

Should I trust my gut feeling when hiring people?



The short answer is “no” and “never!” If you want to know why, keep reading.

Using your gut is similar to scratching the surface of something; to examine and discover only the superficial aspects of something, or in this case a candidate.

We call it the “**Four A Syndrome**”, because when you trust your gut, you are assessing a candidate’s presentation skills over business performance and substance.

The four A’s are:

- Articulate
- Assertive
- Attractive
- Affable

For sure, we have all been there. Think back to your latest recruitment challenge that might have looked something like this.

You have received resume after resume from HR or your external recruiter. You have spent days and days sitting in useless interviews and just having a conversation in English with the candidates has been an uphill struggle. You are getting increasingly desperate because your head office is pushing hard to get the hiring done sooner rather than later.

Then one day, you receive this two-page resume with just the right amount of information, the font type and size are reader friendly, there’s lots of white space and a beautiful build up. It’s a model resume so you quickly arrange a meeting.

Entering the “gut club trap”

Your interview goes well, the candidate is friendly, articulate, and speaks fluently and coherently. The candidate is assertive and confident without being aggressive. The person is attractive, well dressed and presentable, and you build rapport quickly and easily. The interview goes beyond your expectations, so you start asking the easy questions to get a home run.

Your gut is screaming at you: hire, hire, hire.

Welcome to the gut club: you have just fallen into the typical trap of assessing presentation instead of performance. You are falling in love with the candidate’s personality. It would have been easier to just flip a coin: heads you hire, tails you don’t.

Jack Welch, former CEO and chairman of General Electric, told an MBA class that while he developed a strong instinct for knowing which mergers would work, even when the data and facts said something different, when it came to hiring decisions, he never trusted his gut. He found first impressions and subjective opinions very unreliable. Instead, he looked for hard evidence that a candidate came with the right skillset and fit.

What is it about the gut feeling that makes it so ineffective? In short, it is the absence of hard data and the lack of facts and reality.

So if your gut is not reliable, and if you cannot use your *finger-spitzen-gefühl* (a German term translating to “*finger tips feeling*” and meaning intuitive flair or instinct), then how do you best assess the qualification of applicants and candidates?

Designing an effective interview process

An effective interviewing process follows these four steps:

1. Prior to the interview make sure you understand the key elements of the job.
2. Identify the knowledge, attributes, and skills the candidate needs for success.
3. Identify the people skills a person brings to the job. This is by far the hardest trait to determine, but by understanding the applicant's personality and motivation, you are guaranteed to improve your hiring process.
4. Follow a structured process. This does not mean the entire process is inflexible and without spontaneity but that each candidate is asked the same behavioural-based questions.

If you're interviewing someone by asking them hypothetical questions, also called "**situational**" or "**scenario**" questions, you don't get the truth, you get speculation.

This means that to get a good, accurate picture of their capabilities, don't ask interview questions along the lines of "*what would you do in X situation?*" or "*if X happened, how would you react?*".

Questions should be reality-based, something similar to "*tell me about a time you had to...*" or "*when this happened in your previous position, what did you do?*"

Try to understand what people have accomplished in their career rather than spending the whole interview just talking about yourself and how great your company is.

Hiring as a selling activity

And always remember that hiring is also a selling activity. If you are meeting so-called passive candidates, who are people typically provided by headhunters, keep in mind that these people have good jobs and are not yet necessarily convinced that they should make a move.

If you feel you have a strong candidate, you need to switch into sales mode. That means you should tell them why the grass is greener on your side of the fence compared to where they are employed now. If you manage this, the candidate leaves convinced about the great opportunity your company can offer.

Candidates should be treated with the courtesy and respect that you would offer to your best customer. Make sure that your receptionist is at her best and welcome the potential new colleague with a smile and Thai greeting. This helps ensure that the candidate's first impression of your company is positive. Interviews should have the tone of a meeting, an exchange of ideas, rather than a cross-examination of someone's background.

And the wake-up call to hiring managers; please remember, a candidate may have no more than honest curiosity to learn more about the position and your company. If the candidate is not convinced about the opportunity after meeting you, the candidate may decide that she or he may not want to pursue the job. Just as you may decide not to move forward with the person.

Sometimes interviews extend longer than initially planned. Be sure to allow sufficient time between interviews in the event of more lengthy discussions. It is also important to ensure that interviews are scheduled far enough apart so that candidates for the same position are unlikely to encounter each other. This avoids embarrassment on all sides, particularly in industries where many of the executives know one another.



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Tom Sorensen is an executive search veteran with 35 years' experience recruiting in Asia, Europe and Africa. He has worked in retained executive search in Thailand for 15 years, and is recognized as one of the country's top recruiters. Along with an extensive network, Tom has broad industry expertise, and has successfully completed a number of challenging searches for highly specialised roles.