

Culture Add, Not Culture Fit

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When a hiring committee interviews a potential employee, they are not just looking at their skills and past experiences. Often, the team looks for a sense of how an interviewee would work with the team and whether they hold the values of the organization. This evaluation of a candidate's internal beliefs, ethics, and personality is often branded as a search for a "culture fit" – as in, "Does this person fit into the existing culture of our organization?"

All hiring teams want to find the person best suited to work well with their team. But an over-emphasis on culture "fit" can easily slide into group think, and a homogenous culture that doesn't spark creativity and

value diversity of background, thought, and experience.

Instead, we often urge our clients to consider "culture add," and ask not whether a candidate fits into a particular mold, but how might their presence add to the entire organization?

Why do so many business sources continue to champion "Culture Fit"?

Forbes recommends looking for "culture fit" candidates because, as they explain, "we can always provide the resources and tools to help employees get better at their jobs, but we can't teach someone to align with our cultural values." Each organization has their own language, processes, and customs. Many people believe that a new employee who is a "fit" will be easily onboarded into this culture, leading to increased employee satisfaction and reduced employee turnover. But culture fit is a highly subjective factor that often is translated into "Do I like this person and do they seem to like me?" during interviews, which is not a good way to evaluate candidates.

"Culture Fit" is flawed

Culture fit is often ripe with bias. According to a 2019 Wall Street Journal report, research has shown that hiring managers tend to look for traits in candidates that make them feel good about themselves. A manager who got bad grades as a college freshman is likely to warm to an applicant who also got off to a rough start. Or a hirer who attended a low-prestige school may favor applicants who did the same. Without even being aware of it, hiring managers are often gravitating toward candidates who have similar interests, experiences, and characteristics as they do.

When those with decision-making power, such as hiring managers, act more positively toward those who are like themselves, they are in danger of continuing cycles of structural discrimination, shutting out those without equal access to decision-making.

Each workplace has a unique culture, but if it is made up of a homogenous staff, the culture will likely align with the culture of those most represented. In that case, it may seem like a difficult task to onboard someone who does not

hold identities similar to those in the office majority. Even if unconsciously, hiring teams make judgements based on who they believe would be the easiest to train or get to know, often choosing those similar to them. For instance, if your workplace culture encourages after-hours social events, a hiring team may be less likely to hire someone with small children or who lives far from the office. Perhaps more unconsciously, an all-white team may not hire a person of color simply because they are unsure whether they hold similar interests or whether there are differences between the interviewee's cultural background and their own.

“Culture Fit” may be hurting your business

With each individual hire, these trends may not be obvious, but they build over time. This leads to a lack of diversity within an organization, which can stifle its success. As McKinsey & Company reported in *Diversity Matters*, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 21% more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile. Those in the top quartile for racial diversity are 33% more likely to outperform. According to McKinsey & Company Partner Sara Prince, “More diverse teams have better, faster, more innovative decision making,” and companies “in the lower 4th quartile on both gender and ethnic diversity are more likely to underperform their industry peers financially.” Their research demonstrates that hiring bias's effect on office diversity has large ramifications. A homogenous workplace culture (whether it be homogenous on racial, gender, or mindset lines) can lead to groupthink and the team may have a more difficult time finding business solutions.

Instead, focus on “Culture Add”

All of this is not to say that hiring committees should get rid of any attempts to examine how a candidate may work with the organization's culture. Rather than “culture fit,” consider seeking someone who would be a “culture add” to the workplace. As Beamery explains it, “culture add” requires asking: “What can a candidate bring to the table that will add to your culture and help move it in the right direction?” Mind the Product acknowledges the systemic inequalities that can result from seeking a “culture fit,” stating that culture add is about “deprogramming unconscious bias in our teams and removing the opportunity for bias to shape conversations and decisions about hiring.”

Focusing on hiring a “culture add” reorients the task by asking the hiring team to perform pre-work that will set them up for success. Before hiring a new candidate, the team should examine: What perspectives are we missing from our work? Where are we looking to grow as an organization? Following the interviews, the team can evaluate based on these criteria and explore the ways in which a candidate could be helpful in challenging the existing status quo within the organization. By speaking openly about the ways in which a candidate will “add” to a workplace, a hiring team can work to mitigate their own internal biases that result in discriminatory hiring.

After hiring, what's next?

The work, however, does not end with utilizing “culture add” as a hiring tool. After accepting that individual employees can and should help an organizational culture evolve, there must be processes in place to allow this to happen. This means fostering an inclusive workplace where employees are recognized for the unique perspectives and skills they bring to the work. A hiring team no longer needs to worry that hiring wrong “culture fits” will lead to turnover. Instead, they can feel confident in a workplace culture that empowers to actively “add” to the workplace and its growth.

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Koya Leadership Partners is pleased to have a long relationship with YW Boston, an organization that plays a key role in advancing equity and inclusion in the city of Boston, where Koya has a strong presence. Koya is grateful to YW Boston for sharing these helpful tips with our audience.

About YW Boston

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