

Selecting for Flair Factors: Improving the Selection Process

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Abstract

Purpose: This article examines the importance of selecting for “flair factors,” or those differentiating personal qualities that make the critical difference in achieving superior outcomes in modern organizations.

Design/methodology/approach: Conceptual research about flair factors, key predictors of performance, and effective selection tools are reviewed and propositions related to improving the personnel selection process are developed.

Findings: This review reveals six flair factors—grit, execution, general intelligence, emotional intelligence, personal integrity, and communication effectiveness—as well as three selection tools—structured interviews, situational assessment writing assignments, and assessment centers—that can improve the selection process.

Originality/value: This article highlights the overlooked concept of flair factors in the selection process, identifies six factors that are vital for successful employee selection, suggests three tools to improve selection processes, and presents five propositions for practitioners and scholars.

Keywords: flair factors, employee selection, selection validity, performance excellence, hiring tools, personnel selection

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that selecting the right people is critical in empowering organizations to become great (Collins, 2001), many organizations are ineffective in identifying candidates who best contribute to their strategic success (Highhouse, Doverspike, & Guion, 2015). Although extensive research has been conducted to identify people who can make a significant economic and service quality difference (Swenson, 2016), Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) struggle to conduct selection processes that identify truly valuable candidates (Perry & Haluska, 2016). HRPs have difficulty identifying the most valuable candidates for two reasons. First, key qualifications that make a substantial difference in employee performance are not easily identified and are often overlooked. Second, sophisticated selection tools need to be considered in order to evaluate some factors, and the most effective tools may not be implemented. Thus, highlighting these key qualifications and the selection tools to assess them can substantially improve selection processes.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the importance of “flair factors,” or those extremely valuable performance criteria essential in hiring outstanding employees. We begin by defining flair factors and explain the value of selecting based on them. Next, three selection tools are identified, and five selection-improving propositions are presented. The paper concludes by summarizing four practical implications stemming from this discussion.

2. Understanding “Flair Factors”

Flair factors are unique personal qualities that contribute to the successful achievement of an organization's mission rather than just a list of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other “nice to have” qualifications (Irish, 2011). Flair factors add unique value in organizational performance and consist of five essential qualities:

- 1) The ability to focus on correct purpose. Recognizing what needs to be done and distinguishing tasks from outcomes to achieve are critical to this focus.
- 2) A clear understanding of unique competencies. Knowing one's talents and their application to achieving a desired

result enables a person to take proper action.

3) The capacity to apply abilities to a situational context. Recognizing how to execute and to adapt to circumstances makes success possible.

4) An unflagging personal commitment to results. Determination to give one's total effort drives action to achieve a desired outcome.

5) Personal integrity that generates trust. The ability to earn the respect and trust of others empowers combined effort.

Figure 1, provided below, is a conceptual portrayal of the qualities that make up individual flair factors.

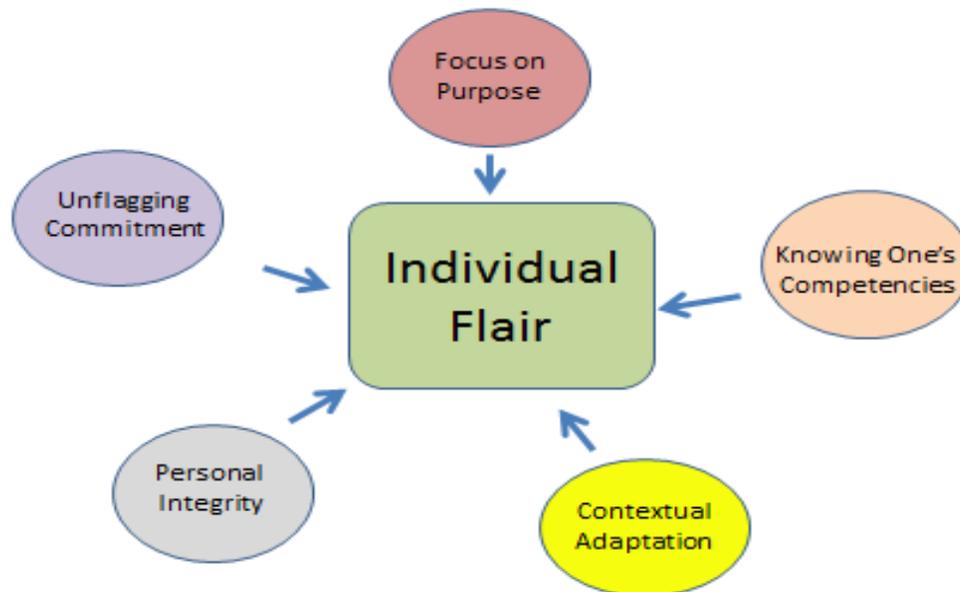


Figure 1. Contributing qualities of flair factors

Without clearly defining desired outcomes, a selection process is limited in selecting candidates and contributing to strategic success. Although a job analysis should be performed conscientiously whenever new positions are created, most selection decisions are made based upon assumptions about “conventional” job qualifications (Stickney, 2016) and reflect an approach that fails to identify qualities required for a candidate that make a difference in achieving key outcomes (Anderson, 1994). In contrast, HRPs that focus on factors that add value enable an organization to achieve strategic goals (Kaufman, 2011).

Citing Abraham Lincoln’s attempt to select a supreme Union military commander during the Civil War, Irish (2011) explained why Ulysses S. Grant possessed qualities which his predecessors lacked. Lincoln had unsuccessfully made selections based upon West Point achievements, past performance ratings, and combat experience in the Mexican War—but generals with these qualities led the Union army to little progress.

Contrasted with other generals, Grant disliked West Point, was primarily an observer in the Mexican War, and was largely unsuccessful as a civilian (Stickney, 2016). Yet Grant’s indomitable will to succeed was coupled with his understanding that he had superior resources that enabled the Union Army to systematically grind down Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army (Stickney, 2016). Grant explained his simple philosophy of war: “Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can, and keep moving on.” (Brinton, 1914, p. 239). The collective skill, achievements, and knowledge of his predecessors were good on paper but did not match Grant’s steady but forceful ability to take advantage of superior resources (Irish, 2011).

3. Improving the Employee Selection Process

The challenge of selecting employees impairs the ability of many firms to compete (Sutherland & Wocke, 2011). Many organizations cut corners in utilizing resources, fail to research better selection and testing methods, and fail to identify critical factors to differentiate candidates for positions filled (Highhouse et al., 2015). This section identifies six factors useful in predicting employee success that merit consideration in the selection process. These factors were chosen because (a) they are not easily identified and thus are often overlooked in selection and (b) variance in

performance accounted for by typical selection processes can often be low, and these flair factors represent an opportunity to provide increased predictive validity. A literature search was conducted for the relevant terms identified as flair factors herein in Google Scholar and PsycINFO. See Table 1 for key references for each concept.

Table 1. Flair factor articles

Flair Factor	Key Relevant Articles
Grit	Duckworth (2016) Kelly et al. (2014) Reed (2014) Schacht (2001) Duckworth & Quinn (2007) Duckworth, Peterson, & Matthews (2007)
Execution	Ardiale & Lemaire (2013) Dawson (2014) Higgins (2005) Pfeffer (1998) Raffoni (2008) Gokins (2009)
General Intelligence	Gottfredson (1997) Ones et al. (2012) Schmidt & Hunter (1998) Sackett et al. (2008) Lubinski (2004) Spearman (1904)
Emotional Intelligence	Albrecht (2009) Goleman (1996) Goleman (2006) Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee (2013) May & Carter (2012) MacCann (2010) Thornton & Rupp (2006) Van der Zee et al. (2002) Wilson (2015)
Integrity	Becker (1998) Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman (1995) Callahan (2004) Kish-Gephart et al. (2014) Kouzes & Posner (2011) Maritz (2011) Ones & Viswesvaran (2007) Simmons (2010) Van Iddekinge et al. (2012)

Communication Effectiveness

Coffelt et al. (2016)
 Elliott (2015)
 Fenton (2010)
 Garnett et al. (2008)
 MacDonald (2011)
 Neufeld et al. (2010)
 Seeger & Ulmer (2003)
 Richmond & McCroskey (1997)

3.1 Grit – *The Convergence of Passion and Perseverance*

Duckworth (2016) identified the importance of passion and perseverance, or “grit,” as a quality superseding talent in the quest for outstanding performance. Although natural talent is important, excellence ultimately is achieved by persistent effort. According to Nietzsche, the tendency is to credit genius to “something magical” so that others who are unwilling to persevere can have an excuse for performing at a lower level, while great men achieve greatness by hard work and perseverance (Schacht, 2001, p. 213).

Passion, Duckworth (2016) noted, is a focused compass that guides a person in achieving progress. Passion integrates great purpose with an expectation that greatness is achievable. Coupled with an unwavering commitment to pay the price to achieve a specific purpose, passion enables an individual to break through barriers to perform previously unattainable goals. For example, Reed (2014) found a significant correlation between grit and exercise scores. Grit had more predictive ability for exercise persistence and effort than conscientiousness, which is the factor commonly used in selection. Additionally, Kelly and colleagues (2014) tested cadets at West Point and found that 'grit interest' predicted attrition through Cadet Basic Training, and 'grit effort' predicted persistence for a Cadet's full four years.

3.2 Execution – *Translating Strategy into Action*

The ability to convert a plan into action is a commodity that distinguishes creative thinkers from brilliant doers (Pfeffer, 1998). Raffoni (2008, p. 3) explained that execution requires translating a “broad-brush conceptual understanding of your company's strategy into an intimate familiarity with how it will all happen, who will take on which tasks in what sequence, how long those tasks will take, how much they'll cost, and how they'll affect subsequent activities.” Having a great plan is not enough. For example, Hewlett-Packard wrote off an \$8.8 billion investment “following a failed acquisition... due to inability to execute the strategy” (Dawson, 2014, p. 11).

Execution requires the ability to identify key performance outcomes, the capability to tell the truth in evaluating progress, and the commitment to taking immediate action when a strategy veers off course (Raffoni, 2008). The vision to understand critical actions required, the willingness to confront reality, and the discipline to focus resources where they are needed to make a plan work are necessary commodities in the process of effective execution (Scholtes et al., 2003). Higgins (2005) identified eight aspects of successful strategy execution: strategy and purpose, structure, systems and processes, style, staff, resources, shared values, and strategic performance. When properly aligned, these elements lead to successful strategic performance for executives.

3.3 General Intelligence – *The Core Foundation*

One of the most studied characteristics in selection is general intelligence. Gottfredson (1997, p. 13) defined general intelligence as a “mental capability that... involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and learn from experience.” Most jobs require problem solving, planning, learning, and adapting. Capabilities in these areas translate into greater organizational contributions. Decades of research support general intelligence as a predictor of performance (Sackett, Borneman, & Connelly, 2008; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Ones and colleagues (2012, p. 183) noted that “(o)ne hundred years of psychological science have shown cognitive ability tests to be among the best, if not the best, predictors of performance.”

Cognitive ability tests predict overall performance across many jobs, organizations, occupations, and countries (Ones, et al., 2012) and are more strongly related to overall performance than specific abilities (e.g., quantitative ability). Finally, general cognitive ability predicts a number of outcomes beyond overall job performance including leadership effectiveness, innovation, and counterproductive work behaviors.

3.4 Emotional Intelligence – Relating Effectively and Understanding Self

Goleman's (1996) study of emotional intelligence identified the importance of self-knowledge, self-monitoring of responses, empathy toward others, and responding appropriately to interpersonal situations. Empathy, the capacity to relate with others, has been acknowledged as one of the most important skills that employers want (Wilson, 2015) and is necessary in treating others as valued partners.

Interpersonal relationships research confirms the importance of self-knowledge, self-control, the ability to accurately discern others' needs, and the capacity to respond properly as critical variables in establishing close relationships and developing trust (Albrecht, 2009). Relating effectively with others was identified as more important than general intelligence by psychologists and its value has been well documented (Thornton & Rupp, 2006). The skills of social and emotional intelligence contribute to both the financial and the behavioral success of organizations, enhancing the effectiveness of employee cooperation and team effectiveness (May & Carter, 2012).

Studies have also suggested that emotional intelligence is separate from other intelligences and uniquely valuable. Through latent variable analysis, MacCann (2010) found a three-factor model featuring emotional intelligence, crystallized intelligence, and fluid intelligence was the best fitting. Van der Zee et al. (2002) found that emotional intelligence predicted academic and social success and had incremental validity above general intelligence and personality (see also Iliescu, Ilie, Ispas, & Ion, 2012).

3.5 Personal Integrity – Earning Trust and Keeping Commitments

Personal integrity encompasses honesty in dealings with others and the ability to be perceived as fair, aligned, and consistent. Personal integrity involves individuals' words that match their actions (Becker, 1998). In a world labeled "The Cheating Culture," integrity is a valued commodity (Callahan, 2004). Kouzes and Posner (2011) found that credibility and honesty are qualities that people most want in leaders and peers. At a time when distrust in business leaders has become the norm (Maritz, 2011), integrity has become essential in creating high trust relationships (Simmons, 2010).

Becker (1998, p. 158) noted that integrity extends beyond conscientiousness or dependability to encompass "a code of morally justifiable rational principles." Integrity enables a person to withstand competing desires and social pressures, reflecting an individual's character and moral values (Kish-Gephart et al., 2014). Empirical studies report significant correlations between integrity and performance. Ones and Viswesvaran (2007) found a correlation of .27 between integrity tests and maximal performance. Van Iddekinge et al. (2012) reported validity estimates of .12 and .15 for integrity as correlated with job performance--and these numbers were higher when factoring in counterproductive behaviors.

3.6 Communication Effectiveness – Combining Accuracy with Candor

Employers frequently decry the limited writing and presentation skills of employees (Elliott, 2015). The ability to write well and to document the rationale for recommendations with well-researched information enhances written communications (Fenton, 2010). Similarly, the competence to make effective business presentations is considered an important skill (Coffelt et al., 2016). In addition to writing and speaking, the ability to present candid recommendations and to convey "bad news" is a key part of effective communications. Seeger and Ulmer (2003) explain that one part of the ENRON demise was the employees' inability to tell managers when problems arose. In today's fluidly changing business context, organization members who can communicate accurately and in a timely fashion are critically important, and failure has resulted in serious business catastrophes (MacDonald, 2011).

Empirically, Neufeld et al. (2010) surveyed 41 leaders and 138 followers and found that communication effectiveness predicted leader performance. It also mediated the relationship between leadership behavior and performance. Garnett et al. (2008) used National Administrative Studies Project data and found that communication mediated the relationship between organizational culture and perceived organizational performance.

4. Tools for Selecting Outstanding Employees

Although identifying outstanding potential employees is the purpose of human resource management (HRM) selection and testing, selection remains a difficult task. Variance accounted for is the statistical measure of the proportion of variability in the dependent variable (success on the job) accounted for by the independent variable (candidate test scores). Variance not accounted for often far exceeds variance that is measured. For example, Southworth (2009) reports that written examinations commonly used to measure cognitive skills and general intelligence account for between 11 and 16 percent of variance. Thus, current selection methods leave most of the variation associated with successful performance unidentified.

This section identifies three useful tools to improve the validity of the selection process and presents five propositions associated with their use. These three tools were chosen because (a) substantial research has supported their validity for selection purposes and (b) these tools are useful for assessing the identified flair factors.

4.1 Structured Interviews

Although interviews are the most common selection tool (Macan, 2009), there is little evidence that unstructured selection interviews add substantial incremental value to the selection process (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004). However, carefully constructed structured interviews are far better than unstructured interviews (see Huffcutt & Culbertson, 2011; Levashina et al., 2014). Macan (2009) noted that effective interviewing requires examining the constructs that interviews legitimately measure, clearly defining those constructs for interviewers, and educating interviewers about candidate factors (i.e., impression management and faking) that can affect the interview process.

Klehe and colleagues (2008) found that structured interviews that gave applicants an understanding of the constructs being measured were more valid and improved applicant performance. Van Iddekinge and colleagues (2004) found that a critical requirement of structured interviews was that constructs measured were properly defined. Validity of ratings for structured interviews is also enhanced by utilizing anchored rating scales with multiple examples and illustrations of anchored responses to aid interviewers (Campion et al., 1998). The findings from research about the interviewing process consistently affirm that more time should be spent in understanding the constructs associated with superior performance, translating those constructs into transparent situational questions, and increasing the training provided to interviewers about measuring desired constructs. Given this, the following is proposed:

P1: Organizations with HRPs who develop structured interviews and train interviewers are able to select better qualified candidates than organizations that do not follow that approach.

4.2 Situational Assessment Writing Assignments

Because the ability to communicate effectively in writing is a skill not commonly found in employees, situational assessment writing assignments represent a powerful tool in evaluating how a candidate analyzes a problem, documents analysis of key issues, and presents conclusions and recommendations in a clear and logical manner (Woolever, 2007). Asking a job candidate to analyze in writing and solve a real-world problem critical to successful job performance allows evaluators to identify the candidate's understanding of the context of a job.

Providing candidates with enough time to thoughtfully evaluate, research, and respond to an organizational issue is not only content valid but meets criteria for construct validity as well (SIOP, 2003). Requesting candidates to submit their written assessment of a problem before conducting the interview also provides an opportunity for interviewers to carefully assess candidate responses and craft follow-up questions.

As with any well-designed employee selection tool, the criteria for evaluating written assessments should be developed in advance, be job-related and documented by the job analysis, and include evaluator training. Given this, the following is proposed:

P2: Organizations with HRPs who develop job-related situational assessment writing assignments and train their interviewers are able to select better qualified candidates than organizations that do not follow that approach.

4.3 Assessment Centers

An Assessment Center (AC) employs multiple assessment methods, evaluating multiple competencies such as interpersonal skills, communication, and planning (see Arthur & Day, 2011). Although the AC process has been successfully utilized for more than seventy years, it is infrequently used in most selection processes and is often misapplied and poorly administered (Caldwell et al., 2003). Nonetheless, properly administered ACs are frequently cited as among the most valid predictors of employee success (Thornton & Rupp, 2006).

Although conducting a valid AC requires training and a clear understanding of the AC process, utilizing a well-conceived AC selection approach greatly increases predictive validity (Thornton et al., 2014). AC usage is particularly valuable for selecting candidates for positions requiring the integration of interpersonal, technical, and managerial skills and is considered by job candidates to be fair and highly job-related (Thornton & Gibbons, 2009). As an integration of multiple assessment tools that incorporates feedback from multiple well-trained assessors, the AC process can produce highly useful results regarding the predicted success of job candidates. Given this, the following is proposed:

P3: Organizations with HRPs who develop AC processes and train interviewers are able to select better qualified candidates than organizations that do not follow that approach.

4.4 Integrating the Tools

The reviewed literature suggests each of these tools can be useful in identifying key flair factors. Table 2 integrates the three employee selection tools and identifies the relative effectiveness of each tool in measuring the six factors which we have identified as important contributors to employee success.

Table 2. Predictive values for flair factors

Flair Factor	Structured Interview	Situational Assessment	AC
		Writing Assignment	
Grit	Medium	Low	Medium
Execution	Low	Medium	Medium
General Intelligence	Medium	High	High
Emotional Intelligence	Medium	Low	High
Personal Integrity	Medium	Medium	High
Communication Effectiveness	High	High	High

Based on these tools' effectiveness, companies with HRP's who integrate all three of these tools into their selection process will be more likely to identify candidates with the six flair factors than companies that do not use this approach. Thus, the following is proposed:

P4: Organizations with HRP's who properly implement structured interviews, situational assessment writing assignments, and ACs are able to select better qualified candidates than organizations that do not follow that integrated approach.

P5: Organizations with HRP's who properly implement structured interviews, situational assessment writing assignments, and ACs are more profitable in their industry than organizations that do not follow that integrated approach.

5. Implications for Practitioners

Hiring great employees is critically important in today's highly competitive, innovative, and fast-changing global marketplace. This paper makes four contributions for HRP's in improving the selection process.

- 1) We identify the importance of flair factors as critical skills. We suggest that the concept of flair factors has been overlooked as a critical variable for employee and organization success and encourage HRP's and top managers to put greater emphasis on flair factors when hiring for key positions. We note that the job analysis process is extremely important in identifying these flair factors.
- 2) We identify six important characteristics that are vital for success in the modern organization. These six characteristics combine well accepted qualities, including general intelligence, with factors not consistently identified as critical for success, such as grit.
- 3) We suggest three tools that can be used to improve the effectiveness of organizations in selecting employees. Each of these tools is useful in improving the selection process but integrating all three tools is likely to not only improve the quality of employees hired but also increase the profitability of companies that utilize all three tools.
- 4) We identify five propositions to test the validity of our recommendations. These propositions have practical value for business and contribute to the scholarly research on selection and testing.

6. Conclusion

HRP's in many organizations sub-optimize their contribution to the strategic goals of their companies by failing to incorporate best practices in their selection and testing processes. Improving employee selection and testing to identify candidates with the flair factors required to achieve excellence is as important today as it was for Lincoln when he selected Grant to lead the Union forces over 150 years ago.

The selection and assessment process has increasingly been recognized as critically important for organizations competing for top talent in today's global marketplace (Beer, 2009). Failing to address the flair factor elements identified herein will result in continued sub-optimization of organization performance – an untenable position in a world where even great organizations are struggling to survive (Christensen, 2016).

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