



Article

Thin Slicing Your Way to Better Hiring Decisions

As a hiring manager, your decision making skills are continuously challenged. You are responsible for finding the best candidates for critical jobs. The health of the organization often rests upon your decision.

Last month your database development team hired a senior Oracle PL-SQL Developer to complete a critical phase of a new product development project. One of your colleagues in HR ran the process. You know this colleague is thorough. He pored over every resume line. He pre-screened on the phone. Twice. His interviews are long and chocked full of information gathering. He checked references to make sure this person was straightforward and honest in his depiction of work he's completed.

The new hire was here for two weeks and then you had to let him go. It turns out that while he knew the programming language and seemed like an energetic guy, he just didn't get the business outcome your team was trying to achieve. Three times he headed down paths that didn't make business sense. You couldn't afford a fourth misstep.

Now you need another senior Oracle PL-SQL Developer. You need him yesterday, and he better be good. Your HR colleague is on assignment in the Europe office, so you've got the ball. The rush is on.

You've got plenty of resumes and your candidates want the assignment. The questions you now have to answer are:

1. Can you pick the person with the best chance at success?
2. Can you do it fast?

Relying on the Resume

Candidates write resumes to grab your attention. They know the hot words you want: spearheaded, developed, enhanced, and all the others. They know the technical skills and business experience you desire...seven to ten years of Oracle PL/SQL development experience in a Unix environment...experience working as a senior developer on high pressure projects within a PMO managed environment... etc. etc.



It comes not as a surprise to you that you see many resumes all with variations of the same core statement:

An accomplished, certified Oracle PL-SQL Developer with expertise in designing and implementing database solutions within Unix operating systems. Extensive experience working within PMO managed multi-national financial services corporations. Polished leadership skills, with ability to motivate teams for increased productivity.

What does this mean? Well, fortunately, it means that all candidates are qualified to do the job from a technical perspective; all you need to do now is find a candidate with the right personality and work ethic, and cover all your bases to make sure you have all the needed information. Right?

Well, they might *seem* qualified, but is the rest of your process designed to find out who will really succeed?

Too Much Information

...man walks into a hospital with chest pains. He's sweating and disoriented. Is he having a heart attack? The doctor needs to know *definitively* and *quickly* if she's going to make the right treatment decision in time to help.

At one time, doctors at Cook County Hospital in Chicago looking to diagnose heart attacks would gather as much information as they could – the electrical activity of the patient's heart (the ECG), the patient's blood pressure and cholesterol levels, whether the patient had fluid in his lungs, how long the patient had been experiencing pain, the location of the pain, and many other data points – to help inform their decisions.

With this approach, doctors missed a genuine heart attack somewhere between 2% and 8% of the time, and only accurately diagnosed a heart attack for patients they admitted to the hospital about 10% of the time.

They considered too much information to make their decisions. Most of which played a small role in determining what was *actually* happening to the patients at that time.



Now, doctors consider the patient's ECG and only look for *three critical risk factors*:

1. Is the pain felt by the patient's unstable angina?
2. Is there fluid in the patient's lungs?
3. Is the patient's systolic blood pressure under 100?

Researchers have discovered these factors to be enough evidence to diagnose a heart attack.

The key point of this story, outlined by Malcom Gladwell in his book *Blink*, is that more information can make for worse decisions. In this story, his characters were doctors and patients. In other stories, they were firefighters and burning buildings, police officers and dangerous situations, consultants and clients, and scientists and patients.

He didn't have a story for interviewers and job candidates, but the shoe fits.

Many interviewers run through long checklists when they vet candidates. They gather large stores of data. Oftentimes, they don't need it all to make the *right* decisions.

Experienced hiring manager that you are, with most of your interviews you run through a mental checklist of data to gather: the enthusiasm-level of the candidate during the introduction (check), preliminary research the candidate conducted on the company (check), direct eye-contact, confident body language, and clear communication (check, check, check), and the list goes on.

Add to that, the examples the candidate shares of past behavior provided in their responses to your questions assessing: attitude, motivation, initiative, stability, planning, and this list goes on as well.

So much information to process, in fact, that you can cloud your own ability to make a good decision.

Your colleague hired the ambitious, poised candidate with 10 years of experience as a certified Oracle PL-SQL Developer with polished leadership skills and the ability to motivate teams...but in the end he completed your project late, over budget, and with astounding mediocrity.

Yet, you were all confident in your decision. What happened?

Too much information killed you.

Thin Slicing for Better Decisions

According to Gladwell, all that extra information isn't actually an advantage at all. It confuses the issues, and undermines your decision making process.

This is not to say that information is worthless. There are things you need to know. For example, candidates must be enough of a cultural fit. Candidates may also be motivated, disciplined, eloquent, and a host of other things, but do you know which *specific characteristics* will make or break their success on each project?

Many interviewers can do a better job at clearly identifying the specific knowledge, skill, and behavioral characteristics that make or break success for specific roles. Often, these characteristic lists are shorter than they think they will be.

Gladwell refers to the concept as "thin slicing" to identify the underlying signature, or the pattern, you need to know.

Similar to the way doctors now diagnose a heart attack with 95% accuracy versus their past performance of 75% to 89%, you can improve your accuracy at identifying candidates that will, indeed, succeed.

Most of us have been in the situation where our thoroughness in our hiring process has convinced us that a person would be the perfect fit, but he simply ended up doing a mediocre job.

Perhaps in our thoroughness we missed a small set of criteria that was really going to matter. Perhaps it was one of the following:

1. History of completing projects on time or ahead of *time*
2. History of project delivered on or under *budget*
3. Consistent exhibition of *business acumen* and a complete understanding of the assignment and the desired business objectives
4. History of solving complex problems and succeeding in constant ambiguity

Perhaps it was something else. Regardless, some short list of criteria should rise to the top as the most critical predictors of success.

Now, thin slicing does not mean you should make snap decisions or just "trust your gut" with hiring. It simply means you should define the criteria more strongly beforehand that will make the most difference, and focusing heavily on gathering information that matters most.