

How I Hire:

Focus On Personality

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By Richard Branson

There is nothing more important for a business than hiring the right team. If you get the perfect mix of people working for your company, you have a far greater chance of success. However, the best person for the job doesn't always walk right through your door.

The first thing to look for when searching for a great employee is somebody with a personality that fits with your company culture. Most skills can be learned, but it is difficult to train people on their personality. If you can find people who are fun, friendly, caring and love helping others, you are on to a winner.

Personality is the key. It is not something that always comes out in interview – people can be shy. But you have to trust your judgement. If you have got a slightly introverted person with a great personality, use your experience to pull it out of them. It is easier with an extrovert, but be wary of people becoming overexcited in the pressure of interviews.

You can learn most jobs extremely quickly once you are thrown in the deep end. Within three months you can usually know the ins and outs of a role. If you are satisfied with the personality, then look at experience and expertise. Find people with transferable skills – you need team players who can pitch in and try their hand at all sorts of different jobs. While specialists are sometimes necessary, versatility should not be underestimated.

Some managers get hung up on qualifications. I only look at them after everything else. If somebody has five degrees and more A grades than you can fit on one side of paper, it doesn't necessarily mean they are the right person for the job. Great grades count for nothing if they aren't partnered with broad-ranging experience and a winning personality.

That doesn't mean you can't take risks when building your team. Don't be afraid of hiring mavericks. Somebody who thinks a little differently can help to see problems as opportunities and inspire creative energy within a group. Some of the best people we've ever hired didn't seem to fit in at first, but proved to be indispensable over time.

If you hire the wrong person at the top of a company, they can destroy it in no time at all. Promoting from within is generally a good idea as the employee who is promoted will be inspired by the new role, already know the business inside out, and have the trust and respect of their team.

Equally, bringing in fresh blood can reinvigorate a company. Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Australia recently brought in CEOs from outside - John Borghetti at Virgin Australia and Craig Kreeger at Virgin Atlantic. They have brought a lot of fresh ideas into the company, as well as experience of what the competition is doing well and what they are doing badly.

When companies go through growth spurts, they often hire in bulk and company culture can suffer. While it may seem a desperate rush to get somebody through the door to help carry the load, it is worth being patient to find the right person, rather than hurrying and unbalancing your team. I heard a great line by Funding Circle CEO Samir Desai at the IoD Conference in London (quoting Apple's Dan Jacobs) about making sure you hire (and fire) the right people: "It's better to have a hole in your team than an asshole in your team!"

