

# SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, Dec. 12, 2003

## Ideal employees

*Three skill domains form the foundation of success for today's workers*

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**Question: We're spending more time on the front-end of the employment process — recruiting, screening and hiring employees. Looking back, we've had mixed results selecting employees over the past couple of years. Some people we thought would be stars turned out to be just OK. A few turned out to be less than OK. Other people surprised us and exceeded our expectations. Now, we're trying to zero in on the qualities that are most important to this company, the ones that will result in the most success. My question for you is this: What do you think a company should be looking for in an employee today?**

**Answer:** This is a very timely question. There are some signs that the economy is picking up and employers are moving back into the hiring mode. At the same time, it is worth noting that the past decade has coincided with an evolution in the way many people conceptualize and approach work. Technological and geopolitical changes have created a business environment where traditional thinking is less applicable. The workforce itself is driving many of these changes.

For example, today's workers want:

- Time to spend with their families
- Input into decision making
- Opportunities to continually learn and take on new challenges

In some ways, the entire concept of "the job" has changed, along with the way many organizations, both large and small, operate. Yet, despite predictions about shorter workweeks, flexible hours and telecommuting, many Americans are working more hours at their work sites than ever before. As a result, the concept of "life-work" balance has emerged on the scene.

In an overall sense, the basic expectations and assumptions that are made about work are quite different from those that were made 10 years ago. Most of these trends are universal, cutting across all industries and all types of jobs. For instance, in the past it was:

- Employment for life
- Defined career track
- A single career
- Strong organizational hierarchy
- Strict managerial supervision
- Focus on performing specific tasks
- Little need to acquire new skills or knowledge
- Information and decision-making power held by management
- Making and selling products

Now it is:

- Frequent employment changes
- Personal responsibility to show value
- Probability of changing careers more than once
- Flattened organizational structures
- Team-based work
- Focus on improving work processes
- Constant need to acquire new skills and knowledge
- Decisions made at all levels
- Developing and offering solutions

Accordingly, organizations (like yours) need to rethink the criteria that they are using to select employees. Many firms are spending time defining the competencies (i.e., critical knowledge skills, abilities and personal attributes — KSAPs) that they seek from all employees.

Those competencies can form the foundation for organizational practices in the areas of employee selection, placement, management, evaluation, compensation, and development.

To get to the heart of your question, let me suggest that from my vantage point, three skill domains form the foundation for success for today's employees:

## Technical/subject matter

Obviously, the foundation upon which job success is built is the extent to which the individual is proficient with the basic subject matter of the business. In other words, if you are a retail organization, you will want to look for people who know a thing or two about retail. Accounting firms should look for people who know accounting. And so on. Yet, knowing a lot about the subject matter with which the organization concerns itself is only the beginning. It gets you in the elevator. Two other domains (see the following) affect how high the elevator goes.

## Interpersonal

In today's team-based, customer-oriented organization, all employees must be able to establish effective, reciprocal relationships. This means building relationships across organizational levels, valuing diversity, and resolving conflicts constructively. In short, it means being an assertive communicator not just some of the time, but all of the time.

## Strategic

The premise underlying this domain is that today's employees have to act like "owners," not "renters." They must think in terms of the bottom line, commit to offering first-rate quality, focus on customer needs, and understand the global context in which they operate. Profitability must be built into the organizational system.

There is a hierarchy implicit in these domains. Front-line employees make most use of the technical/subject matter domain. Managers make most use of the interpersonal domain. Top managers or executives make most use of the strategic domain. So, the old idea of person-job "fit" is consistent with the domains I have described here — different jobs demand different skill sets.

In order to extract maximum benefit from the skills that they bring in these three skill domains, let me also suggest that today's employees must also possess systems thinking capabilities. Specifically, they must be able to make meaningful and practical connections with the:

**External business environment:** Employees need to be mindful of the three C's (i.e., Customers, Competition, and Change). What is going on in the marketplace? What should we attend to? What should we ignore?

**Internal business environment:** Employees need to be mindful of the three P's (i.e., Processes, Productivity, and People). Are our work practices both efficient and effective? Are we operating at peak performance? Are we collaborating and cooperating as a cohesive team?

In light of the emerging trends that I have highlighted, it is worth noting that organizations today need to emphasize learning and growth opportunities for their employees in ways that vary from what has historically been practiced. Developmental programming for employees must move beyond the traditional focus on task-related skills only. Today's developmental programming must be more robust and focus on skills that are vital to everyone in the organization such as:

- Business organization basics
- Communication
- Globalization and diversity
- Leadership
- Learning and creativity
- Systems thinking and critical thinking
- Problem solving and decision making
- Working as a team
- Measurement basics

In conclusion, let me note that a very appropriate starting point is your effort to identify the success factors specific to the jobs in your company. While it may seem like a lot of work, when that "target" has been clearly defined, you will find that you can more proceed with greater efficiency and precision.

So, my advice to you is to identify those success factors, making sure that they represent a mix of subject matter, interpersonal, and strategic capabilities appropriate to the position you seek to fill.

Over time, my feeling is that such an approach will provide for higher caliber employees and, ultimately, better performance and greater productivity.



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