“Perfect Hire” is an oxymoron

BY MANAVI PATHAK

The perfect is the enemy of the good” was proposed long ago by the philosopher Voltaire. Yet, many talent leaders forget this serviceable bit of wisdom when recruiting top executives. They develop an inflexible profile of an ideal candidate for a role thinking that such a person actually exists; reject candidates who could bring company maximum value. Early in the recruitment process, when the companies have seen a few candidates they are especially prone to pursuing perfection, passing on candidate after candidate. A more nuanced and effective approach to the complicated business of key hiring decision may be found in the principle of "satisfice" - combination of satisfy and suffice. Satisfice provides guidance through complicated decisions characterized by multiple criteria and competing objectives. However, satisfice is emphatically not about settling for what is merely sufficient. Rather it is about choosing the option that has the most chance of being satisfactory and getting as close to the ideal as possible when making complex decisions.

In case of executive recruitment, calculating which option satisfies is doubly difficult because both the candidate and company calculate it differently. Candidates have one set of criteria, each of which they weigh according to their individual circumstances, while companies weigh according to their needs. Companies that want to escape the trap of perfection without settling for the merely sufficient must understand the candidate’s calculus and find a way to harmonize it with the company’s calculus - in short, reach a decision that satisfies and thereby creates a maximum value quickly.

Factors influencing candidates

The relative weight that candidates give to specific factors when considering an opportunity will differ at different times in their lives. However, it is possible to generalize about the things they are ultimately trying to determine, and which choices are likely to make them happiest. They may weigh considerations such as geography, family issues, compensations and other factors differently, but most take a holistic view driven by the desire for happiness as they define it. Balancing all of the factors that go into one’s happiness can be complicated. All the factors need to be weighed against the appeal of the position, from the nature of the opportunity to the compensation to numerous factors alone or in combination. Two factors weigh particularly heavily for the executives. First, almost all focus sharply on the content of the role: will it challenge me, will it develop me as a leader. Second, they strongly consider whether the company has a culture in which they will thrive.

Most successful executives apply the principle of satisfice in their career. Long before an opportunity appears they deeply reflect about their motivations and goals. Rather than simply reacting to things that occur, they have thought far ahead about their careers and lives, and made deliberate decisions. They change companies and industries for good reasons, and they take advantage of unexpected opportunities, that fit with their deep self-understanding. They instinctively know in balancing the many factors that go into their happiness and their family’s happiness that perfection is unattainable. However, they also know that they can make a choice that has the maximum chance of being satisfactory.

Factors influencing organization

Companies on the other hand are in the business of pursuing profits and not happiness. Their decision criteria are much more focussed on business issues. Their decision issues are more narrowly directed on business issues. Though numerous criteria are as numerous and complex as the issues considered by the candidate. As with the candidate’s decision, perfection is unattainable,
and the companies that are unable to address complexities in an efficient way are likely to suffer significant opportunity costs the longer a position goes unfilled or is filled by a superficially perfect candidate.

Further, while candidates tend to think about the appeal of particular industries, companies tend to focus on candidate’s domain skills. They may segment the criteria further, such as defining a sales role in terms of products, services or multiple channels. When focusing on skills, companies sometimes downplay candidates characteristics such as leadership potential, or raw intellectual power. Similarly, the emphasis on domain expertise makes companies weigh work experience over competence. Also, given that happiness ultimately drives candidates, too few companies seriously consider whether they offer a good work environment.

Not surprisingly, the most rigidly companies cling to decision criteria, the most likely they are to miss out on, the best possible, as opposed to the perfect candidate.

**Putting picture into practice**

Adopting the principle of satisfice, however, does not mean adopting a new formula: there is no HR algorithm. Satisficing means evaluating candidates in a way that is more supple, nuanced and appropriate. The key lies not in a mathematical formula but adopting practices and some of the important practices can be listed as follows:

- **Picture success and work backwards:** Instead of developing a rigid job specification, picture what success in the role looks like, in one, three or five years. Define success in a wide range of key areas, and not revenues or profits, such as customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, career development and succession planning.

- **Know the talent market:** Assessing internal and external candidates requires a realistic view of the market. This also helps avert the trap of the perfect, but non-existent, candidate. At the same time, by including talent both inside and outside the company, it expands the possibility of achieving maximum satisfaction with the ultimate choice, and achieving it faster.

- **Hire for character and train for skill:** Overemphasizing skill and domain expertise at the expense of leadership potential and competencies not only lengthens the time to value in the role, but also likely to result in less than satisficing choice.

- **Making development a priority:** Hiring for character and training for skill is pointless unless an organization maintains a robust development program. Opportunities to grow and develop figure highly for most executives today. As a part of a comprehensive talent management system, development should include in-role opportunities, stretch assignments, mentoring and executive coaching. Knowing that such a program exists gives talent leaders far more flexibility in finding a candidate that satisfices.

- **Understanding the candidates’ calculus:** It is critical to know what really motivates candidates, what worries them and how they weigh the factors in an opportunity. Otherwise, talent leaders could find themselves selecting someone who quickly derailed or who is jumping into a role without having calculated its personal and professional attraction and draw back.

- **Be flexible:** Once talent leaders understand which happiness and employment factors weigh most heavily with candidates, they can determine if satisficing answer is to adjust position requirements.

With the principle of satisficing in mind, and the practices in place that support it, companies can free themselves from the tyranny of the perfect in executive recruitment. The paradoxical result is better hiring decision, more successful executives and a reputation as a great place to work, which in turn attracts more talent. Once the leaders understand that there is no such thing as a perfect candidate, imperfections can be managed and talent managers will be more willing to develop promising candidates to meet company standards. For instance, new hires should be on-boarded immediately. Once the hiring decision has been made, it is time to build up the employees to grow the organization. In an age, where talent has become the ultimate source of competitive advantage, nothing less satisfices.