

Reducing long term costs of recruiting Local Ordinance Officers: Improving selection for a "job fit" that requires both people and animal management skills

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Abstract

The expense of recruiting new staff is becoming an increasing burden for local government and the figure of \$10,000 for the recruitment of 1 person is not uncommon.

Aggravating this situation is the fact that the job (in this case animal control and local laws), comes with significant stress and often a relatively high staff turnover.

With this mix comes a need for the recruit to have additional skill sets involving education, marketing, information technology, regulations, social welfare, safety awareness, people skills, a practical attitude, and animal control.

During a recent investigation and research project with a south east Queensland Local Government, it became apparent that an improvement in job-match recruitment methods might reduce the long-term financial burden of recruitment, and contribute to a reduction of stress in some work areas.

The ideal personality characteristics for the job (Regulatory Officer) were ascertained in collaboration with key stakeholders including existing Regulatory Officers, Senior Management, and a Management Consultant.

New recruitment strategies were applied, particularly the use of psychological profiling for Emotional Intelligence, and the use of an external recruiting agency to cull applicants. Comparisons between the preferred candidates selected by the recruiting agency and the preferences indicated by the Emotional Intelligence assessments are discussed.

The effectiveness and success of the new recruitment strategies are considered in terms of longevity of employment, level of job satisfaction and morale of new employees, and any benefits observed by management.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is about matching the right person to the job, and the financial and hidden costs of getting this wrong.

The financial cost of recruiting new staff is becoming an increasing burden for local government and the figure of \$10,000 for staff recruitment and engagement is not uncommon. This ever-increasing burden is due to a range of factors including:

- additional time required because of modern interviewing formats;
- legal obligations regarding frequency and breadth of advertising a position; and
- increased staff turn-over in stressful jobs like those having to enforce local laws.

Not so long ago when the writer interviewed job applicants, they would be asked a number of creative questions relating to the position. The respondent's answers would be used as the basis of further questions. Some interviews took 10 minutes, whilst others might have taken 40 minutes – and all for the same position. This approach is largely considered unacceptable now.

Today, refining the method of staff selection can make interviewing more equitable, and has the added potential of saving money through retaining staff, which results in lower recruitment costs, greater efficiencies and increased productivity.

It therefore makes sense to employ people who are better suited to the job.

Regulatory Officers have a diverse area of work that requires a diverse range of practical skills, such as attention to detail, safety awareness, people skills, and skills/knowledge of animal control. They are also the face of local government authority in the community, and so experience intermittent abuse, which is a stress against which they must toughen themselves if they are to survive.

This is a job made more stressful for indigenous Council employees who at times encounter additional problems like being subjected to racist taunts in the course of their work.

Given the stress and diverse demands of this job, it's no wonder that it has a higher than average turnover of staff, which often translates into more money spent on recruitment. Obviously some personality types are better suited to this kind of work than others, which provides a clue for staff selection.

Reducing stress and recruitment costs through better job matching

In late 2005, the author was contracted by a South East Queensland Council to review its recruitment processes for engaging regulatory officers. During investigations, it became apparent that an improvement in job-match might reduce the long-term financial burden of recruitment, as well as contribute to a reduction of stress.

This process began by first examining the current recruitment processes, then reviewing data like sick leave, and staff exit data information. Next, the ideal personality characteristics for the job were ascertained by talking to senior officers, HR personnel and regulatory staff.

Before discussing the personality characteristics required of the role, it is important to explain how an improvement in job-match may reduce stress and improve staff retention.

The answer is in two parts. The first part is that employees will feel more at ease in a job that suits them. The other part is that if the employee is a Supervisor/Manager, and they are suited to their job, then less stress is created for subordinate staff.

It's a fact of life that people handle stress differently. So when employing someone to fill an inherently stressful job: Match the appropriate person to handle the stress, and the stress will be effectively reduced, while productivity is maximized.

Qualities that Regulatory Services staff considered important in their job

Initially 30 desirable qualities were listed, with a further 15 qualities to avoid. Staff narrowed these down to 5 subheadings of desirable qualities, and 3 subheadings of what to avoid:

Top 5 attributes to hold:

1. Be of Good Character
(Trust, honesty, approachability, and integrity),
2. Good Communication skills
(Interpersonal skills, team player, multi cultural awareness and acceptance),

3. Ability to Accept the Role and Responsibilities (Undertake all roles and responsibilities, help others, have the ability to work under limited supervision),
4. Life experience (Common sense, lateral thinking, willingness to embrace new technology/ideas/methods, open-minded, good presentation), and
5. Trust in their abilities and in their employer.

Top 3 attributes to avoid:

1. Poor attitude (Confrontational, aggressive, racist, sexist, non-professional, argumentative.),
2. Unreliability (Check previous employment history, criminal history, mental health history), and
3. Overconfidence/over experience (Self-absorbed, less inclined to work as part of a team with others).

The role of Emotional Intelligence assessments

As noted earlier, work records and dialogue with existing staff helped define the most effective and the least effective attributes for Regulatory Officers. Then **Emotional Intelligence assessments** were used to identify the beneficial personality characteristics of the most effective field workers.

Emotional Intelligence is called EQ. An EQ assessment is not about how people use their logical brain but rather about how they respond and use the sensory data we receive as human beings.

EQ assessments explore Intra-personal awareness, Interpersonal abilities, how stress is managed, adaptability and stability of moods.

These personality characteristics reflect the ability to act and make decisions gleaned from conscious and unconscious sensory information. What we do with this information and how we interpret it, affects our mood, how we cope with stress, how we affect other people, and how we adapt to different situations.

In other words it reflects much of our ability to deal with the external world.

It is important to note that "Emotional Intelligence" is not an IQ test. The latter measures one's ability to understand and solve standardised problems in the areas of: arithmetic, spatial organization, logic and mechanical comprehension, with considerations to speed and accuracy. Emotional Intelligence is evident when we have hunches, "gut feelings", feel "in-tune" with someone, or uncomfortable about a course of action when we aren't sure why.

It is now considered that EQ. is generally a better predictor of someone's success in a particular job than is IQ. Apparently the CEO's of the top Fortune 500 companies were asked about how they made business decisions. They all said (without exception), that they examined the data and arguments relating to their decision, and then made up their minds based upon "gut feelings".

So what are the qualities needed to be an effective ordinance enforcer?

The desirable attributes offered by the Regulatory Service staff all focused upon behaviour and attitude. However behaviour and attitude, although important, aren't everything.

EQ identifies the inherent coping skills of a person, and from the more effective Regulatory Officers observed, the following coping skills stood out:

- stress management;
- effective Interpersonal skills;
- adaptable to changing situations; and
- not prone to mood fluctuations.

These coping skills contribute to such things as: patience; the "quiet" use of one's authority; the ability to be effective under stress; interpersonal skills for avoiding conflict and for dealing with conflict; and the ability to adapt to a situation.

Note that the ability to adapt to changing situations is closely linked to coping well with stress because these two things affect each other.

Selection method

From here on the job selection criteria included desirable personal qualities, as well as a desirable profile based upon EQ Assessments. However, before people even got this far, they had first been through the culling process of an external recruitment agency.

Why was an external recruiting consultant used as opposed to in-house recruitment?

There were a number of reasons for this:

- Local government had a demonstrated history of being unable to source quality candidates in the market.
- Saving time and money in salaries and advertising (i.e. analysing initial applications, checking references, short listing, initial interviews, plus all the statutory requirements), and all this before the final interviews.
- An external agency is handy to enhance an objective and transparent process, particularly where an organization is interviewing internal applicants.
- Finally, recruiting agencies usually offer a money back guarantee if the staff with which they supply you don't last three months.

There are currently three methods of recruiting staff:

- Using relevant Department Managers and administration staff for the entire recruitment process;
- Using a Recruiting Agency to supply and short list candidates;
- Employ a recruiting agent internally as part of the HR Department.

Whether it is in your organizations interests or not to use a recruiting agency will depend on a number of factors including the size of your organization, the way it is structured, and the availability of job candidates.

Advantages and disadvantages of in-house recruiting by HR department

Advantages:

- * In theory this option costs less than paying an external recruiting agency.
- * By centralizing all advertising for recruitment through an HR Department, an organization can obtain significant bulk-advertising discounts.
- * Time saved in not having to worry about letters to applicants. (HR do it for you).

Disadvantages:

- * Managers have to work in with the in-house recruiting agent and may not be able to organize interviewing schedules around core their duties.
- * It may still take Managers about 2 days to vet job applications prior to interviews.
- * One organizational structure is to have each Department pay their HR Department to fill a position. However, if the new recruit doesn't last - the Department doesn't get a refund from HR.

An interesting aside:

During our research/ investigation, it was noted how the recommendations based upon EQ. assessments compared with the recommendations made by the Recruiting Agent. At the time of writing this paper we had interviewed a total of approximately 20 job applicants for different positions. We prioritised our recommendations for each position and interestingly enough our recommendations were identical every time, except for one person on one occasion.

Of course this is not to say that EQ assessments make a recruiting agent redundant. For one thing EQ assessments don't find your job applicants for you.

Why job matching is so important

Well, we already know that staff are more likely to stay in a job if they are suited to it, and that this kind of reliability can save money in the form of fewer recruiting costs over an extended period.

However, when employing anyone in a Supervisory or Management capacity, there are other costs involved if the right job-match isn't found. These are equally important, and can affect productivity, efficiency, morale, loyalty and trust, staff retention, and work harmony.

Consider the effects and consequences at work of inappropriate job matching in the real-life examples below.

There was a pleasant Supervisor who got on well with their staff, in fact the staff liked the supervisor. They even felt protective of the supervisor. And paradoxically this is the first warning sign that the supervisor may not be the right person for the job.

The question needs to be asked: "Why does a person in a supervisory position need protecting and from what do they need protecting?"

Most supervisors I know appreciate the support and loyalty of their staff, but they don't need them for protection.

The very nature of a supervisor's job is to keep work flowing and to look after their staff. Not the other way around. When a Supervisor needs their staff to protect them, an unhealthy collusion occurs that can easily breed anger and resentment toward other departments, followed by low morale.

Although this particular supervisor knew the job well, the officer had difficulty in asserting authority.

Consequently, the supervisor was not a good advocate for the needs of the staff, the Department, or them self. This led the supervisor to feeling discriminated against, because they didn't seem to get what they wanted.

From my perspective, the supervisor behaved like a victim when they repeatedly gave up opportunities of professional and personal development. And when I say a "victim", I mean someone whose attitude and behaviour fits the pattern of a person who feels vulnerable in the present due to unresolved issues from the past.

Unfortunately this "victim" attitude unconsciously reduced the ability of the supervisor to negotiate effectively, and it handicapped their ability or willingness to function as part of a team.

This is a very high cost indeed for any organization to pay for a Supervisor. Consequently everyone in the Department experienced significant interpersonal tension and low morale.

The next example of a job fit mismatch is of a Manager who was a shy person that cared about the staff. The Manager had both expertise and experience but lacked people skills, so the focus was always away from people and upon the technical aspects of the job.

Because of this shyness, contact with staff was avoided whilst walking around, which gave the unfortunate air of appearing preoccupied with things more important than the people around. This negative image of the boss was compounded by an attitude of only telling staff what they needed to know, which helped cement a lack of trust in Management, and created a "them and us" attitude with staff. This alone is a recipe for stress and burnout.

However the 2IC became the face of Management, as the go-between. In this, not uncommon scenario, the power, authority, and respect of the Manager was diminished as the staff's performance was indirectly monitored through an intermediary. This in turn encouraged a culture of blame where employees were defensive about their work. The 2IC became an apologist for the misunderstood decisions of Management and had to deal with subsequent disunity.

Low morale, cynicism amongst employees, and a higher turnover of staff was endemic. Time inefficiencies developed as middle managers had to deal with recurring employee dissatisfaction, all of which impacts upon the organization's budget.

Inevitably this job mismatch of a senior manager meant that everyone else had to "peddle a bit faster" to get the same amount of work done. Remember that any Manager, by virtue of position, will influence the attitude and stress of staff below. Cultural change in the workplace always starts at the top.

This brings us to my final example of job mismatch - which existed in a firm of Surveyors.

The owner had invited the best employee to become a partner. The best employee was a reliable family person and had great attention to detail, a very desirable quality in a surveyor.

The job generally consisted of surveying land and buildings out in the paddocks with one or two others, plus coming back to the office to draw plans. The surveyor knew the firm, and understood and used cutting edge IT applications much better than did the firm's owner. But the best employees do not necessarily make the best managers.

When a partnership was offered, he had to take on more responsibility and make executive decisions for allocating jobs, and promoting the firm with the aim of finding new projects.

This was not easy for a shy, quiet person to do. Tension built up between the two partners. The original owner felt the other wasn't pulling his weight in bringing in new work. But the new partner wasn't suited to that task!

They brought in a Management Consultant to unravel the knot. Their situation was not unlike many marriages, where each party has unspoken expectations of the other.

The two partners in the surveying firm had to renegotiate their roles and responsibilities in order to work effectively together. However, if the owner had thought about the new qualities required in his best worker as a co-owner, then the decision to engage the new partner may have resulted in someone else being selected. Therefore when recruiting it pays to consider how a job might evolve.

Next time you're recruiting, consider how a job might evolve.

When filling a position or promoting someone, it is important that we don't just consider how skilled they are or how well applicants did in their last job. You first have to ask how might the job evolve over the next 5 years given, Socio, Economic, Political, and Technological changes. For instance, many field officers must now be able to use a GPS navigation system and onboard computers. Some of these items were not part of the role 5 years previously.

So for this reason alone it is so critical that when we recruit we don't just look at the personal qualities required in a job. Ask yourself if other qualities will be needed that weren't needed previously. Also, think of where you want an employee to go in the job. Will they have to change as the job evolves?

Let's take a common example of this problem from private enterprise.

A well-regarded tradesperson has been doing work for an employer for a number of years. This person decides that they can make more money by working for themselves, so they advertise and print business cards. Many of these new entrepreneurs don't survive 18 months.

"Why do you think many don't survive when they are good at their job?"

The answers usually include a lack of training and experience in:

- *management skills;*
- *people skills;*
- *organizational skills;*
- *book-keeping skills; and*
- *balancing work and family.*

Essentially, the job has changed!. Now as business owner and manager, they are required to do things they didn't have to do before.

So where possible, select Managers whose personality and style match foreseeable changes in the job. This approach supports both the company and the new employee, by proactively hiring to minimize the stress and inefficiencies that come from change.

What is the main message about staff selection?

To begin with we are always constrained by the materials we choose.

When we build anything, whether it be a house or a work-team, or changing the organization's culture toward an efficient non-blaming Systems Focused Environment, we are always constrained by the materials we choose as much as we are by our knowledge of how to use them.

Sorting people into jobs in which they are best suited is like collecting the best building materials before you build. Poor building materials reduce your design possibilities.

For example, if you use low grade support beams, you will need additional engineering to get the support and strength you require. As we saw from the examples given earlier, Managers and Supervisors who are not well suited to their jobs will require additional costly support from within the organization to facilitate their working effectively. Hence there are tangible benefits for effective staff selection.

Summary

The importance of an employee's job fit is important in any circumstance, but can be critical if they are in a position of Supervisor or Manager.

The use of EQ assessments and Staff Recruiting Agencies has been discussed, but what hasn't been discussed are the Results from using the recruiting strategy above. Unfortunately from a research perspective I live in a Buddhist world, and as the Buddhists say, "shit" happens. In my case, the "shit" meant having severe disruptions in the department within 12 months of implementing my recommendations.

However, if the principles of recruitment highlighted in this paper are applied then in the long run both the organization and the staff will benefit. They will experience less stress, and so be more productive. The organization will be predisposed to a more stable workforce, leading to higher morale and better value for money.

The author of this paper is available for discussion on any issue raised.

References

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About the Author

Russell Kennard has had extensive experience in Psychology, Psychotherapy, Personal Development, Education, and as a Management Consultant. He has a Masters Degree in Psychology and has trained in various traditional and fringe psychotherapies including Hypnotherapy, Gestalt Therapy, Transpersonal Psychology, Art Therapy, and Meditation.

Russell is particularly interested in self-esteem and the structure and development of personality. He has developed the "Mypersonalities" self-exploration personality program, and he is the author of "The 8 Day Self-Esteem program". Russell is currently a Training and Management Consultant and in this regard developed the nationally accredited Frontline Management training program, People Management Certificate IV, which has been used in a broad range of industries.