

## **Failure of Previous Efforts**

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Many anti-poverty programs have failed because of the misguided notion that simply providing jobs and training will somehow break the poverty cycle. What they are neglecting, however, is determining whether individuals have what it really takes to succeed - whether they possess the essential motivations, potential and personality strengths needed to perform well in a particular position.

In our assessments of nearly two million individuals for over 25,000 companies worldwide, we have found that regardless of experience or background, people who are matched to jobs, based on their inherent personality attributes and motivations, and are then given the appropriate training to do that job, will succeed.

This "job-matching" process, in our view, is the key to breaking the vicious welfare cycle.

## **Relying On Experience**

When assessing the potential of individuals who are trying to make the transition from welfare to the workplace, one of the first hiring myths that has to be debunked is the reliance on experience.

As human resources professionals, we are all aware that, traditionally, experience has been one of the key criterion used to measure job candidates. Resumes are initially scanned for those ideal candidates who have the most directly-related experience. If it is a sales job, for instance, the traditional approach is to seek applicants who have sales experience, preferably in selling the same product or service.

Since most people trying to make the transition from welfare to the workplace lack extensive experience, they have traditionally found themselves trapped in a revolving door.

But consider for a moment: we have found that 55% of the current sales professionals have absolutely no ability to sell. Another 25% have sales ability but are selling the wrong product or service. The remaining 20% are doing precisely the right jobs for themselves and their companies, and, invariably, are the ones who make 80% of all sales. And our studies indicate similar trends in management, customer service and myriad other positions. For too many people, twelve years of experience is just one bad year repeated a dozen times.

So, why rely so heavily on experience in the hiring process. Aren't we, in fact, simply encouraging the re-circulation of mediocrity?

## **Assessing Potential**

Rather than relying upon what someone has done or on the superficial impressions that can come across in an initial interview, success can be better predicted by assessing the potential of individuals, then further delving into their capabilities in a follow-up, in-depth interview.

To succeed in sales, for example, an individual needs to start out by having three essential qualities: empathy, ego-drive and ego-strength. As a starting point, salespeople need empathy to accurately sense the reactions of prospects and clients. Then they need what we call ego-drive, or the motivation to persuade people, to bring others around to one's point of view. And finally they need ego-strength, or the ability to bounce back from rejection. When people possess these three qualities, regardless of their experience, we have found that they will enjoy sales, be motivated to sell, and, in fact, perform very well.

Interestingly enough, we have found that twenty-five percent of the general population, regardless of what they have done in the past, have excellent sales potential. They possess the same inherent qualities shared by the very best sales professionals. This has enormous implications when considering people who are trying to enter the workforce.

Similarly, to succeed in management, individuals need certain fundamental personality characteristics. They have to start out with the ability to focus and motivate others. Then, depending upon the position, they must be able to see the big picture, be willing to take calculated risks, and to make decisions. They must also be assertive, be able to delegate, be considerate and fair, communicate well and command respect. Of course, other qualities may be required depending upon the particular position. But individuals need to possess these qualities as a starting point in order to manage effectively.

And, the most successful customer service representatives, for example, are driven to please others. Just as a salesperson is driven to hear others say, "yes," a customer service representative needs to hear someone say, "thank you." The best customer service representatives are also conscientious, secure, flexible, outgoing, and adept at solving problems.

In essence, we've discovered that people succeed because of who they are - not because of what they have done. Finding successful job candidates means looking at people in a whole new light. Potential is more important than experience. And testing for potential has enormous implications for people who are trying to make the transition from welfare to the workplace.

### **Early Programs**

Back in 1965, we were provided with the opportunity to put this assessment approach to the acid test. Caliper was given a grant of \$198,000 by the then existing Office of Economic Opportunity to place "chronically unemployed individuals" in San Juan, Puerto Rico in professional-level sales jobs. Obviously, none of these individuals, who by law could not be earning more than \$1,800 per year, met any of the stereotyped

criteria that companies normally utilized in making hiring decisions. None were experienced or adept at hiring interviews. Many were minorities, some were physically disadvantaged, and slightly over half were women. The project was designed to assess the basic personality attributes and motivations of each individual and determine whether they were suited for sales positions.

To accomplish this goal, we had applicants take the Caliper Profile, a comprehensive personality assessment instrument developed to assess an individual's primary motivations, strengths, and areas that could be developed. In effect, each applicant's potential, as assessed by Caliper and by an intense follow-up interview, replaced the typical criteria that obviously could not be brought to the table by applicants from an underprivileged population.

Those individuals who possessed the potential to succeed in a sales job were then enrolled in a one or two week work preparation training program. During this time, participants received counseling to help prepare them for the job interview. Prior to the interview, the participating companies' human resources executives were provided with the results of the personality and skills assessments, so that they had a clear understanding of why we were recommending a particular individual.

The success of the initial program led to an additional \$300,000 to fund the program for a second year. In total, out of 1,700 "chronically unemployed individuals" who were assessed, we were able to place 350 people in professional sales jobs with oil companies, mutual fund houses, radio stations, newspapers, business forms operations, etc. A chronically unemployed woman who baby-sat for my son became the first woman ever to be licensed to sell mutual funds on the island of Puerto Rico and she came back six months later to hire five people from a subsequent class to work for her. This is but one example of many success stories that could be cited.

There was one major frustration, however. While we did place 350 people in sales jobs, there were another 1,350, many of whom had ability, but who simply did not possess sales dynamics. We felt they would have been ideally suited to many jobs, but we did not have those jobs available. Many had the assertiveness, interpersonal skills and empathy to be good supervisors. Others had excellent service motivation and detail ability, enabling them to do well in customer service positions. Others had the personal organization, conscientiousness, and self-structure to coordinate projects for positions such as a traffic manager. Others showed the kind of dexterity that clearly would have allowed them to do many manual tasks at a high level of proficiency. And still others had the mathematical skill, detail ability and numbers orientation to do excellent work in finance. Without these jobs available, however, we were unable to place many capable people.

Then, two years later, one of our key clients, Oppenheimer Management, Inc. asked if we could help find fifteen minority individuals to fill back-office positions. We received sixty-eight referrals from the New York City Department of Welfare, who we assessed to determine, among other qualities, their levels of conscientiousness, flexibility and detail

ability. We were then able to place the fifteen people who Oppenheimer requested, and with Oppenheimer's permission, placed an additional thirty individuals with a number of other New York City companies in a wide range of jobs. Out of sixty-eight referrals, we were able to successfully place forty-five "hard-core unemployed" individuals.

With these two programs as background, we applied for and received a \$2.88 million grant from the United States Department of Labor under the "JOBS" program to place "hard core unemployed" individuals in fifty-five job categories in New York City. This was followed by a grant of \$4.69 million to continue the program.

Over a two-year period, we assessed some 7,000 "hard-core unemployed" individuals and were able to place over 3,000 of these people with fifty-two New York City companies. While there has been no way to follow these individuals over the years, and while there were some heart-breaking failures because of social pressures and circumstances which some simply could not overcome, the successes were significant. We know this: within two years, less than three percent of the individuals placed had to be terminated specifically because of an inability to perform well.

Space does not permit a recitation of the hundreds of case histories that we have available; however, one of those closest to me personally might serve to represent the rest. A young man, let's call him Ralph, fell asleep one morning while taking our battery of tests. We immediately feared drug involvement, but it turned out that he had worked in a bar until 4:00 that morning and literally came to us at 7:30 a.m. with no sleep. In any case, he was interviewed, tested brilliantly, and was sent to Gimbels for an interview. He was hired in spite of a long series of arrests between the ages of 18 and 42 and a fair amount of imprisonment. The tests and interviews revealed exciting, up-end potential, and they took the chance. Ralph received 5 promotions within 2 years, and when our baby daughter was born, my wife received flowers and a note from him saying, "To a new life, from a life you saved."

### **Diagram for the Future**

The key to the success of these efforts is based on the simple proposal that all human beings have fundamental weaknesses, but most also possess important strengths. In assessing anyone, whether they are a welfare recipient or a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, weaknesses can invariably be uncovered, as can major strengths. More often than not, success depends upon whether, through planning, opportunity or perhaps even luck, individuals are able to play to their strengths and are not forced to attempt the futile task of filling a job demanding qualities that are in fact their weak spots.

Most welfare recipients, for a multitude of reasons, have not had the opportunity to play to their particular strengths. The reason the programs described earlier worked so well is that they were designed to cut through the superficial background factors to uncover those nuggets of strength in each individual that were buried under the debris of discrimination and the welfare cycle. Then, when those key strengths were uncovered, training could be specifically applied to maximize those strengths and relate those core

strengths to the functional requirements of the job to which they were matched. There was no attempt to push people into jobs for which they were fundamentally unsuited in the hope that training could perform magical wonders. In such instances, we preferred not to place an individual, rather than to add still another defeat to an already losing psychology.

Breaking the welfare cycle and tapping the enormous hidden human resource reserves that exist in the current welfare population will require a partnership between industry and government. Industry must offer a wide range of jobs, and be willing to replace their usual hiring criteria, including experience, with the one criterion that marks job success - the basic appropriateness of the individual to the job.

Funding should involve a partnership between companies offering jobs and government agencies that help subsidize the selection and pre-job training components of such a program. This blueprint will take a tremendous commitment, but can work. If government and industry work together, view the welfare population as a rich source of talent, and accord this population the same opportunities that are provided to the middle-class - looking at each person's basic ability and matching that ability to a specific job - the poverty cycle can indeed be broken.

We know from our experience, that most people want to get off welfare. They want to work. They want the ego-satisfaction of knowing that they can make it in the mainstream of society, and that they can attain the self-respect that stems from doing a job well.

Assessing talent and applying training to match that talent to appropriate jobs provides an opportunity to finally break the welfare cycle.