PLURALSIGHT

You don't need to
hire a unicorn

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Every hiring manager's job is to hire the best candidate. Often, they'll look at what the team needs and go forth to search for a mystical unicorn. Someone who can write clean code, build networks, design amazing layouts and is a pleasure to be around.

While hiring managers waste time looking for the "perfect" candidate, they miss out on amazing future employees because they have a perceived skills gap.

Unicorns don't exist—in horse or human form. It'd be fantastic to have someone on your team who has a background in UX, can design, code and write stellar copy. But the chances of finding someone who does all those things well is slim.

Great employees are made, not found. You can teach the right candidate the skills they need to succeed.

u•ni•corn

\ˈyü-nə-ˌkôrn\

noun

1. an imaginary animal that looks like a horse and has a straight horn growing from the middle of its forehead (Webster's definition)

2. an imaginary employee who looks human and can design, code, write, color inside the lines, perform magic, bake scrumptious cookies, host fabulous dinner parties, stays informed on world events, is a humanitarian and works out 7 days a week.

MANAGERS WASTE TIME LOOKING FOR THE "PERFECT" HIRE

Unrealistic expectations often start with the job posting. A list of qualifications a mile long can scare off perfectly capable candidates, leaving hiring managers frustrated that they're not getting the volume or quality of applicants they want.

Why is the first option always to find someone who checks every box—a unicorn? If the job description was pared down to the skills the team actually needs to succeed, the right candidates could have been rolling in.

This problem has a simple fix.

It'll take a little more work at first, but soon you'll realize what you're looking for in a new hire: someone who's a great culture fit and who has the potential to grow into the skills you need with proper training.

FINDING THE RIGHT CANDIDATE

The first thing you should look for in a candidate is whether they'll take part in your culture. If you haven't established corporate values, it's time to do so. Look to your leaders and best employees to find the qualities they share to build out your values.

Once you have your values, tie them to actions. Being a team player might mean staying late to help a coworker with something. Being an entrepreneur might mean taking the initiative to work on a known issue without being asked. Communicate those values with everyone in the hiring process and craft interview questions that shed light on the candidate's alignment to those values. If an applicant isn't open to improving, has the wrong personality for the job or is difficult to work with, their tech skills won't matter.

"Hiring failures can be prevented," Mark Murphy, CEO of global training research company Leadership IQ said in a 2015 blog post. "If managers focus more of their interviewing energy on candidates coachability, emotional intelligence, motivation and temperament, they will see vast improvements in their hiring success."

Think about it—if you're only hiring for someone's skills, why would you even need to conduct an interview? You'd simply need a few examples of their work and proof of the training they've received. The purpose of a face-to-face interview is to get to know a person and find out who they are.

"Technical competence remains the most popular subject of interviews because it's easy to assess," said Murphy. "But while technical competence is easy to assess, it's a lousy predictor of whether a newly-hired employee will succeed or fail."

HIRE FOR YOUR CULTURE.

Culture isn't something that can be easily taught and if a new hire doesn't fit in, it can be costly. A 2008 study by the Society for Human Resource Management found that turnover costs of hiring someone who isn't a culture fit is between 50-60% of that person's annual salary.

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How do you gauge a culture fit? Hire people you want to work with. Could you find yourself happily stuck on an 8-hour plane ride with the person you're interviewing? Can you tell from their résumé that they always finish their projects? Seek people who believe in your values and vision and who will help you grow your business.

HIRE FOR POTENTIAL

How do you identify potential? Ask for concrete examples of a time in their career when they didn't have the answers to a problem and how they solved it. People with a growth mindset will show that they're capable of taking initative and willing to put in hard work to succeed.

"The first indicator of potential we look for is the right kind of motivation: a fierce commitment to excel in the pursuit of unselfish goals," said senior adviser at exec search firm Egon Zehnder, Claudio Fernandez-Araoz, in a 2014 Harvard Business Review article. "High potentials have great ambition and want to leave their mark, but they also aspire to big, collective goals, show deep personal humility and invest in getting better at everything they do. We consider motivation first because it is a stable—and usually unconscious—quality. If someone is driven purely by selfish motives, that probably won't change."

HIRE FOR FLEXIBILITY

Every week, it seems, a new technology emerges that suddenly becomes critical to your company's success. If you've hired someone who's willing to adapt and change the way they've done things before, they'll succeed. If they're flexible, that's an indicator they'll be teachable. This is important if they don't come prepackaged with all the tech skills you want.

Once you've decided who to test for your culture and values, it's time to figure out what skills you can compromise on, as well as the skills that are (and aren't) trainable. Hiring for culture first doesn't mean you hire someone without skills. You don't want a jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none. Identify which skills you're willing to train someone on and hire people who can learn.

CHOOSING WHICH SKILLS TO TRAIN

Now that you've hired someone who has great potential and is a cultural fit, it's time to identify their skill gaps and fill them. Since technology moves so quickly, the skills required today aren't necessarily the skills required tomorrow. Even if you found a mythical unicorn, their skills will still need developing to stay relevant in the future.

If you need another graphic designer more than anything, hire a designer with a great portfolio, even if they don't know the difference between HTML and CSS. They can learn beginner code when it's necessary for them to do so. However, if the role requires writing code much more than designing, you may need someone with front-end developer skills instead of Photoshop prowess.

Try to nail down what you want your new hire to be able to do right when they walk in the door. What skills will they need to make an impact immediately? If you've decided on a front-end developer, understand you can teach UX fundamentals after they start. They can shadow one of your designers, go to a conference, take online classes or even go back to school. If they have the potential to be great, give them the opportunity to be.

Another way to choose which skills to train on is to look around your company to fill open roles first. Your employees are already well-versed in your culture and can be taught the skills needed to succeed. And, you already know the skills they have, so it'll be much easier to pinpoint what they need to learn.

Hiring from within also saves you time and money. You never know how long it could take to fill a vacancy, or how much it'll cost if you have to get a recruiter involved.

BUILD A CULTURE OF LEARNING

The skills gap is real, and it's affecting businesses around the world. Employers have found themselves in a situation where the staff they have can't keep up with how fast technology is changing. Keeping your team on top of their game doesn't stop at the interview table.

Show your employees you care about their professional development by making continual learning a priority. Make learning part of your culture, and something you're championing from the interview phase and on. Let potential employees know how important professional development is to your company. Make it clear to everyone, including on your job postings and "about us" pages.

MAYBE
UNICORNS
DO EXIST

A few common ways of helping your team grow is to offer training opportunities online, paying for conferences or reimbursing them if they go back to school. Allow and encourage people to shadow others in the company.

If you show your employees you care about their professional development, you'll build a culture where your employees want to learn how to do something instead of finding someone to do it for them.

Maybe unicorns do exist. But if they do, they already work for a company that enables them grow their skills. That's why they're not easy to find.

But you can build them.

Hire people who are a culture fit and who have potential, invest in their professional development, and show them that who they are matters to you—not just the skills they list on their resumes. Suddenly, you'll realize you cultivated the unicorn you were looking for.

Powerful training you can trust to keep your organization competitive.

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Sources

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