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## Guest Columnist: Beware of 'similar to me' mistake in hiring

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The chief executive officer is ecstatic and on the verge of coming out of his chair. "I love the guy, terrific; he's got to be the one. Let's make him an offer."

"Well, fine, but tell me how you think he fits our profile and search criteria as you described them to me?" I ask.

"The heck with the profile. I have an instinct about this guy. He went to Harvard at the same time I did, belongs to the same golf club, and his kids go to high school with my kids."

I know where this is leading, and it isn't good. Nothing can play havoc with an important hiring decision like the No. 1 interviewing error -- often known as the "similar to me" error.

We all respond favorably to people who share our values, passions, hobbies and other important life experiences. Making a hiring decision, however, based on the fact that a candidate went to the same college you attended may not ensure a successful hire and may, in fact, do just the opposite.

What happens in the typical course of interviewing is that a hiring executive, when he discovers that he and a particular candidate share some aspect in common, makes an unconscious positive association ("Oh, that's similar to me") with the candidate, quite apart from how he or she might meet the specific criteria established as critical to successfully fulfilling the position.

The process of evaluation then becomes skewed enough that no matter how many well qualified, or even better qualified, candidates are interviewed, the candidate who was unconsciously marked as "similar" to the hiring manager frequently gets the position.

There are real problems associated with this particular error. A smart manager understands that there is value in hiring skills, attitudes and abilities that he or she does not possess -- or are complementary. A classic example of this is the charismatic, extroverted CEO who embraces big picture strategy but is terrible at administrative detail and follow-up.

This executive would be wise to hire an analytical chief accounting officer or chief operating officer who thrives on attending to detail and overseeing the internal workings of the organization.

Unfortunately, the "similar to me" error often leads to the CEO hiring someone in his own image, and replicating or even exacerbating the same problematic behaviors he evidences. The organization never gets the infusion of new thinking it so sorely needs.

A number of other interviewing errors can contribute to poor decision-making.

"First impression" and "recency" errors: First impression errors occur when an interviewer reaches a strong favorable or unfavorable conclusion about a candidate prematurely based on something in the first part of an interview.

Relevant information that arises later in the interview gets discounted or undervalued.

"Recency" errors, conversely, occur when the interviewer forms a strong favorable or unfavorable judgment about the candidate based only on the most recent information at the end of an interview, and discounts or ignores relevant information from the beginning of the interview.

"Positive/negative leniency" errors: Positive leniency occurs during an interview when the evaluations of all applicants tend to be excessively positive.

The interviewers tend to be either unwilling or unable to make a cut or distinction between really good candidates, less good candidates and bad candidates.

The hiring manager may not want to appear the bad guy, the bearer of bad news, or may wish to stay politically neutral to avoid later criticism ("Well, you are the one who selected this turkey").

Negative leniency happens in the opposite way -- when all the evaluations of every candidate are uniformly negative.

The interviewer in this instance is doing what is called "saving the upper end of the evaluation scale" for that perfect candidate (known as WOW, or walks on water), who, in reality doesn't exist. In this scenario, all candidates fail to make the grade.

"Central tendency" errors: This problem arises when nervous evaluators end up evaluating all candidates in the middle of the ratings range. The central range is always considered "safe," even subliminally, so the interviewer/ manager can never be accused of being wrong.

If the candidate is hired and turns out to be good, he can claim credit, and if the candidate is hired and later bombs, he can defer blame by claiming he didn't rate him highly in the first place.

Falling prey to these errors and committing a serious selection blunder is not inevitable if a few simple precautions are taken:

Do not be afraid to use the entire evaluation scale from lowest to highest.

On a 1-to-10 scale, there are bound to be some candidates who should rate closer to 1's and some who will approach 10's. If not, the recruiter has not done a sufficiently good job of matching candidates to the requirements.

Rate each candidate independently, and make an effort to avoid comparisons.

If the recruiting process was done correctly, you will have initially described in detail a number of critical criteria that candidates will have to meet to be considered seriously.

Use these criteria to measure all candidates, using a pre-determined scale such as 1 to 10.

Be unstintingly honest and unmerciful in the rating process.

Perhaps more important than any of these is to keep in mind that it is a natural human tendency to be drawn to other people with whom we share a common bond -- be it the same college, home town or other mutual experience.

When it comes to conducting that crucial interview, however, this tendency should be fought with the knowledge that common experiences frequently don't translate into smart hiring decisions.