

# DO YOU HAVE THE RIGHT STUFF?

A successful executive isn't just a question of qualifications. Sometimes, it's not what you know that matters, but how well you fit the company culture, as Linda Clarke explains.

**Recent research** reveals that CEOs and senior executives fail in their jobs because they are unable to establish a culture fit, to build the required teamwork with their peers and staff, or are unclear about what the board/their boss expects. Please note: none of these reasons has anything to do with their business or technical skills to do the job. Instead, they centre around the softer skills of understanding how people and organisations work and get things done.

When you're considering a new employer, how do you start to understand its culture and values? Research can begin to paint a picture but corporate values are often expressed in a non-specific way, leaving you none the wiser.

Take the values of a major UK retailer recorded in its last accounts – quality, value, service, innovation and trust. Which retailer would not subscribe to such a statement? Far better to ask existing employees or other businesses that work with the target company.

Where a vacancy is being handled through a search firm, candidates can expect to be briefed by the firm on the company, its leaders, goals and challenges, culture and values, in order to assess whether it is an environment they would like to work in. Take the candidate who turned down a big marketing role for another position that was lower paid in an organisation that let senior people leave at lunch every other Friday. Clearly, the half day off at the end of the week was more valuable to her than the additional money of the other job.

Developing a corporate culture takes a lot of hard work and effort on everyone's part.

"If the recruitment process doesn't take this into account and you end up recruiting the wrong fit, then one person could damage everyone else's hard work in a very short time and potentially destroy the very thing you've been working towards," says Paul Brewer, director of HR at Quintessential Hotels.



When senior appointments fail for reasons of poor fit, all parties in the recruitment process must share some of the blame – the search firm for not briefing thoroughly or assessing/advising on the fit; the company for not paying enough attention to integrate the new appointee and the candidate for not asking for assistance. Where asking for support in the early days used to be seen as a weakness, now it can show commitment to get up and running fast.

One solution is "transition coaching" ("executive onboarding" in the US) – upon appointment, the new executive is introduced to the coach (and this may be before the first day of employment) to clarify expectations and set out goals for the first 90 days in the new job. During the next three months, they work closely together to ensure a productive time and as smooth a transition as possible.

"There are three key areas for newly appointed senior executives to focus on; learning, relationships and performance," says Beverley Hamilton, MD of One Step Further. "Learning about their new business – about what skills and knowledge they need to acquire immediately and what can wait – and learning about how the culture of their new

company works. Creating the right relationships and alliances both internally and externally. Their boss, team, colleagues and key influencers all need to be listened to and understood as do customers, suppliers and partners. Performance is critical but even more important is understanding the key objectives, how they will be measured and within what timeframe. In research conducted in 2001, 47 per cent of new appointees failed for not having achieved the objectives they were set."

When implemented properly, this coaching approach to integrating the newly appointed senior executive can be a "win, win, win" – for the search firm, because it's a successful "marriage" and they are likely to continue to work together; for the company because it helps to ensure that an important investment pays off; and for the candidate as they feel the company cares about their future growth and development.

The operations director of one global software company received such commitment from his new employer and supports this view: "Having an external sounding board during my first few months was invaluable. I was able to talk through key challenges and was also guided on some strategies to help me tackle both my own learning and the development of key relationships within my company."

Using business coaches to actively support senior appointments is the smart way to manage the costly recruitment/retention challenge.

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