



Square Pegs in Round Holes: The case for creativity in recruitment

David Sneesby, Managing Partner

In this article

- 1 Balancing risk and opportunity in a changing market
- 2 Safe on proven ground or try something new?
- 3 The value of transferable skills
- 4 Cultural fit
- 5 Losing the baggage
- 6 A creative approach to finding the right people
- 7 A word from the Partners

Balancing risk and opportunity in a changing market

Is there ever a perfect candidate? Does the perfect job exist? Whether you are the hirer or the hired, one thing is certain – we are all human beings. This means that, in reality, finding a perfect fit between a person and a vacant position is probably seeking the impossible because we are not dealing in the realms of certainty. This is a world of risk management and opportunity.

Because we are dealing with humans and therefore unpredictability, the process of recruitment is inherently a risky undertaking. This is why, as an employer, there is often a tendency to take a more risk averse approach in seeking to make a selection of the “right” candidate. But this safe approach may lead to some very uninspiring hiring decisions.

Safe on proven ground or try something new?

Take an example. When recently taking a brief for a senior executive position I was asked to find “as close to the last incumbent as you can”. Why – because they were obviously seen to be good at what they did. But organisations change and their needs change. The last incumbent was hired at a certain time when the organisation needed their specific skills and experience. Surely, after five years the business challenges are different? By hiring the “same” as before gives no acknowledgement to the fact that the external environment may well have changed as well as the aspirations of the business.

“Surely, after five years, the business challenges are different?”

The other common request we receive as part of the briefing stage in an assignment is that candidates should come from the same sector as the employing business. The logical outcome of this is that retailers get retail candidates, FMCG organisations get FMCG candidates and so on. Nobody ever crosses the Rubicon from agency to client side or vice versa and poachers don’t turn gamekeepers. Boring but safe. Is that the kind of business that people want to be proud of - boring and safe? Round pegs in round holes?

The value of transferable skills

One of Snowdon Tate’s values is “Guts”. As a trusted advisor in the world of recruitment one of the manifestations of this is that we challenge and push back. We do this because it makes for a much better brief where everyone understands what is being sought and, we believe, ultimately leads to a much stronger appointment. For example, we will question the importance of candidates needing to come from the same sector or the same size of business. The opportunity for any business when hiring at this senior level is immense. The new leader will be expected to make a huge difference and bring something special to the party.

Cultural fit

When it comes to “fit”, of vital importance are chemistry, cultural and values alignment. This is where the concept of cultural round pegs in round holes needs to apply. Everybody knows that just ticking the boxes of technical ability with a selection of candidates is in no way sufficient to warrant making a hire. But getting the wrong cultural fit will be a disaster.

Losing the baggage

Some of the most satisfying and successful assignments I have personally managed are where the hiring business has worked with a genuinely open mind. A recent example involved the appointment of a senior manager to a role totally outside their immediate sector experience. Their management and functional skills were transferrable and the fact that the new director was not from the industry gave them the licence to be

“...[with no industry experience] the new manager was able to see the business much more objectively”

able to ask some, sometimes obvious, but nevertheless, highly pertinent questions which someone hired from within the sector may have felt it inappropriate to ask. And of course, there were plenty of colleagues already in the business from the sector only too willing to share their knowledge. In addition the new manager had no “sector baggage” and was able to see the business much more objectively as a result – a “fresh pair of eyes” or even “a breath of fresh air”.

Our client was so enthusiastic about this particular hire and made a point of congratulating us on opening their mind to introducing candidates from outside their sector – something they had never done before but which now paves the way for a much more innovative approach to recruitment and a route to developing a strong competitive edge.

A creative approach to finding the right people

The executive search industry is notorious for trying to categorise candidates and put them into pigeon holes. So many times candidates with the most interesting CVs approach us almost apologising for the difficulty they anticipate they are going cause because they aren’t easy to “package”. This does give a challenge but it also makes for a massive opportunity. Some head hunters welcome these diverse experiences and see an opportunity whereas others who are themselves more risk averse or just can’t be bothered may not. Having made the transition successfully between sectors before becoming a head hunter, I can identify with the negative reception candidates with a similarly diverse background sadly receive from the executive search industry.

“...candidates with the most interesting backgrounds sometimes apologise because they aren’t easy to pigeonhole”

So while I’m definitely not advocating shoe-horning candidates I’m also definitely not a supporter of the shoe-in either. Obvious choices are exactly that. Round pegs in round holes and unremarkable for it. They make few ripples, raise few eyebrows and very

effectively can be trusted to keep a steady hand on the tiller. Sometimes that's exactly what is needed. But I would argue that the businesses that really succeed are the creative ones which take calculated risks and that extends to the hiring of their management teams.

A Word from the Partners

We hope you've found this piece interesting and useful, and we'd love to hear your thoughts on this subject. If you would like us to explore this subject in more detail, or if you would like to suggest other topics, please don't hesitate to contact us.

We look forward to working with you.

Best wishes

The Partners

ingoodcompany@snowdontate.com

www.snowdontate.com