Hiring Beyond Expectations

C. Stephen Byrum, PhD
Barry W. Hull, CDR, USNR (Retired)

Athena Assessment Inc.

The phone rings in the Human Resources Department of a major construction company. The call is coming from one of the company's critically positioned Project Managers, who asks to speak to a Recruiting Specialist. The Project Manager is professional, but clearly frustrated: "Mike Smith just quit. I suppose I should be thankful for that, because Smith was nothing but trouble. For the past two months, he cost our company so much time and energy that it's hard to believe. Never—*please*—*never*—send me another Mike Smith. He was a disaster!"

Or, the call might take another track: "Mike Smith just quit. Thank heavens! You told me that he would not work out, but when I interviewed him he seemed—or at least I thought he seemed—better than you were telling me. I saw something in him that, obviously, was not there. How can I get better at this hiring process? I feel that the person I interviewed and hired must have been abducted by aliens somewhere about the third day he was on the job."

Sound familiar? There is an old saying in many organizations: "We *hire* most of our problems." Many attempts have been made to calculate the LOI—*Loss of Investment*—involved in bad hiring. Most estimates have been judged very inadequate, too small! It can be nearly impossible to place a price tag on the time, energy, and effort to solve problems that should not have happened to begin with, and loss of positive team interactions. A poor hire should come to be seen as an *avoidable event.*

Jim Collins literally "wrote the book" on the importance of good hiring. He coined the phrase "the *right* person in the right seat on the bus." For his classic book, *Good to Great*, Collins created the subtitle "Why Some Companies Make the Leap… and Others Don't." That is the question: why do some companies make the *leap* that separates them from their competition, and allows them to move beyond their former potential to even higher levels of achievement? Collins answered his own question, repeatedly, by pointing to the vital importance of getting the *right* people.

In today's challenging economy, recruiting may be more important than it has ever been. Many organizations, in hopes of designing the best workforce they have ever had, are doggedly determined to be smarter in their hiring decisions. As one CEO literally proclaimed with renewed excitement to his key leadership recently: "Now, we really have a chance to *get it right* for once in our lives!"

Back to Jim Collins, he believed that the *right* person had a combination of (1) the *right* skill sets needed to perform a job with excellence; and, (2) the *right* values. All of that sounds good, with *values*—maybe—meaning a good set of ethics or personal virtues or even something like humane professional behaviors. "Values" is a hard word to define.

At Athena, we believe that a person's *values* are much more than how they think or feel, for a person can think or feel almost anything. A person's *values* are best seen in their actions, with actions being primarily driven by their *judgment*. Therefore, the *right* person is the person with outstanding skill sets, *and* outstanding judgment. There must be good skills, and there must be good, solid judgment that will assure that those skills are used in a successful manner. The Athena Assessment scores and measures judgment, and brings a dimension to the hiring process that allows companies new insights and options, to get the best workforce they have ever had.

Any job can be seen as the relationship between three, vital factors: (1) Capability, (2) Capacity, and (3) Demand. *Capability* relates to the skill sets required to do the job. *Capacity* relates to the judgment required to do the job well. *Demand* relates to the intensity, pressure, and stress of the job, and the corresponding personal energy required for the job. Some jobs are more *demanding* than other jobs. Here is a graphic depiction of what is being described:
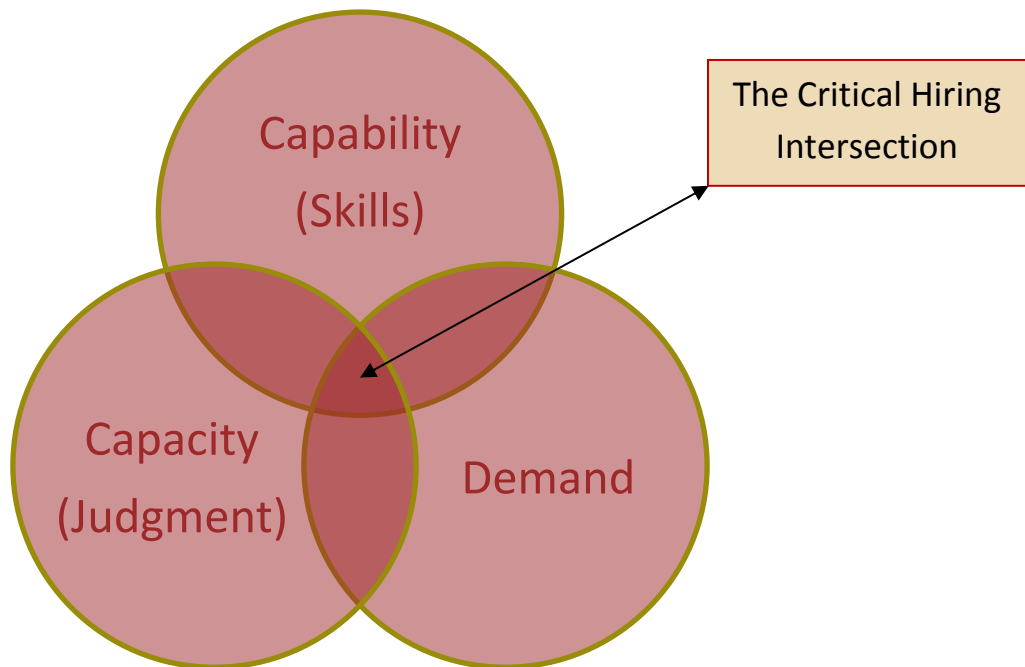
At this point, it is possible to develop a wonderful augment to the hiring process that can easily be incorporated into almost any Human Resource Department. Consider the following steps, which are not complicated, but will absolutely work. Merely using these steps, as a catalyst to focus attention more intently on the hiring process, will improve the hiring process.

1. Assess the specific skill sets necessary to perform the job to organizational standards.
2. Assess the general level and types of judgment needed to enhance skill sets in the job.
3. Assess the demand, i.e., pressure and stress found in the job, and the personal energy likely to be required to do the job well.
4. After the required skill sets are validated in an applicant, apply the Athena Assessment to determine whether the applicant possesses the judgments necessary to enhance their skill sets, and handle the demands of the job.

If lucky, there will be two or three applicants, who match up well with all of the comparative factors. Then—but only then—move the hiring decision toward the applicant thought to be a "nice" person, who you "like" the best, or who you personally respond most readily. Never, should these kinds of factors lead the decisions that guide the hiring process. Additionally, the Athena Assessment can be used to help refine the overall process in terms of which applicant "fits" best with the group he/she will be part of, or to help determine which applicant can be added to a group to best improve overall group judgment. The latter factor is very significant when hiring individuals for leadership, executive level groups.

Above all, be determined to make *time* your friend and not your enemy. Forget about "needing somebody yesterday." Forget about "warm body hiring." If there is not a strong conviction and clear evidence that an applicant is the *right* person for a particular seat on the bus, look a little longer. This is, indeed, a time of severe economic challenges, but regarding hiring it can be a time of substantial opportunity. This is a time when organizations can *get it right,* if organizations will take the time to *get it right.*

Now imagine a phone call in which the Project Manager responsible for a multi-million dollar development calls the Recruiting Specialist to extend compliments for the high level of new employees being sent to the job site. "I don't know how you're finding these people, but keep doing it. You're sending us the best employees we've ever had" (an actual phone call from an Athena client).

First, make sure that capability of skill sets is present; then make sure that capacity of judgment is present; then hire with greater precision, accuracy, and predictability.