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## *Wanted: The “perfect candidate”*

— BUT, LIKE THE PERFECT SPOUSE, DOES HE OR SHE EXIST?

**D**URING THE BOOM YEARS of the 1990s, information technology recruiters used to describe their clients’ insatiable desire for the “purple squirrel” – a creature whose coloration, of course, does not exist in nature.

It’s only *human* nature, though, to crave an unattainable combination of qualities in everyone from friends to spouses, and from bosses to new hires.

At home, who wouldn’t want that perfect companion who combines brains with beauty, strength with tenderness, assertiveness with deference, etc. – and who adores you, cares for you and can’t get enough of you except when you want to be left alone? At work, who wouldn’t want that perfect employee who is just like oneself – only not quite as clever and good-looking?

Real life, it almost goes without saying, does not often work that way. The man who sets his sights on marrying a cheerleader from the University of Michigan ends up falling for a film-maker from NYU. And the woman who visualizes marrying the heir to a great fortune tumbles head over heels for a starving poet. How empty our lives would be if we disqualified everyone who was not a cheerleader from Michigan, or the heir to a great fortune.

Yet, day after day and time after time, hiring managers set out to find the job candidate with a combination of academic background, professional skills and personal attributes found often on job descriptions, but rarely if ever in nature. Having described the perfect purple squirrel, they reject all those of different colorations.

(Whether true or apocryphal, there’s a story about the company, six months after Java script was introduced, that wanted a Java programmer with ten years’ experience. Arguments to the contrary fell on deaf ears.)

Since setting unrealistic expectations is an easy path to constant disappointment, why do so many hiring authorities take it?

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### **The causes of wishful thinking are many and varied**

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**S**HE’S LIKE A RAINBOW,” sang the Rolling Stones in their 1967 psychedelic love song. Also like a rainbow are the multi-hued causes of unrealistic requirements for job candidates. For example:

***Let’s Run It up the Flagpole*** – One school of thought in hiring is “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Perhaps there really might be a Harvard MBA out there who is willing to join the company for only \$60K a year. If we don’t try, how can we know we weren’t right?

***We Don’t Really Want to Hire*** – In some corporate environments these days, making no decision at all is far safer than making the wrong decision. And the best way to avoid a hiring decision is never to find the right candidate for the job. Setting unattainable expectations helps ensure that the hiring process remains exclusionary.

***No One Other than I Will Do*** – Go ahead and take credit for it: you are unique. Therefore, no one else in the universe will have your precise background, experience and qualifications. You

can delay the search process indefinitely by insisting on your exact replica. The unanswered question is whether your organization will benefit the most from another you.

***HR Can Fill in All the Blanks*** – In this age of multi-tasking, lots of balls in the air, too many IMs on the Blackberry and too few hours in the day, what hiring manager has the time to sit down and carefully think about the needs of the job? Better to send a requisition over to Human Resources and let them figure out what matters in the new job. They'll know, won't they?

***We Mistake Job Descriptions for People Descriptions*** – The typical job description does a mighty fine job of describing the job – *e.g.*, manages a department of 17, determines marketing strategy for existing and new products, prepares the annual departmental plan and budget, makes regular reports to the Management Committee, works closely with Product Development and Manufacturing, etc. Unfortunately, that same job description does a lousy job of describing the incumbent or the skills he or she will need for success on the job. Yet what do companies most often send to search consultants? Job descriptions, of course.

***The Applicant Tracking System Works Best from Key Words*** – We weren't born yesterday and understand that most management-level positions depend for their success on leadership and other "soft skills," which generally cannot be identified from résumés and instead require careful probing. But we also weren't born the day before yesterday and recognize that top management wants everyone to use the six-figure applicant-tracking system that the CIO purchased, which does keyword searches of candidate data files for specific skill sets, job titles and educational degrees. Therein lies the rub.

***We Pay for a Search Firm's Help but Don't Seek Its Input*** – Companies pay search consultants for essentially two things – their time and their expertise – but are more apt to make use of the first than the second. Because most professional recruiters specialize by industry and/or occupation, they often have found scores if not hundreds of people for similar jobs. They know the marketplace and what's available for the price. If you want the proverbial champagne on a beer budget, a knowledgeable search consultant can help you decide between beer and a bigger budget.

Human nature being what it is, when push comes to shove, the job will go not to the mythical perfect candidate – but rather to the individual with whom the hiring manager falls in love. (We speak figuratively, of course.) The trick is to maximize the pool of candidates likely to produce a match.

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## Focus on what counts, not what impresses

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**F**ORGET THE IMPRESSIVE PEDIGREE for a moment, concentrating instead on what truly counts in performing the job. And if truth be told, the job likely doesn't care if it's filled by a Harvard grad or not.

The "what counts" list may well include some specific skills (a mastery of accounting is a good requirement for the corporate controller), but it also will document the past experience and soft skills that help make a difference at the end of the day. Don't get bogged down in minutiae.

Let's pretend, for a hypothetical position, that there are six high-priority "what counts" factors. With the counsel of a trusted search consultant, take a deep breath and rank them from most to least important. Yes, all may be important, but ... If you had to sacrifice one of the bottom factors to get one of the top, nobody being perfect, which would be the least harmful to give up?

High on the list may be a soft skill – *e.g.*, the ability to re-energize a demoralized department or de-sensitize labor / management strife. An experienced recruiter often can be invaluable in steering a hiring manager to individuals who are both right for the job and affordable.

No candidate is likely to possess every characteristic you desire, nor may the best qualified (on paper) of three or four finalists prove to be the best fit for your organization. Ultimately, we hire those whom we like – and the more inclusive we can be at the beginning of the search, the more exclusive we can be at the end.

— George Snider

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