

Sunday, September 25, 2011, 00:39 by

Calvin Cassar

First impressions in recruitment

Available online at: <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20110925/business-news/First-impressions-in-recruitment.386232>



Present anyone with two apples – one good, the other bad – and ask them to choose one.

A bad recruitment decision can lead to productivity loss, loss of customer and brand equity, legal liability, as well as additional recruitment costs

- Calvin Cassar

The likelihood is that the vast majority will lean towards the good apple. The decision is prompted by the visual, tactile and olfactory cues – first impressions – and this will probably lead to a positive outcome.

Within an organisational context, recruiters are regularly required to make such choices for the companies they represent. These choices will bear weight on the future of those companies.

A bad recruitment decision can lead to productivity loss, loss of customer and brand equity, legal liability, as well as additional recruitment costs.

When interviewers are asked to pick the right 'apple' from two or more viable options, it is unclear whether decisions based on first impressions can lead to similarly fruitful outcomes.

Newspaper and magazine articles often suggest first impressions contribute towards recruitment decisions.

Generally, people believe recruiters are capable of forming a valid impression of an individual in anything between five seconds and five minutes, and the remaining interviewing time is nothing more

than filler or an act of social courtesy. This is why people believe making a positive first impression is so important.

Academic literature in psychology provides mixed views on the significance and value of first impressions. In an article entitled 'Personnel selection' for the Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology in 2001, Robertson and Smith argue for the greater ability of structured interviews to predict performance on the job, documenting the superiority of rigour over unstructured procedures.

On the other hand, other authors argue for the contributory role of first impressions. In a 2006 study called 'Using thin-slice judgements to evaluate sales effectiveness' in the Journal of Consumer Psychology, Ambady, Krabbenhoft and Hogan demonstrated how 20-second video clips extracted from interviews could lead to a good evaluation of the candidates. Assessors screening the video clips formed valid judgements of individuals' personality characteristics.

The review of these studies does not present a clear case for which viewpoint is more accurate. Are decisions based on first impressions valid and useful? Would structured approaches provide more appropriate in-formation on a given pool of candidates?

Local recruitment agency Konnekt recently carried out a study to determine which proposition holds more value.

A group of interviewers were asked to rate 86 candidates on a scale of one to 10 under two conditions.

In a first assessment, interviewers were asked to provide a spontaneous rating after greeting participants at the door and inviting them to take a seat. In a second assessment different interviewers used a set of structured questions to rate candidates' key skills for administrative tasks.

Following these assessments, all 86 participants were presented with a computer-based task, placing them in an administrative role in Vector Electronics, a fictitious manufacturing company.

The participants were asked to screen a set of e-mails forwarded to a senior management team to identify the correct recipient, as well as the level of urgency. This test reflected the typical work activities of administrative personnel and provided scores on a similar 10-point scale.

The test measured the accuracy of the responses, as well as the time spent on the task: two pieces of information the assessors had been asked to predict.

The research was designed to allow comparison of predicted scores under the first impressions and structured interview conditions, with the scores obtained on the computer-based test.

In order to determine which process was more effective, the predictions were compared with the scores obtained on the Vector Electronics test, using a correlation coefficient.

The results showed first impressions do provide useful information in forming judgements and formulating predictions. At the same time, and at a significant level, the information obtained in structured interviews was more effective in doing so.

Surprisingly, under both conditions, the assessors found it difficult to predict the time it would take to complete the task.

On a general level, it would seem organisations are wise to invest in setting up professional selection structures based on a clear understanding of the job: a technically sound process will lead to better decisions.

First impressions will almost certainly contribute to the decision-making processes, but only in conjunction with structured interviews.

Picking the right apple on impulse will probably lead to a satisfied stomach, but it is doubtful that basing recruitment decisions on the same mechanism will lead to similarly favourable outcomes.