

'Fit' to Hire?

The dating site eHarmony is the latest vendor to enter the hiring arena, with a platform designed to match jobseekers with companies whose cultures best align with their personalities and values. But critics say it can potentially undermine workforce diversity, experience and other factors.

By **Andrew R. McIlvaine**

Tuesday, May 31, 2016

"Cultural fit" has become a major buzzword in talent acquisition in recent years, under the premise that a tight fit between new hires and an organization's culture will lead to higher retention rates, engaged employees and increased productivity.

One of the latest vendors to throw its hat into this ring is Los Angeles-based global dating site eHarmony, which in April announced its Elevated Careers platform. The platform is designed to, in the words of eHarmony founder and CEO Dr. Neil Clark Warren, "allow people to love not only what they do, but where they do it" by matching jobseekers with companies whose cultures best align with their personalities and values.

The new platform, nearly 8 years in the making, is based on eHarmony's research-based matching process, which it says is responsible for 438 marriages per day. Elevated Careers uses 16 "cultural factors" to determine best fits between candidates and employers.

Poor cultural fit between companies and employees is a major factor behind the low engagement rates in today's workforce, says Elevated Careers Vice President Dan Erickson, who led the team that created the platform.

"Lots of people leave their jobs because of the problem that our solution solves: lack of engagement," he says, citing studies that indicate as many as 70 percent of today's employees either aren't engaged or are actively disengaged from their work.

"A poor match between a person's core work values and the company culture not only leads to lost productivity and higher turnover, but lots of wasted time and money for recruiters, as well. "However, critics say that using cultural fit as a criterion -- particularly when it's used by companies to assess candidates -- can potentially undermine workforce diversity, certainly in background, experience and other factors, if not ethnicity.



Celia de Anca, director of the Centre for Diversity in Global Management at IE Business School in Madrid, Spain, writes in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Why Hiring for Cultural Fit Can Thwart Your Diversity Efforts" that assessing candidates for cultural fit can end up "creating a situation in which companies will be very diverse in appearance, but intrinsically homogenous. They will be hiring the same profile of people, even though they may have different backgrounds."

This will undermine one of the most important benefits of workplace diversity, she writes: "Creating places where people with different ideas, different perspectives, different attitudes and different aspirations can work positively together. The beauty of diversity is to have different, unique people come together to work on a common project."

People who don't fit naturally into "any given prototype," de Anca writes, "are often the ones who, because they don't fit easily into any one group, serve as the 'translators' between groups." These are valuable people for any organization to have, she writes.

An emphasis on cultural fit can also lead hiring managers to inadvertently rule out potentially great hires simply because of their backgrounds, says Stuart Friedman.

"So many times I've heard hiring managers rule out candidates because of things like 'I couldn't stand his dead-fish handshake,' or 'He wouldn't look me in the eye,'" says Friedman, CEO of Global Context, a San Carlos, Calif.-based consulting firm. "They don't realize that in certain countries and certain cultures, a strong handshake or direct eye contact may not be encouraged, or actively discouraged."

In other cases, a manager might describe a candidate as having good technical acumen but express puzzlement as to why she would not advocate forcefully for herself as a great hire, he says. "There are lots of cultures in which humility is so important for presenting oneself that it would never occur to these candidates to be anything but humble."

These concerns aside, screening for cultural fit has many defenders, who say it's often a business necessity. "Chasing cultural fit is what all of us in talent acquisition do in some shape or form -- we want to find people who will stay and thrive," says Dan Lewis, CEO of Norwalk, Conn.-based HR outsourcing firm OperationsInc.

Erin Peterson, vice president of talent management for NFP, a New York-based insurance brokerage and consulting firm with 3,600 employees, says hiring for cultural fit is vital to the company's efforts to maintain its brand. "Our culture is very well-defined -- we describe it in terms of our initials, as 'nimble, fantastic results and personal.' We need people who align to this."

She describes NFP's ideal candidate, from a cultural-fit perspective, as someone who "listens more than they talk, builds enduring relationships, puts clients first and has a record of meeting challenges and overcoming obstacles."

Peterson and her team film videos of NFP's leaders and employees answering specific questions about why they joined the company and why they stayed. Next, they analyze the videos for recurring trends and phrases and "recruit against that."

The interviewing stage is a valuable opportunity for companies to present their culture in a positive light to candidates, says Peterson. NFP uses digital video screening to ask specific questions of candidates -- that, in itself, sends a signal to candidates that its corporate culture is tech-savvy and it expects the same of potential employees, she says. It also uses online assessments designed to get a sense of candidates' energy level, assertiveness, attitude and objective judgment, she says.

"We give different roles to different interviewers, so we're not asking the same questions twice and giving candidates the impression that we're not coordinated. Every step in the process is sending them the message that that's how you need to be here, too."

Screening for cultural fit can also be helpful for candidates -- it allows them to "self-select out" if they realize they'd be a poor match with a company's culture, says Peterson.

But what about diversity?

"You ensure you're filling the funnel with people from a lot of different backgrounds who have the right skills," says Peterson. "Make sure you're sourcing from many different places to get a rich diversity of candidates, get them through the objective structured part of the process, and then give everyone a different role to play in the interview process so you don't end up with 'just like me' syndrome."

Peterson and her team also conduct pre- and post-interview briefs with hiring managers to ensure multiple perspectives are incorporated into the hiring decision, guaranteeing that hiring decisions are based on a candidate's merits rather than whether a manager feels "comfortable" with a certain type of person. "I think companies that don't do this are in danger of ending up with the 'just like me' syndrome," she says.

Ideally, companies will have interview panels made up of interviewers with diverse backgrounds and experiences -- including international experience, when possible -- who can recognize cultural differences and help ensure that candidates aren't unfairly screened out because of them, says Friedman.

If anything, Erickson says, matching on cultural factors may actually improve diversity. "I think predictive analytics can actually help dispel the myths that often stand in the way of people with certain backgrounds getting hired," he says. "I think we could actually broaden the opportunity for people from all walks of life to get hired, which can result in a more diverse workforce."

HR must keep in mind that, as organizations change, the definition of cultural fit may also change, says Lewis. "My own organization was half its current size three years ago," he says. "And what determined 'fit' in this company three years ago was very different from today. So while you can still have those same core qualities, it's also important that companies embrace the fact that changes happen and, as such, you need to re-examine your definition of fit from time to time."

Hiring managers and recruiters must also learn to adjust their expectations in light of a changing job market, says Lewis.

"Things are much more competitive this year, so 'fit' in some respects is as much about the available pool of talent as it is about finding someone who's a perfect cultural match," he says. "But a lot of companies fail to realize they need to adjust those filters from time to time."

Send questions or comments about this story to hreletters@lrp.com.

Copyright 2016© LRP Publications