Should You Hire People Based on Passion Over Experience?

For today’s hiring advice article, we decided to find out what hiring managers, recruiters, and anyone else in charge of hiring thought about this question: Should people hire based on passion over experience? We received quite a few responses to this question, and we are excited to be able to share these thoughts with you. After reading through these, if you want to add your own thoughts, feel free to do so in the comments below the article.

Passion Over Experience

Passion is essential in every employee. Understanding the core requirements of a position and how the candidate satisfies those requirements is important. I want people in my organization to care about their jobs and feel passionately about meeting the goals and objective of their positions.

When a candidate communicates effectively about their ability and interest in a position, there is a greater possibility of a long term relationship between the employer and employee.

Carol Vincie
Productivity Tools & Insights, LLC
Poughkeepsie, NY
I had 17 years in the financial services industry. When interviewing for customer service representatives, the quality I looked for most was receptiveness to being coached. I found that receptiveness more in the passionate than the experienced interviewees.

Kartika
Author, Turning Blue to Blue - How God Used Art to Lift My Depression

One of the challenges of hiring for passion over experience is finding a reliable metric for passion. Everyone who wants a job will tell you they’re impassioned for whatever it is the job is, but much of the time they either just have "passion" for no longer being unemployed or for the status/perks of the position rather than the work itself. This is why many companies, especially start-ups, are adapting "tryout" models for applicants where rather than relying on a traditional interview they will ask applicants to do some task - a report, presentation, etc. - related to the job in response to the application. Some will drop the task on a Friday evening, due Monday. The applicants that aren't willing to blow a weekend on it are viewed as self-selecting for elimination. Such tryouts not only serve as an ad-hoc measure of "passion" but also result in a deliverable on which applicants can be stratified. In some ways this is similar to military recruiting, where applicants must pass a battery of tests and attend certain obligations long before their first paycheck.

Travis Root, former recruiting assistant for the USAF/investments advisor

There are a number of factors, which could be associated to a single hiring occasion, but to try to answer as objectively as possible, I think passion trumps experience for a number of reasons:

- Today, we’re seeing less candidates with experience, especially direct experience regarding those who switch industries entirely. Hiring based on experience could cause a great worker to slip through the cracks.
- Experience is usually a good indication of a short-term solution, while passion insinuates a candidate and associated positive attitude will benefit the business regardless of present assignments or unexpected modifications of position or business structure.
- Hiring for experience is like ensuring a business' processes are optimized, but hiring for passion seeks to optimize a business' in-house philosophy and culture. Day-to-day operations could be quickly seen as a photo of microcosmic proportions, but looking at the larger picture, a business demands a good foundation of people.

James Agate

We are a company that has significant influence over the hiring and placement for more than 5,000 administrative, executive, and technical jobs annually, and we screen all applicants' handwriting for some 300 personality traits. At times, one of our clients will send us a candidate that is so terrible for the job at hand, or any job, for that matter (integrity problems), that we offer a flat NO as our recommendation. Yet he/she is hired anyway, because the president likes the person or for other reasons which we are not told about. Almost invariably, our warnings come to reality within a few months (usually in some form of unpardonable fraud or theft) and the "passion" that permitted the hiring is shown to be a very expensive indulgence. We tell all of our clients, "Don't submit to passion when it comes to such an important responsibility as hiring. Too many people get hurt."

Barney Collier
Director
Graphology Consulting Group
What if you are reviewing your top two candidates for a job opening and one has the passion to learn the job, while the other has the experience? A scenario that presents an interesting decision. The hiring manager should consider the benefits of hiring a candidate with passion, while determining if they have the time to train the employee.

A few benefits of hiring the candidate who has the passion for the job, but lacks the experience...

1. You become a manager/mentor as you train the employee and develop an effective team.
2. You teach the employee how to execute the job duties using your methods.
3. The employee is grateful for the opportunity and will strive to exceed your exceptions.
4. You can delegate duties with confidence the employee will complete as outlined.
5. Your employer sees your dedication and leadership skills as a manager.

If you have the time to train, consider a candidate with passion for the position. During the decision make sure to share your concerns. The way they answer your concerns, should help to determine if they have the drive and dedication to master the position.

Diane Bogut
Author/Speaker/PT Radio Co-Host
Employment-Relationships-Inspirations

Passion vs Experience?
Passion - my word is attitude - trumps experience.

All open positions have a technical skill and years of experience requirements. For example an open accounting position will require a CPA with 7 years' experience. The top candidates all meet the time requirements and have demonstrated great success. The defining difference in an outstanding employee is their attitude.

Attitude is everything. Would you rather have an employee with great skill and a poor attitude or one with average skill and a great attitude? Skills can be learned. Attitude can be changed but it is much more difficult.

People with positive attitudes are winners. They think positively. The words don't and can't are not in their vocabulary.

How do we identify winners? It is hard to tell by casual observation. Winners dress the same as everyone else, eat in the same restaurants and work in the same companies. Successful people come in all personality types, physical characteristics and professions. We identify them by their attitudes, behaviors and results.

Winners don't give up. The sad truth about people who give up is they are just as capable as those who don't. The main difference is their attitude.

Hire to attitude, promote to attitude and fire to attitude.

Tom Northup
Author of the book, Five Hidden Mistakes CEOs Make: How to Unlock the Secrets that Drive Growth and Profitability

Experience and passion are both important, but I always advise my clients to look for (and HIRE) "fit" over anything else. For example, is the candidate a natural fit with the existing corporate culture (size of the company, work environment, etc.)? Does his or her personality mesh well with the other employees? These are the types of indicators that will determine
how happy someone will be at a particular company and, likewise, how long they will be likely to stay.

Experience is a significant factor, but the reality is that knowledge and skill can be gained over time. Passion is also very important, but an employee’s enthusiasm will be lost if the deeper issue of “fit” is not in alignment. (E.g., someone might be passionate about a company’s mission, but if they function best in a small work environment with laid back co-workers and they are hired by a large corporation housed in a Class A office building, that employee is very likely to eventually jump ship and work for someone else who offers them a similar job description in a more suitable environment.)

Bottom line - if the fit is there, the passion and experience will fall into place. So, hire FIT first!

Jackie Ducci I President
Ducci & Associates

I run a boutique recruiting firm and before that was the COO of recruiting for the world’s largest hedge fund. In brief:

- Hiring managers need to be comprehensive in thinking about the characteristics required to be successful for a given hire.
- Those characteristics, once they are identified, need to be prioritized relative to each other.
- Most characteristics fall into three categories - personality/culture fit, horsepower/intelligence, learned skills/experiences.
- There is real risk to prioritizing the third set over the first two. It often leads to “quick fix” hires.

Cliff Dank
President, Managing Partner
Elm Talent Group

Hiring people with passion and will is often better than experience. I curate the museum of interesting things and teach people to be curious and passionate about life, education and work.

Often people with a passion and will to do something just want a chance to do something. If you give them that chance to excel they will go above and beyond because you believed in them when they were down or new. Then you have a loyal worker even when they move on. That makes for a good ally too.

I learned this when I was a kid at 13 and got my first few bass players. Most had never played bass. I even had to go to the store and help one buy his bass. Later everyone wanted to “borrow” my bass players because they became brilliant creative bass players!

Denny Daniel

Should people hire based on passion over experience?

Passion always wins the race!

There are three things that I want to know when interviewing candidates:

- Can they do the job?
- Will they fit in with the team and our company culture?
- Will they be successful in the role and contribute to our organization’s success?
- Can you do the job depends upon the technical skills and experience required for the role.
Depending on the employer and the position of course -- hiring managers will train the right person who has the spark of passion.

The best companies tend to have one thing in common that separates them from the rest...they have a strong company culture. When you hire passionate talent who fit your company's culture...you may very well end up with a passionate team and company!

Patricia D. Sadar, SPHR, CHRE, MBA  
President & CEO  
People2Strategy

In my experience, you have to "buy" core values - everything else you can teach. Hire people with passion and who share the core values that are integral to your firm's and your customer's success. Trust me, you CANNOT train someone to share your core values!

Mark E. Calabrese

Should people hire based on passion over experience?

It depends entirely on the industry. You have to weigh the risk of lack of experience versus the risk of lack of passion.

If you are flying a plane, the risk of a lack of experience in the pilot is death of the passengers. If you are operating a startup, the risk of lack of passion in the leadership you hire is death of the company.

Working for a Software-as-a-Service company that makes software to help people hire (www.TheResumator.com), and has seen much of its success from disrupting the existing options that screen people solely on binary experience and skillsets, I have seen this firsthand.

We have had people on the leadership team who had very impressive years of experience yet were not agile or passionate enough to adapt in the ways we needed, and the negative impact of this was far reaching.

On the flip side, we have hired people with very non-traditional experience who were able to convey their passion to us during the interview process, and they have been some of the biggest contributors to our success.

It has been so eye opening that we have changed our interview process to include questions that get at the passion and the way people think. As long as they have a competency in the skills required, the passion outweighs the experience, in our world.

Laura Smous

Should people hire based on passion over experience?

It all depends upon your expectations, the position and the salary requirements.

For instance, if you are looking for an intern for a starting position - then of course, you will be hiring based on passion over experience. If you need someone to ‘hit the ground running’, produce right away and a very critical position then you need a combination of experience and passion (with more experience). If you need someone to step in and consult for a short period then you need the experience (with little regard to his/her passion for your company).

It all depends upon your expectations toward performance and productivity. If you can tolerate a longer production cycle and absorb higher training costs (and turn-over costs), than passion, on its own, is fine. But there’s really no replacement for proven results (i.e.  

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experience) and desire (i.e. passion) when it comes to achieving your company's business goals. The bottom line is that your company is in business to make money. And to achieve that, you need a combination of both passion and experience. On the other hand, not everyone on your team needs to have equal parts of passion and experience. As mentioned above, lower level staff with lower production expectations can have a larger percentage of passion over experience. Positions with very high-performance expectations in short delivery cycles requires a larger experience percentage over passion. People in management roles need more of an equal percentage of passion and experience.

Laura Lee Rose, CTACC
Business and Efficiency Coach

At my company, technical skills are a must. We hire based upon successful completion of a technical assessment, because passion and experience on paper don't tell the full story.

Jackie Farzad
Advaion, LLC

Definitely, hire based on experience over passion.

Effort says 1,000 times more about a person than their stated passion does.

For example, the son of a neighbor is passionate about computer programming. He even earned a B.S. degree as an IT major. He could talk about his passion for computer programming 24/7.

But, he is a lazy bum who lives off his parents and has not gotten a job nor even volunteered to show actual effort to do computer programming for any organization.

In contrast, I know another fanatic about computer programming who volunteered and did unpaid practicums in which she did computer programming. She showed effort and a good work ethic and found experience actually doing her passion for computer programming.

Any smart manager would hire based on actual effort & experience - and not on a job applicant's stated passion.


I would say you should hire based upon both. Having said that, there are other important areas you should consider as well that aren't mentioned here. Interestingly enough, Americans traditionally slide towards experience (skills). The ironic thing is that of all the things you should consider, skill is the only one you can teach...

Kathryn Prusinski, VP
Vision Alignment

The best approach is checking the qualifications and pertinent experience boxes first, then using the criteria of enthusiasm and personality/team fit as deciding factors in making the hiring decision. When it comes to a draw, select the person with the best personal fit qualifications. Enthusiasm and passion are the best motivators in making up for any knowledge deficit.

Sandra Lamb, www.SandraLamb.com, is a career, lifestyle, and etiquette expert, and the author of 3000 Power Words and Phrases for Effective Performance Reviews; How to Write It; Personal Notes; and Write the Right Words.
It really depends on what the team needs. If you're a business owner in growth mode, you may not have the ability to train as much as you'd like, so you would need to hire for experience and passion. If you can train, then take passion over experience every time. I always say, "You can teach them the job but you can't teach them what their mama didn't." Ideally, a business should only hire people who believe in their mission and values--it's the only way to have an intentional culture. Hiring people who do subscribe to your mission and values ensures you'll have passionate employees.

"Laura Renner is the founder of Hiring Coach. She is passionate about people. Throughout her career in the U.S. Air Force and in Human Resources, she has studied people: what drives us, what inspires us, what scares us. Laura's mission in life is to change people’s worlds for the better. She does that by helping business owners to make smart hiring decisions, getting them to hire with intention and avoid the painful and costly experience of a bad hire. She wants every business owner to have an all-star team because she doesn't believe we should settle for less than that.

Laura has worked for nearly fifteen years dealing directly with people, whether in public relations, foreign relations, education or human resources. She has an International MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and a bachelor's of science from the U.S. Air Force Academy."

Laura Renner
Hiring Coach

As a former manager who hired and trained several hundred employees, I often took a chance on enthusiastic candidates who had no job-related experience (assuming that we could teach them everything that they needed to know). I found that this approach can work, but several factors should be considered.

When hiring for entry-level positions that require a relatively short training period, hiring unskilled people who are passionate about learning a particular job (or supporting the organization's overall mission) can make good sense. An unskilled candidate is generally less expensive to hire, and an applicant's passion and enthusiasm will help him or her persevere during difficult aspects of training.

On the other hand, passion alone cannot overcome a lack of aptitude for learning the skills related to a particular job. A great many duffers, for example, are passionate about the game of golf. And even though they put a lot of time, effort, and money into improving their games, relatively few can truthfully call themselves skilled golfers -- even after many, many years of practice. Thus, when using passion and enthusiasm as hiring criteria, managers must accept the fact that some percentage of their new-hires will not make the cut (and the related costs of their recruitment, selection, and training will have been wasted). Further, the longer the training period, the more costly these hiring mistakes become.

In the final analysis, making hiring decisions primarily based on an applicant's passion and enthusiasm can make sense in some types of jobs, particularly at entry-level where standardized training programs are available. However, if job-related success relies heavily on a person's judgment, experience, formal education, or other personal characteristics, the screening process will have to go well beyond an applicant's passion for the position.

Timothy G. Wiedman, D.B.A., PHR
Associate Prof. of Management & Human Resources
Doane College -- Crete, Nebraska

The characteristics of passion and job experience are not of course, mutually exclusive of one another. We've seen over the last several years that our clients end up selecting talent and passion over job-related skills, even if that wasn't their initial intent. Passion for the job at
hand is obviously an important characteristic. The hiring manager must be careful however, that the passion they sense is indeed passion for the role and not passion for simply getting their next job. Let’s face it, most anyone can fake passion for a short period of time. Their past job history and performance cannot be faked.

Too many hiring managers and recruiters become overly obsessed with a particular profile that they believe a candidate must rigidly have. Instead, we would encourage those managers to focus more on the task at hand, job goals and what they expect the candidate to accomplish. Personal characteristics such as passion, intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness and idea leadership are traits that are more difficult to evaluate over a text resume or "profile", but may in fact be more important to the candidates ultimate success.

Don Jacob
CEO of The Jacob Group, an affiliate of MRI Network, one of the largest executive search and recruitment organizations in the world.

In all the interviews I've conducted over the years, I have very rarely found an applicant who didn't appear "passionate" for the job. The applicants all show up with thoughts of how amazing they would be if they were selected for the position (even if they are not particularly qualified for it). Experience says a lot more about the applicant in an interview. It shows the length of time the employee has dedicated to the industry and in most cases you can see the passion shine through when they speak about their past experiences. To make a long story short, I think experience trumps passion. Passion can be present in any interview, experience can't be. Now, if the candidates have equal experience, the "passion" conveyed about that experience is the deciding factor for me.

Stacy Glass - CHRP
Senior Human Resources Consultant
Consulting Services, HR Options, Inc.

When hiring sales professionals, we hire individuals who have tremendous drive over experience. We feel that we can teach a great sales person about our clients, products, solutions, etc. What we can't teach is determination, hunger, competitive spirit, grit and persistence. I always caution our recruiters to not mistake experience with ability.

Geoff Winthrop
Executive VP
Acquirent

The ideal job candidate has a perfect balance of experience and passion. However, we all know that ideals don't always align with reality. At some point, all recruiters and hiring managers will find themselves considering a candidate who is under-experienced for the position they're applying for, but who has a high level of passion and enthusiasm for the job. It's tempting to think that this passion can make up for experience, but hiring managers should proceed with caution. In the nonprofit world, you ideally want a candidate who has a strong passion for your mission, as they will be more engaged. It's true that a passion for the job can make employees faster learners and better performers, but there are some things that only experience can teach. I advise hiring managers not to make extreme compromises on experience in favor of passion. For example, you are probably safe hiring a candidate who has a year or two less experience than your position requires but who is extremely passionate, but hiring an enthusiastic entry-level candidate for a senior level role is likely a recipe for disaster.

Lisa Brown-Morton
CEO
NonProfit HR
3 Hiring Tips You May Not Have Thought Of

1. Look for candidates with a positive attitude over aptitude. Many skills and technical aspects of a position are fairly simple to teach a person. It is much more difficult to change a person's attitude.

2. Look for people with a history of helping people. Scan resumes and applications for community work and volunteer accolades. These are the type of people that will go the extra mile for you.

3. Look for people who are active listeners. This can be assessed in the interview process or even over the phone. People who pay attention, nod in understanding and follow through with tasks you request during the hiring process fall into this category.

Audrey McLaughlin, RN
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