Career Choices

Finding the Right Fit for the Job

Stephanie Stephens

When something’s a good fit, it doesn’t bind or encumber you. It’s just so comfortable that often you’re not even aware of it. Maybe this calls to mind that well-worn pair of tennis shoes that you’ve had for a seeming eternity or your best friend to whom you can say anything and not make waves.

Footwear and friends are one thing, but jobs are quite another. It’s true that the term “good fit” gets overused on career cover letters these days by aspiring applicants. However, if you’ve already taken the plunge into a new job—or you’re overseeing a new hire—having a good fit is doubtlessly important. No one wants to waste time, skills, or other resources, including money, when someone just doesn’t cut the employer’s cultural mustard.

Let’s explore the “been there, done that” experiences of your peers. They reflect upon having chosen a position that ultimately just did not fit or upon hiring someone who turned out to be the wrong “size” for the job.

Don’t Worry, Be Happy

“I’m a firm believer that if you’re happy doing what you’re doing, you’re going to succeed,” said Heidi Horn, vice president of clinical engineering service at SSM Integrated Health Technologies (SSMIHT) in St. Louis, MO. “If you’re not happy, it’s time to move on or change careers.”

She remembers having her moment of epiphany 18 years ago at a small, privately held company with 30 years’ experience under its business belt. The owning partners thought they wanted an innovative business development director to expand their business, she said, and hired her as a result.

At the time, it seemed like a good idea. “Unfortunately, they weren’t quite ready culturally to make the changes that innovation required,” Horn said. She got frustrated trying to get them to follow her recommendations, and they got frustrated with the new kid on the block who sought to change their long-time processes—even though that was her job.

Although she was doing what she was hired to do, she encountered resistance at every turn. Horn was fired after a year. Her injured ego later mended, she reflected calmly and objectively. Then, she embarked on a new professional adventure, joining her current company a few weeks later.

“It’s been a great fit,” said Horn, who’s been promoted several times at SSMIHT.

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“If you continue to be unhappy no matter what you do or where you go, you must do some soul searching and identify whether the problem is really you,” Horn said. “As the saying goes, ‘No matter where you go, there you are,’” she added.

Stay or Go?
Even when the fit doesn’t feel quite right, maybe leaving isn’t the best option, said Jenifer Brown, president and owner of Health Tech Talent Management in Virginia Beach. “The first step can be to analyze what’s lacking for you in your current role and exactly what type or level of position you not only want but are qualified for. Then, be sure to do your research to determine if opportunities exist within the organization before you decide to leave.”

As humans and employees, the grass frequently does look greener elsewhere. It’s the main reason we desire to make change, but when we get there, that grass isn’t always so lush.

Douglas Dreps knows this well. He’s the director of eastern regional operations for Mercy Clinical Engineering Services in St. Louis, MO.

“I have taken on several positions and then found out the picture painted was different when I started,” he said. Like Horn, he’d accepted the job, so he was committed to doing the best he could for his employer—and himself.

“Always work hard, because you learn more, and know that no one can take that away from you. Besides, you can always look for a new position if you need to,” he said. That old adage about not burning bridges really does ring true. Dreps has been fortu-

nate to be recommended to other organizations for most of his career. When he’s departed, it’s been because he did all he could do but the organizational structure and his needs weren’t converging.

“We all look for a promotion and more responsibilities, and those were factors in all my job changes,” he said.

As Liz Ryan, founder and CEO of Human Workplace in Boulder, CO, told Forbes.com, “You are the CEO of your career. Like any CEO, you know that you have to focus on your mission and take a step toward the realization of that mission every day.”

Be Specific
By taking time to lay the right groundwork, said Brown, you can help ensure the right fit.

“Make sure to have specific job requirements and responsibilities in job postings and descriptions, so they’re not too generic,” she said. “Managers must also be clear about specific expectations during initial conversations and interviews.”

When you realize someone doesn’t fulfill expectations, it helps to have unwavering employment policies already in place. The 90-day rule really can be a deal-breaker, Dreps said. “If a new hire isn’t working out—due to policy violation or they turned out to not know as much as they presented—then termination is an option since they’re under probation.”

Dreps said that it’s important to be consistent and transparent during the termination process by, for example, providing verbal, written, and final written notices. “Some offenses result in immediate termination, regardless of the employee,” he added. “Even for those who’ve been in their position for years, the same process would be followed.”

Horn urged managers to “focus on the specific behavior or performance issue versus the employee’s ‘attitude’ and clearly explain in writing what you expect them to do or not do. Provide training if applicable and follow up regularly with oversight and suggestions,” she said.

This process will simply evolve, added Horn. “When you get to the point of a formal performance improvement plan that includes human resources, about half the people will realize the error of their ways and turn over a
new leaf. The other half will blame you, take no accountability for their behavior or actions, and either quit or need to be terminated.”

Staying the Course
When the staffer stays, Dreps said he’s there to help foster improvement. “I believe in formal training and leverage for my technicians to give them the tools they need to perform their duties. It’s still up to each staff member to get it right, whether they’re facing behavior or performance issues.”

“If you wait until after the 90 days, you owe it to the employee to do everything you can to make them successful,” Horn said. Plus, she advised managers not to “label” a bad fit for a particular job or company culture as a “bad employee.” No one wants to wear that label.

“Managers should carefully screen applicants not only for their skills but for a personality that meshes well with others and is comfortable with the supervision level and tasks they’ll be assigned,” she said. “For example, don’t hire a BMET who feels more comfortable receiving constant direction into a role with little supervision. And don’t put an independent problem solver under a micromanager.”

The reason why fit is an issue should be identified and a solution put in place, said Janet Prust, director of standards and global business development at 3M Health Care in the Minneapolis–St. Paul, MN, area. “Coaching or counseling helps the employee improve and helps measure that improvement. Discuss this with a mentor or trusted associate at a higher level who knows the employee well, and ask them about a better position for the employee. Confidential employee assistance resources can help when employees struggle either professionally or personally.”

Prust agrees that consistent communication and feedback are key influencers along the way. “If transfer or termination is determined to be appropriate, I’d assist that employee in finding another suitable position either internally or externally, and with a solid reference,” she said.

Our nation’s first president, George Washington, wasn’t known for his insights into future 21st century employment models, but if he were alive today, chances are he might fit right in with current corporate culture. Washington said, “It is far better to be alone than to be in bad company.”

Whether you are a bad fit, or you hired one, staffing experts agree that you don’t want to dwell on either scenario. Take what valuable information you can from the experience and move on to the next job or hire where a good fit awaits you or your new employee.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

For employees:
• If you’re happy, you’re going to succeed.
• Analyze what you need and how to go get it.
• Don’t burn any bridges.
• Take something away from every job.
• You’re the CEO of your career.

For employers:
• Determine fit early rather than later.
• Be specific about job requirements and responsibilities.
• Explain in writing when things aren’t going right.
• Provide training and support, with follow-up and oversight.
• Don’t label a bad fit as a “bad employee.”
• If necessary, help the employee find another position—within or outside of the organization.