

## PROBLEM SOLVING

**The hiring dilemma: Go for experience or potential?**

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**SUSAN PINKER**

**Dear Susan,**

I co-founded, with a partner, a medical technology company. We recently ran a search for a mid-level manager, got a big response, and it's now between two candidates. The first one we interviewed is around 30 years old, but has an incredible résumé for someone at that point in his career. ... He impressed us in the interview; he was convincing about the fit between his skill set and the job requirements. He has an MBA and strong references. One employer said I'd have to stop him from working too hard, and burning out young. He seemed like a star and I wanted to offer him the position right then. The second candidate is older, more low-key, and has a proven track record. He came well-recommended through industry contacts, so also has great references. Should I go for the known quantity? I'm leaning toward the star, but my partner wants the other candidate.

- *At a Stalemate*

**Dear Stalemate,**

In an ideal world you'd find the budget and a niche for both of your strong applicants. In the real world, with the unemployment rate at 8 per cent in Canada, it's a buyer's market for employers. Though you may have a couple of good candidates, you have to decide what you want.

Is it more important to hire someone who understands your business and will need less time to ramp up? Or would you prefer to invest time in a young whipper-snapper with star power? Here are some tidbits from the world of cognitive science to bear in mind as you weigh the pros and cons.

**The primacy effect**

You may feel more enthusiastic about the younger candidate because you interviewed him first. The first item of any list is remembered more easily, according to long-standing research. For years, researchers have debated over how to explain why this "primacy effect" happens. One side argues that we have more time to review the features of the first item, even as others continue to appear. (This may be why we remember the pop lyrics of our youth with such alacrity, no matter how unmemorable they truly were.)

Researchers on the other side of the argument have demonstrated how the human brain gives first items an encoding boost: Whatever or whoever is in first position gets the benefit of more neural resources than those coming after. The first-in-line is filed away more carefully, not simply reviewed by rote. That might be why I have a special attachment to the name and appearance of my first-grade teacher but not my sixth- or seventh-grade teachers. The primacy effect may be influencing your recall of candidate No. 1's achievements, while candidate No. 2, though less salient, ultimately may be a better fit.

**The superstar effect**

Contrary to the perceived wisdom that super high achievers become role models who motivate others, most of us simply give up if we're put in the position of competing with a star. Recent research by Jennifer Brown, a Canadian behavioural economist at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Illinois, has shown that the presence of a superstar depresses the performance of other contenders.

Professor Brown examined professional golf tournaments, and discovered that high-level participants performed more poorly when Tiger Woods played. "The adverse superstar effect increases when Woods is playing well and disappears during Woods's weaker periods," she noted. We can all identify. As a pianist, you might feel like throwing in the towel if you were competing against Glenn Gould in a music contest. If the superstar you're considering will be expected to manage and motivate others on his team, you may be disappointed. If, on the other hand, he will be working mainly on his own, he may be your man.

**The bluster effect**

Okay, I admit I made up the name. But the data are clear that self-assessment has little to do with how a candidate is currently doing, or will fare, in any job. So there's no point asking an applicant about his or her skill set.

In several large studies, psychologists Joyce Ehrlinger and David Dunning and their colleagues at Cornell University, and Roy Baumeister at Florida State University, compared people's self-confidence with their actual performance. The researchers asked people to rate their skills on various job-related tasks, and then measured their competence with standardized tools. The researchers found that nurses aren't good at assessing whether they had mastered basic life-support skills, for example, and that surgical residents can't predict how they'll do in the operating room. Managers often overstate their competence (not to mention their people skills) and most people, when asked, say they're far more intelligent than they really are on IQ tests.

These cognitive processes seem to defy logic. Why should the first be most memorable, the best be least inspiring, and the most confident the least competent? There seems to be no over-riding rule that would suggest a course of action, except to carefully scrutinize your first impressions. And consider the job's real-life context, not just the candidate's qualities.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*. Her blog on the science of human relationships can be found [here](#).

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