

Purple squirrels

Hiring the ultimate game changers

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During my 20 plus years as an executive search consultant, I have attended a number of events where I have repeatedly heard companies boast of how they hire only the very best people, the crème de la crème – those who not only have a first class degree but who are also able to think “outside the box”, be creative, etc. Paradoxically, they will then shunt candidates into a standardized recruitment process where the tests and interviews that follow have little or nothing to do with the actual positions for which these candidates are applying, or being considered.

The process runs contrary to what the companies are declaring. How can they expect to find candidates who are game changers when, before they even set foot through the corporate front door, management (through the recruitment process) has tried to place them inside a box where the opportunity to be creative simply doesn't exist? Could you imagine people like Steve Jobs, James Dyson, Larry Ellison or Richard Branson successfully getting through this process? Highly unlikely, as either they wouldn't enter it or their profile wouldn't “fit.” Yet they are among the ultimate creative game changers in modern business, the very people business leaders might want to have on board.

As the business world changes in the “post crash” era, few would argue that, to remain competitive, it is crucial for businesses to hire and retain extraordinary people – those who are supreme innovators and who are able to conceptualize and deliver real and lasting change. To achieve this mission-critical objective, conventional recruitment methods must change. From my experience, those who are truly creative rarely do well in the usual competency-based recruitment procedures.

Right from the outset, the hiring process is flawed when the initial job description is merely a rehash of the role of a previous incumbent and the work undertaken during their tenure. It is understandable why hiring managers adopt this approach because they usually have little else to go on. However, it's a bit like replacing your car with one of exactly the same make and model. It will look, feel and perform exactly the same as the old one.

The problem with this approach is that it does not take into account how your needs and circumstances may have changed. The kids may have left home, you have acquired two new dogs or you are approaching a mid-life crisis; whatever the case, unless the situation is exactly the same (and it almost certainly won't be), the original solution will not be right.

As a consequence, the hiring manager often can't find a replacement. Concentrating too much on their perceived attributes creates a situation where the real game changers simply don't materialize. The analysis that follows is that there is no one out there who has the skills to meet the company's requirements, when the reality is that the applicant screening process is so rigid that no candidate (certainly not the appropriate one) is able to get through.

Particularly with firms in the service industry, there is a tendency, in the immediate aftermath of a key departure, to seek a successor who can replicate the predecessor in terms of background and style. However, this approach is likely only to identify those people who will achieve similar results because they look at things in a similar way. It will not expose the real game changers.

There is no question that business leaders must make decisions regarding the hiring of executives and others. However, they do have a choice as to which method they use to make those decisions. Competency-based methods may work well for junior and middle management, but when searching for the ultimate game changer – the supreme innovator – these methods are inappropriate. We refer to these people as Purple Squirrels, very rare individuals who are extremely talented with a multifarious mix of core skills – education, competencies and experience – but with that “X” factor that allows them to look at things differently and see opportunities where others might not.

Selection methods such as a combination of general mental ability (GMA) tests and work sample measures or GMA tests and structured interviews have high composite validity and are of value when hiring at most levels within the organization (Schmidt *et al.*, 1998). However, for Purple Squirrels, they are not relevant.

The whole “competency” approach will not be relevant or work in the selection process because their achievements and reputation will have already been well-documented and setting “situational tests” will not be appropriate. Additionally, GMA tests are not only irrelevant but it is also highly unlikely that any Purple Squirrel will willingly subject themselves to such tests. These game changers know what they want and where they want to be, so a much more subtle and innovative approach must be made.

In recruitment, we often talk about the need to ensure candidates are a good cultural fit and have skills that complement existing staff. However, given that these people are pioneers who are capable of disrupting an organization in a very positive way, there are times when some exceptions have to be made. It may also mean making internal changes to the way in which the organization operates and driving through those changes to allow the Purple Squirrel to flourish.

There are many examples of companies that have successfully done just that. Google is one company that actively chases Purple Squirrels because they have calculated that recruiting a top technologist will result in around 300 times more productivity and business impact than an average technologist. This gives Google the potential to add \$US300 million to its revenue annually.

Whereas Google’s culture allows the company readily to accept Purple Squirrels, in many other organizations the culture is so ingrained that making the necessary changes required for innovation is rarely plain sailing. Furthermore, some business leaders are oblivious to the fact that their existing culture actually creates a barrier to change.

For Purple Squirrels to be effective – and in many cases be willing to join a company – business leaders must clearly demonstrate that the management team has completely bought into the idea of change. To achieve any significant organizational turnaround, change needs to be driven both from the top of the organization and from the operational areas involved (Hamel, 1996). Therefore, these supreme innovators must be given the opportunity to work across all areas of the organization to achieve the required level of change.

Even though they are rare individuals, identifying some Purple Squirrels, particularly those in management positions, can be straight-forward because their achievements will have been documented. Others, however, are not so easily identifiable, as they may come from small- or medium-sized organizations or currently be in an organization in which their talents are under-utilized. This requires the often lengthy and arduous task of building appropriate networks to identify, follow and develop meaningful relationships.

Building these relationships is crucial because Purple Squirrels, irrespective of the backgrounds, will generally not discuss any potential new role – no matter how attractive the offer or even if the approach is made by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Chairman – with someone they don't know personally. There is virtually no chance of recruiting them using conventional methods such as advertising or cold calling.

Most Purple Squirrels are mavericks who can be a challenge to manage and who have an unconventional approach to business. It is important, therefore, that everyone associated with the hire – or who will be affected by the recruitment of the Purple Squirrel – has been well-briefed and in total agreement and buys into the appointment and the potential disruption to which the organization may be subject.

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History clearly demonstrates that standard recruitment procedures can lead to the recruitment of good people, but it also demonstrates that they fail to recruit exceptional people. With business leaders today needing highly talented and innovative people more than ever, what is required is disruptive talent searching. Even though hiring a Purple Squirrel can be a challenge, those prepared to put in the groundwork and be adaptable will benefit substantially in terms of enhanced corporate direction, performance and profitability.

References

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About the author

David Dumeresque has more than 25 years of experience as an advisor to a many organizations including large multinationals and small owner-managed businesses. A graduate of the University of Durham, David is a qualified solicitor and has practiced in London and Paris with solicitors Slaughter and May. He has also spent more than a decade in investment banking with NatWest Investment Bank, Scimgeour Vickers and Citicorp Investment Bank. He moved into executive search with Tyzack in 1991. David Dumeresque can be contacted at: david.dumeresque@tyzackpartners.com

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