

The Employee Development Bell Curve

You're probably familiar with the statistical bell curve associated with grading tests. The gist of the concept is that results are distributed based upon standard deviations from the mean score. Since the vast majority of the scores fall one standard deviation either side of the mean, the curve is shaped like a bell.

What does this have to do with management? During my 30+ years in the workplace, it has become apparent to me that people's capability to succeed is described by a similarly shaped distribution. The empirical evidence suggests to me that 10-15% of the people "get it" on their own. They know how to figure out what it takes to succeed in their jobs – and other areas of their lives as well. On the other end of the curve, 5-10% of the people just don't seem to "get it", even if endless effort is invested in helping them become successful. That leaves us with the 75-85% of the people in the middle of the bell curve, who can become quite successful with the appropriate training and development.

As a result of "rightsizing" and the baby boom population bulge, it wasn't long ago when substantial numbers of people in the available labor pool fell within the top half of the curve. Since capable workers were relatively plentiful, recovering from a poor hiring choice wasn't too painful.

Alas, skilled workers are in much shorter supply today. The cost and aggravation of poor selection and mediocre on-the-job performance has never been greater. Therefore, the return on investment from better hiring and employee development is exceptional.

The first step in hiring well is creating a functional job description that includes all the competencies required. The next step identifies the traits and behavioral style that are connected to successful job performance. We have worked with clients to construct a behavioral style profile of their top performers. Comparing this profile to those of the job finalists increases the probability of a good fit.

Despite the value of such selection instruments, this data doesn't eliminate the need for an effective interview process. The finalists should interview with several people who know both the job and the organization well. It's helpful to have interviewers look for specific factors so that their written and verbal feedback will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the candidates.

Once someone has been hired, the first 4 to 6 weeks are crucial in having them come up-to-speed quickly. During this time period, be sure to provide specific feedback on performance versus the expectations articulated for the job. Regardless of their level, the new hire should become familiar with the company's Vision and Mission as well as the values and business philosophy of the organization. Expose them to senior management both formally and informally. Your company has only one chance to orient a new employee, so make the most of it.

As a new employee demonstrates mastery of parts of their job, challenge them with assignments in other areas; but don't set them up to fail. Ensure that they have the tools, know how, and understanding to successfully accomplish the tasks they are assigned. After no longer than 6 months, a formal performance appraisal should be conducted. Don't hesitate to compliment areas being handled well or to point out areas requiring improvement. This appraisal must include a personal development plan that realistically establishes what can be accomplished over the next 6 months to strengthen areas which are currently weak.

Manpower planning is another important organizational function. At least annually, senior management must assess future personnel and expertise needs. Based upon this assessment, do what is necessary to ensure that properly trained people will be in place to fill the slots required to fuel the company's profitable growth.

Another function of manpower planning is identifying marginal performers within the organization. Do these people need additional training and development to succeed? If so, they should have a personal development plan to guide them in becoming satisfactory. Or, have we gone the extra mile to make an employee successful, only to recognize that they fall within the bottom 5-10% of the bell curve? If so, it's time to face up to the need for termination.

It often seems that employees get hired for their skills and abilities, and fired because of their attitude. For those people in the bottom 5-10% of the bell curve, you may have to accept this as reality. But for the 90-95% comprising the rest of the labor pool, we can largely prevent this "truism" from occurring. We can hire well, and then retain successful employees who have grown to become valuable contributors.

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