talk to you about "How the work should be performed."