Don't lament the lack of talent!!! Blame it on your recruitment process.

One often comes across intriguing and at times irrelevant questions purportedly asked in job interviews, and the common response would be to dismiss these off as the creative work of bored talent in our organisations. Such questions are fun to read, and some of the responses elicit serious thought. However, when such questions actually make their way into the selection process, the selection process merits serious debate.

Recently, a young MBA graduate was asked to summarise the origin and rise of the ISIS. One might have granted this question, if the candidate was interviewing for a journalist profile. It is difficult to comprehend the relevance of such a question when the position advertised is that of a financial research analyst, and the job essentially requires the candidate to analyse financial performance of the company.

In the above case, Stage 1 in the selection process was to paraphrase a two-page document into a short summary, which one could understand would help determine the language skills of the candidate. A candidate who clears Stage 1 has clearly demonstrated those abilities. This process begets the question: Is English-language ability the primary skill required for a financial analyst? Shouldn’t financial knowledge and skills be of greater importance for a financial analyst?

The candidate was flummoxed with the ISIS question in Stage 2. She even asked the interviewer the relevance of the question, to which the interviewer gave a vague response. The candidate was then asked about the 2G scam. Seriously, do companies expect 22-year old young adults to comment on scams that occurred when they were still in college? I wonder if HR interviewers asking such questions themselves would be able to answer similar questions in a stressful situation. Candidates spend two rigorous years in a formal MBA program to gain subject-knowledge. The entire recruitment process in this case didn’t provide an opportunity to demonstrate that subject knowledge. The candidate was rejected on these flimsy criteria. A bright, young woman who has demonstrated excellent academic record from grade 10 onwards, and who has cleared the Stage 1 language test, was rejected because she couldn’t speak on the ISIS, which has no relevance to the job profile she
interviewed for. Who is to blame here? And then we have HR managers lamenting the lack of talent in our country?

How do the HR managers expect candidates to prepare for a job interview? Should colleges upgrade their curriculum to teach all the scams in the business world? And then what happens to imparting subject-specific knowledge?

Even if the job requires an understanding of such issues, wouldn’t it be more effective to evaluate a candidate after giving the candidate some time, maybe an hour to read up on the topic and then comment. In the real-world, we all read up on issues pertaining to our area of expertise and work, and that’s how we become good at what we do. It is really unfair to a prospective candidate to be assessed on topics which are not even relevant to the job. Often, the job descriptions given to the candidate give only a vague-idea about the profile.

This brings us to a very crucial debate on:

“Do most organisations have competent and qualified HR interviewers to help the company identify the right talent for the organisation?”

“How many such potential candidates are lost to the idiosyncrasies of the interviewer?”

Assuming the candidate knows about the ISIS, and has an opinion, the candidate would still hesitate to comment because the candidate is unsure of the interviewer’s stand on the issue. Don’t we always advise young professionals to avoid discussions on politics and religion at social gatherings, and in formal business environments?

Does anyone within the organisation hierarchy actually groom these HR interviewers on the kind of questions to ask? Shouldn’t questions be aimed at assessing competence, and evaluating the fit of the candidate with the organisation culture?

Another financial services organisation puts candidates through a rigorous aptitude test, consulting-focussed case study interviews, as well as HR-fit interviews to identify the best talent from campuses to do a “cut-copy-paste” job in the fancy title of a business analyst. Then they blame young adults for lacking commitment and loyalty, when candidates quit these jobs in less than a year. Why is the focus on selecting the brightest candidate instead of the right candidate? We all know students who have been selected for these jobs, and who express dissatisfaction with the role. Clearly the hires are often a wrong fit.
The other bane is when HR departments schedule 30 to 40 candidate interviews in a single day. Candidates are kept waiting through the whole day to answer two questions for 10 minutes. How do they assess the fit in such a short-time? What about interviewer fatigue? Or is it only a charade? But, then why would an organisation want to put up a charade? Do organisations really have the time to play recruitment games? What does such behaviour convey about the culture of the organisation, especially when such behaviour is depicted by HR managers? Some organisations justify the waiting period explaining that clients often make the sales executive wait, and they are testing the patience of the candidate. Even if we buy that argument, is it really productive for sales executives to be waiting 6 hours to meet a client? Does the company actually encourage their sales executives to wait on a client endlessly? And why would you put Finance candidates through a similar 12-hour wait period? That is such a colossal waste of productive time.

If recruitment processes are to be effective, the first step is to create a detailed job description that identifies the knowledge, skills, and traits required for the job, preferably with an evaluation rubric. The functional heads need to provide these rubrics for the HR to implement in the process. These evaluation rubrics may even be shared with prospective candidates, who can then do a self-evaluation to see whether they fit the required job criteria.

A more evolved approach would be to get the colleges involved in the selection/recruitment process. Professors have interacted with students for a course, a term or a year. They understand motivation levels of students, commitment, aptitude and potential. Instead of asking colleges to send in the entire batch for the interview, companies could ask campuses to shortlist candidates that best fit the job profiles based on evaluation rubrics provided by the company. It will cut down the inefficiencies in the process. HR managers will not be burdened with interviewing 50 candidates per day. They would have more time per candidate to assess the right fit. It is in the interest of campuses to ensure that candidates fitting the rubric are recommended if they wish to build a long term relationship with the company.

A collaborative effort will create a win-win scenario for the company, the campus, and the students.

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About the author

Dr. Hanif Kanjer holds an MBA degree from the prestigious London Business School, Europe’s premier business school. He was selected for an exchange program to the Ivy League school, The Amos Tuck School of Business Administration, Dartmouth, USA.

He has 11 years of corporate experience in strategy consulting, business process re-engineering and business development, with leading organizations such as Giordano Fashions, Business Consulting Group, Unilever Gulf, 3M, Ernst & Young and Infosys. He has worked on assignments in USA, UK, France, Germany, Poland, Scotland, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, India, and Singapore.

After living abroad for 9 years, he returned to India in July 2002 to head the Rustomjee International School with 3,500 students, in the position of a Director. His group of institutions today houses more than 6,500 students, 425 teachers, and 180 administrative and support staff. He is the founder director of the Rustomjee Cambridge International School established in 2006 to offer IGCSE and A-Level certifications, and he is the founder dean of Rustomjee Business School established in 2008.

His book, “All the Right Answers”, published by MacMillans in December 2005 was on their Best Seller list, and he has authored management articles for leading publications such as Business Standard, Financial Express, Economic Times, and Strategic Marketing.

He was a consulting program director at S P Jain Center of Management, Dubai in its foundation year, 2004. He is a visiting faculty member at S P Jain Center of Management, teaching business strategy and communication.

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