



Making selection decisions – the ethical dimension

Recently, while researching a particular aspect of the recruitment business, I stumbled across an offer that gave serious pause for thought. It was a book, retailing for a few dollars, on how to get through one type of selection interview scenario. Having got angry at the thought that anyone should try to make money this way, and having cooled down, I started to think about the whole subject of ethics in selection.

My first thoughts were that there was too little real content here to make it worth applying fingers to keyboard, but second thoughts pointed elsewhere. Putting the methodological and technological difficulties to one side for the moment, on first inspection the ethics of selection appear to be simple enough. Find the best person for the job, and provide a compensation package appropriate for the job. In that case, both sides win - or do they?

Sadly, on closer inspection, the reality is a touch different. And things are getting worse, thanks to the advent of the Internet – that benign and munificent invention of a bunch of scientists eager to bestow their own freedom of communications on an unsuspecting world. Well, that's how the myth goes, anyway. First, let us have a quick wander through the ethical issues of selection that have been around ever since organisations started down the road of acquiring new talent.

Old tricks for old dogs

The first trap is in that expression 'best person for the job'. As an objective for the selection decision, it simply will not do. Suppose that, of all the candidates available, none has a skill set that is actually of the right shape or up to the level needed for success in the job. That sounds like a nasty case of failure coming up over the horizon – bad for the employer and worse, much worse, for the individual. One of the truly sad features of poor selection is its ability to convert successful people into failures, not because they are bad people but simply because their particular skills do not meet the needs of a new job. They are not necessarily unskilled people, just 'wrong skilled' people. The old rule about "If there's doubt, there's no doubt - the answer is NO" looks as ethically sound as when it was first coined decades ago.

If the difficulties in getting the selection decision right are not recognised, it is not uncommon for there to be inadequate preparation for the selection decision and the implementation of it. In these circumstances, it would be all too easy to infer that the ethical drive was not strong enough for the selection decision to be treated really seriously.

Just as silly is when the 'best person for the job' has a skill set significantly in excess of the needs of the job. The probable result is frustration, with damaging costs, yet again, to employer and individual alike. Not to mention the tendency of highly motivated and

skilled managers, with strong achiever drives, for creating problems - to be solved by themselves, of course - if the existing challenges in the job are not enough.

Equally old and common enough is either side, in what should be a two-way decision, selling the other side a pup. Most people involved in selection decisions are familiar enough with candidates, with their ever-so-well-polished CVs, presenting an image of themselves that has more to do with their ambition than their actual skills or achievements.

Increasingly common, however, is the complaint by newly acquired managers that the job, as sold to them, is very different from the job as experienced. Perhaps the most common manifestation of this phenomenon is the new manager that finds that the supposed decision freedom to tackle lots of exciting, serious challenges simply does not exist in the real job. The alleged freedom is often seriously circumscribed by senior managers who exhibit many of the 'control freak' characteristics of some well known politicians. In such circumstances, our highly motivated and skilled manager is likely to exit stage right – rather quickly.

This is all very silly – and very sad as well. Quite apart from the actual economic damage to both parties, there are two other threats as well. The first is the potential risk to all those other employees in the company where the manager making a bad selection decision could actually be betting the company – and their jobs. The second is the damage to the self-esteem and confidence of the 'wrong person in the job' – compounded by that unfortunate line in the CV, indicating a very short stay in Company X, that may encourage the less bright to try another cover up, next time around ...

One of the mysteries here is why candidates try to dress up their image as better than the reality, as success in falsely getting past the selection decision automatically leads to subsequent failure in the job. Unless, of course, they fall into the 'itinerant job hunter' category. This is the person who changes job every second year – just managing to stay ahead of bad results catching up with them. A short life, but at least a merry one! And they do help to keep up the circulation of certain daily newspapers.

Perhaps less mysterious is the group of managers making the poor selection decisions. At least they have on their side the sheer difficulty of doing it well – or do they? More of this later.

Defence mechanisms for the unwary

In fact, it was probably a recognition of the difficulties inherent in the selection process that led to the development of a number of decision support products. As it turned out, none of them actually helped very much, which is why the varieties that survived are more commonly used as defence mechanisms than as actual devices for making the decisions. This is the 'Don't blame me, Boss, if the new manager turns out to be not up to the job – I used all the state-of-the-art inventories in making the decision'.

A brief review of why the selection decision is so difficult and hence why so many defensive mechanisms are used, will both throw light on the subject and raise the ethical dimension again. First, the inherent difficulties in the selection decision.

Given that human beings are complex entities, and that all the mental activity that sits behind overt behaviour is invisible to the observer, finding an objective way of defining the capability available in the candidate is a challenge from the start. Given that organisations are just groups of (complex) human beings transacting together in a common cause – well, at least that's the theory! – then there is a large extension to the

level of complexity involved, and the job of objectively defining what is needed for success in a job is possibly even more challenging than defining what is available in candidates.

Those two difficulties add up to a serious challenge for the knowledge and skills of the person making the selection decision - this is the third challenge. There is, however, an assumption in all of this that needs airing. It is about the objectives to be achieved through the selection decision.

If they are about fit with the culture and style of the business, that would lead in a particular direction. If they are about fit with the rest of the management team, the direction would be different. If they are about the new manager being able to project the right image of the company, that would lead to yet another different direction.

If the desire is for someone who will be a good team worker, and a safe pair of hands, the direction would be different again. If the key is experience of the industry, and especially if 'good contacts' are the order of the day, then the direction shifts once more.

If these are the objectives, then there are a lot of tools and techniques out there, to assist with the decision. They range from the standard selection interview, through aptitude tests, critical reasoning tests, psychometric inventories, emotional intelligence inventories and even graphology, all the way through to 'motivation in action' profiles. The problem is that all of these tools and techniques only make sense if the objectives are as suggested above.

If, however, the objectives are rather more prosaic and useful, then the tools and techniques noted above make no sense whatsoever. If there are selection objectives that are grounded in reality, they will be all about whether or not the new manager will be able to perform adequately in the job – the performance objective. Will this person deliver the business results that are needed? Both in output terms and in terms of the resources consumed on the way? Implicit in all this is the need to motivate and carry people through the achievement of the business objectives, coping with complexity and a rapidly changing environment along the way, as that is what managing is all about.

The 'performance objective' reduces the focus of the selection decision down to skills and only skills. As there is no evidence of a causal relationship between personality, hand writing, experience, aptitudes or any other characteristic assessed by the various 'state-of-the-art' inventories out there, on the one hand, and the performance delivered by the assessed manager, on the other, there is only one possible justification left for using them. That is the defence mechanism noted above.

That raises the ethical dimension again. Is it ethical to rely on varieties of the standard selection interview and defensive assessments, and ignore the skills issue that is central to achieving required business results? If the skills issue is ignored, then the manager making the selection decision is playing Russian roulette with the candidate, and leaving that person to suffer the consequences if the selection decision is wrong. Even worse, is when managers making poor selection decisions punish the new manager twice. First, is the transformation from success into failure; second is when the 'failing manager' is fired by the very same manager who created the problem in the first place – by the poor selection decision.

The skills route

There is nothing new or remarkable about suggesting that all selection decisions should focus on skills. In just about every profession, except that of management, this is the

normal way to go. Anyone care to fly with an airline that does not select its pilots on the basis of their (demonstrable) skill in flying the things? Anyone not worried about the prospect of going in to hospital for a serious operation, knowing that the hospital in question only really concerns itself with the personality of the surgeons it employs?

That raises the question of why there is so little focus in management selection on skills, and why there is so much focus on that which is irrelevant to actual success in the job. The answer would appear to be that it is difficult. Consider those three difficulties we noted earlier. These were about objectively specifying the needs in the job; objectively assessing the skills available in the candidate; and having the skills needed to perform the first two.

When considering skills such as flying an aeroplane, performing heart surgery, or erecting brick walls for that matter, the difficulties are limited. When the job in question is one of managing, the difficulties are formidable. Which means, of course, that it is not OK to play Russian roulette with airline passengers or hospital patients, but it is OK to play that game with managers, and the employees they are supposed to be managing. Perhaps not.

If we conclude that acquiring the skills to do excellent skills-based selection is a significant difficulty, then it might be reasonable to conclude that this is a common reason why management selection decisions go wrong. It would then be tempting to extend the earlier, tentative conclusion and suggest that perhaps the ethical drive is not strong enough to generate the levels of energy needed to overcome the selection difficulties. In passing, it is worth noting that getting the selection decision wrong in the case of an airline pilot can cause the deaths of hundreds of people; in the case of a surgeon maybe a handful. Getting a management selection decision wrong can blight the lives of thousands of people, some permanently. In one case, that I personally observed, the damage caused impacted on over 200,000 people.

And so to the Internet

Giving the benefit of the doubt to all those selection decision makers who, from time to time, get it wrong – are there any exceptions to this at all? – we have to acknowledge that the effort is generally made to get it right – it is the difficulties that trip up people, time and again.

The Internet has, however, changed the rules for some other aspects of the selection process. One arrival is the web sites that provide advice on how to present 'desired' personality profiles for most of the major psychometric inventories out there. This is not very troubling. That observation is based in the lack of causal connection between personality and performance, so there appears to be little point in cheating a pointless system, from the performance point of view that is. Sorry about the repetitions of the word 'point'!

Much the same can be said about handwriting tests. Then there are 'motivation in action profiles' - can this system be cheated? Not sure, but even if it could, that would be something of a 'so what' issue. In any case, if managers are daft enough to try to make selection decisions based in any of these non-skills based inventories, and end up being spoofed, maybe they should look in the nearest mirror and ponder what it is that is happening to them.

Where the ethical issue starts to rear its ugly head is in respect of the case study interview. Before pondering the ethics, a comment first on the case study interview itself. All the examples seen appear to be a stripped down version of the situational

interview. Designing, conducting and interpreting the results from situational interviews is a real challenge. This is a prime example of the second and third difficulties in selection mentioned earlier.

Real situational interviews are all custom built, against a custom skills model, relating to what will be needed to deliver excellent results in a specific job, in a specific company, at a specific time. Defining the skills demand model is the first of the three challenges. Generic case study interviews simply do not cut the ice, especially when there is no valid skills set that is the target of the assessment. Having said that, it has to be admitted that the case study interview is a least a nod in the direction of trying to assess skills, and, therefore, there may be some limited connection with actual performance in the job.

Once again, there is an ethical issue. The case study interview is only really for managers who have opted out of the challenge of developing their own skills in specifying the job, and assessing the skills available. In fact, a different form of Russian roulette, with candidates and the rest of the company. Probably well intentioned, but roulette nevertheless.

The biggest ethical issue is, however, about those people writing books and guides on how to get through the case study interview – the example noted in the first paragraph. Here we have a bunch of people, making money out of helping candidates sell a pup to the employer, putting the working life of many other employees at risk, and with the probability of converting yet another successful manager into someone with a dodgy entry on their CV to explain away or cover up, as the case may be. Moreover, a manager who is asked to pay for the privilege of being able to cause self-harm!

From the potential employer's perspective, the risk disappears to vanishing point, if proper situational interviews are used. These cannot be spoofed and there is no possibility for anyone to write guides on how to cheat them, as each one is unique. This can only mean that there are too many managers out there relying on case study interviews, or, worse, the various defensive mechanisms in making their selection decisions, otherwise there would not be a market for the people peddling their 'how to spoof' materials.

In which case the only ethical position that can be adopted by the employer is confront the three selection challenges. That means learning how objectively to define the skills needed in the job and then how objectively to assess their presence in candidates. Then, and then only, they can and will employ managers where there is a good fit between the skills they have to offer and the requirements of the job.

Finally there is the ethical position of the candidate. And, come to think of it, there is an ethical way of learning how to get good results in situational interviews. That is taking the trouble to research and study what it is that successful managers do, to produce excellent results, and translate that learning into behavioural skills. That always results in excellent candidates actually enjoying tough situational interviews, and finding them very stimulating.

The end result is that new managers joining companies find that they can and do deliver excellent performance, and that is good for themselves, other employees, the organisation at large, and its customers to boot. Now, what could be more ethical than that?