

CANDIDATE MOTIVATION

In Search of the Holy Grail

The holy grail for employers seeking to hire new employees often centers on gauging a candidate's motivation or the amount of effort the person will expend to benefit the company and its customers. Many superstitious practices have arisen in the quest to predict motivation such as a firm hand shake, direct eye contact, or the number of times a candidate leans forward in the chair during an interview. None has empirical support as predictors of motivation. In fact, these practices hold such little promise as motivational indicators that perhaps we need to evaluate whether or not we're even asking the right question when it comes to candidate motivation.

A Better Question – A Better Answer

Instead of seeking better ways to measure the motivational level of candidates, recent research suggests that greater advances can be made by examining the motivating potential of the **job** for candidates. This distinction shifts the focus from the candidate alone and places attention on the degree of fit between the job demands and what a candidate desires and can deliver. A disciplined study of the work to be performed should result not only in an appreciation for the knowledge, skills, and abilities demanded by the job, but also an understanding of the context in which the work is performed. Contextual features can vary widely from job to job but often reflect distinctions like:

- Working alone – working as a team
- Addressing frequent conflicts – promoting cooperation
- Making choices and decisions – following prescribed procedures
- Dealing with frequent change and variety – dealing with routine
- Focusing on numbers and data – focusing on words and verbal communication
- Persuading and influencing – sticking to objective facts

Collectively, the contextual features of a job can be referred to as the *suitability demands* of the job. The knowledge, skills, and abilities of a

job can be collectively labeled as the *capability demands* of the job (see Figure 1). By understanding both the capability and suitability components of a job, the employer is better positioned to evaluate the motivating potential of a specific job for targeted candidates. Motivation then becomes the result of the degree of fit between the capability and suitability demands of the job and the suitabilities and capabilities of candidates.

Evaluating Capability Fit

Research has consistently demonstrated the predictive power of objective ability and aptitude assessments for job success. A solid match between the ability demands of a job and the talents and capabilities of a candidate is one component of motivating potential. Candidates can be expected to expend more effort when job demands tap their greatest talents/capabilities. The motivating potential of a job is likely to be greater when there is consistency between the knowledge and ability demands of a job and the talents/capabilities of a candidate. This linkage is designated as the *capability fit* between a job and a candidate (see Figure 1).

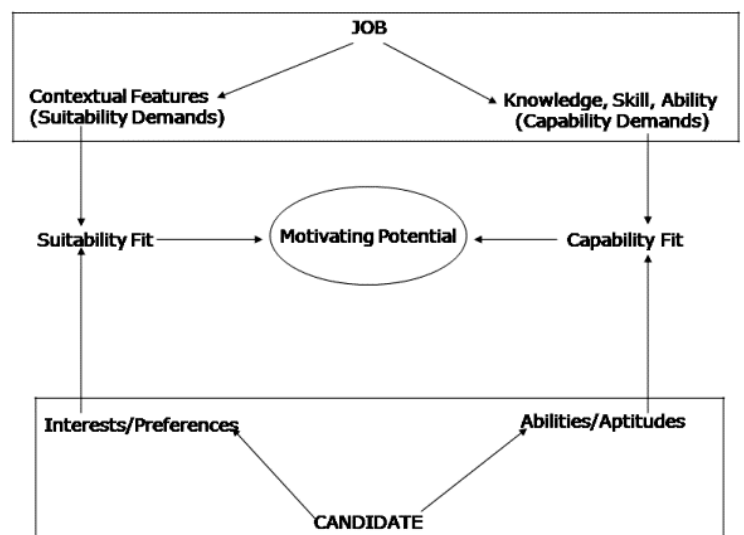


Figure 1

Evaluating Capability Fit (continued)

Capability fit can be evaluated through the use of job related, objective assessments of knowledge, ability, and aptitude.

While capability fit is important to overall motivating potential, it alone is insufficient for a full appreciation of a candidate's success potential. When only capability fit is measured, talented individuals can be wedged into positions that are far afield from their important interests and preferences. Anecdotes about very gifted and talented individuals who never seem to achieve their full potential prevail when only capability fit is examined in the selection process. The work context must also be considered for a full appreciation of motivating potential.

Evaluating Suitability Fit

Assessment methods are also available to measure the interests, preferences, and personality features of job candidates. Recent research has revealed the importance of interest based selection measures to work outcomes such as job knowledge, performance, and retention. Candidates can be expected to expend and maintain higher levels of effort when the work context contributes to the realization of important interests and preferences. The motivating potential of a job is far greater when a high level of consistency exists between the contextual features of the job and the interests and preferences of a candidate. The job context - interest linkage is referred to as *suitability fit* in Figure 1. Because overarching personality characteristics such as conscientiousness and extroversion are just one component of suitability fit, a fuller appreciation of suitability fit, and ultimately motivating potential is realized by incorporating measures of vocational interests, personal preferences, and values into the selection process.

Conclusion

The holy grail of candidate motivation can be discovered by objectively pairing the qualities of the job with the unique characteristics of job candidates. Viewing motivating potential as the outcome of capability and suitability fit moves us beyond the limitations of positioning motivation as a single characteristic of the person. Rather, driven and sustained effort is realized when the demands and contextual features of a job complement the talents and interests of a candidate. The holy grail of candidate motivation is revealed through the application of job related measures of abilities and interests to the selection process. The search will continue to be futile without detailed knowledge of the suitability and capability demands of the job accompanied by accurate measures of the abilities and interests presented by candidates.

References

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