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Soft skills a key to successful hiring

By Howard Libin
SMALL BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Over the years I have had hundreds of employees, some great ones, some good ones and some that I would rather forget.

A graphic designer who I will call Cliff (because that was his name) was one of the ones that will haunt me forever. During the year or so he worked for me I was constantly amazed by his lack of judgment and disdain for standard office protocol.

Cliff was not a bad guy and I don't think he was deliberately trying to take advantage of me, but he did lack a basic understanding of the employer/employee relationship and the concept of customer service.

Finally, after having to explain to him one day why it was inappropriate to spend an hour of work time writing a letter to his grandmother, I took him into my office and told him that he could not work here anymore.

On paper, Cliff had the educational and employment history necessary to do the job, but what he lacked were the soft skills needed to become a success on the job.

Soft skills are the attitudes, aptitudes and abilities needed to successfully navigate the real-world workplace. From understanding the need to dress appropriately and the requirement that you call in if you are going to miss a day of work, to knowing how to work as part of a team and the ability to make sound decisions on your own.

The growing soft skill deficit among employees is a clearly a problem, the way common sense and common decency are becoming far less common. Years ago I used to eat at an Italian restaurant where the owner had posted a sign behind the cash register that read, "I don't have to tell my staff to be nice. I just hire nice people."

If it were only that easy!

Unfortunately, job candidates lie on their resumes, past employer references are suspect, and job candidates lie in their interviews.

While some soft skill weaknesses are obvious, others can hide out until long after an applicant is hired. Later when the employee has to be dismissed, the company has to bear additional hiring costs, training costs and opportunity costs resulting from the poor placement.

Educators and workforce professionals have reacted to employer concerns about the readiness of the labor pool by developing assessment tests and remediation programs to evaluate and train job-seekers in the soft skills.

Many major employers have readily embraced the idea of soft skill assessment. Wal-Mart administers a soft skill/work habit test to each online job applicant. The National Retail Federation has a Retail

Readiness Assessment test for use by its members.

The state has an assessment and remediation program called Florida Ready to Work, administrated through various local agencies, including Tallahassee Community College's Economic and Workforce Development department (201-8352) and WorkForce Plus' One-Stop Centers (933-0023).

The Florida Ready To Work program evaluates a candidate's grasp of applied mathematics, ability to read for understanding, and ability to locate information, as well as a new work habits section that measures attitude, behavior, listening and speaking, problem solving and interpersonal skills.

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