



## Why Hiring the Most Qualified Person Might Be a Mistake

*This transcript was lightly edited for clarity.*

**Chris:** Hello everyone. Welcome back. Today my guest is Bob Penney. Bob is the CEO of Mercatius Limited. And what Mercatius does is specializes in helping small and medium sized life science tools companies improve their revenues and profits through improving their processes. Bob has a particular passion for recruiting the right people for the right job, and building effective A teams, which is what we're going to talk about today. So Bob Penney, thanks for joining us on Life Science Marketing Radio.

**Bob:** Chris, it's a pleasure and an honor to be on here. Thanks ever so much, and thanks for the great summary.

**Chris:** My pleasure. We were introduced by Harrison Wright, who's been on this podcast. He helps out the ACPLS with a webinar series and been a big supporter of the show. And he suggested that you would have some valuable insights for my audience. I mentioned we're going to talk about building A teams, which I think a lot of marketers will be interested in. But just for context, give us your background in the life sciences.

**Bob:** Well I've been in the life sciences now for some 35 years, which probably matches the lack of hair that I have. But I focused mainly on the past 20 years on building companies. So I've started the subsidiaries for both Ambien in Europe, and also Accuri Cytometers. And I've run a fitness company called BioSilta. So within that, you know, it's basically doing business in the life science tools arena. And I personally think that people are one of the

four great cornerstones that make a great company. The other three being products, processes, and philosophies or values.

And I've always tried to build a team that...first thing I realized actually was that the job descriptions that I'd been given for, for instance, technical specialist, or sales people, or commerce person that I was given from, for instance, in Ambion from the head office, they were job descriptions for people over there in that organization, not in my organization. And I found that they actually weren't clear as to...I wasn't clear as to what they were actually conveying in terms of the person's key duties and their responsibilities. So I would say that, you know, one of the key things I've encountered is the poor job descriptions are common, and they usually arise when the immediate manager doesn't actually think carefully enough about what they want the job to do.

And that's actually quite critical because without the manager and the candidates having a clear and common idea of what a successful person needs to do in the job, then there is a great risk that the whole process falls over from the start. And I've seen that in previous companies.

**Chris:** Yeah, I'll just jump in here. I think first of all, you're right. You never get any coaching in how to hire someone. And then as I look across job descriptions, that's another thing that maybe there's not a formula for. Harrison did a nice job on the podcast of describing a different way to write up a job description. But the vast majority, as you say, are horrible. And because you get no training, and it requires a lot of thought about what you really want, and they're just written poorly, so it's kind of a crap shoot who's going to apply, and it's a crap shoot if you're an applicant, about what you're going to get if you're hired.

**Bob:** Well absolutely. And it sort of runs a high risk of, you know, unhappy people, and a mismatch of expectations. And that can...

**Chris:** Okay, yeah, we dropped out. So you said a mismatch of expectations.

**Bob:** Yeah, with comments like the job isn't what I expected to be, you know, or the manager turning around and saying they're not doing the job I expected them to do, and they're not really doing it very well. So you know, if you don't get a job description right, and by right I mean that virtually anybody should be able to understand what the objective

of the job is and what the key duties are, and the responsibilities, and also insure that the authorities match the responsibilities, because I've been in that situation before where you've got all the responsibility and none of the authority. And naturally it should also state the key skills and experience. And importantly, how the job should actually be measured, and when it's going to be measured. This is something that managers don't actually think about quite very carefully. So measuring can include things like quarterly bonuses and whether they are bonuses based on activities or results, and be it sales results or other results. You know, that need to be made clear in the job.

Well that was the first thing. I should also say that the job description should be written by the manager first and not by HR. If you are in a company where you have an HR department, then no problems with HR helping out, or fine tuning it, or putting it into the corporate format, but the manager should really formulate the job description. It's that thinking process that's absolutely critical.

The second issue I would say is selecting interview candidates based only on qualifications and experience. And by that, I mean you see a resume. You look at the qualifications, you look at what's written there, you make several assumptions. My experience has been that this results in actually interviewing many more candidates than you need to. And many of whom end up or turn up to be unsuitable. So it's a bit of a...I would say it wastes a lot of management time. By unsuitable, by the way, I mean not having the behaviors required in to be successful in the job.

And the next thing is obviously hiring the people based on the same basis, just qualifications, experience, and what you see in the interview. I've quite often seen people being appointed on this basis, and turning out to be unsuitable for the job, not performing well, and not fitting in with the existing team, or getting on with the manager. And that, to be quite honest with you, I've concluded is all because they're not using their natural behavior strengths in the job.

Then the last key issue or key problem is having an unstructured recruitment process. I mean, recruiting is subjective at best. And you know, what I've tried to do in my recruitment processes that I've used over the past 20 years is actually bring an increased amount of objectivity into the recruitment process. You know, you can basically filter out people that are unsuitable. And I use the Belbin Team Roles Profile to do that and, you

know, reduce the amount of interview time. If you're interviewing 10, 15 candidates for a particular job, then my question is why? There certainly aren't 10 or 15 highly suitable and eligible people for the job, you know? There are usually fewer than those.

**Chris:** Yeah, I like that. So let's dig into some of those. We'll go back and, just based on my own experience, of course, we naturally think in a resume sort of context. So you're looking at a piece of paper or PDF, and you're thinking who...the first step...the way I look at interviewing has always been, you know, who can do this job? And then you interview them, and you say, who do you want to do this job essentially. You're trying to assess that fit in the interview, but it's not a very objective thing. And some people might interview well, and you try to dig in for those behaviors, as you mentioned, but it's really...and then there's maybe a number of people involved, and they have different impressions, and there's no fair comparison because you may not have each sat in on every other reviewer's interview. So you don't get the full picture. So what's the problem with just saying we're going to hire the most qualified person for the job, whatever that means?

**Bob:** It's interesting because usually qualified refers generally to somebody that's hired for his qualifications, experience, obviously who interviews well. But most interviews are focused on people's competencies, which is interesting and not unusual, I have to say. After all, you know, let's take somebody that was hired based on that, and ask the other colleagues who notice that despite the person having all the knowledge, experience, and qualifications to do the job, they haven't actually achieved or contributed much in reality.

In addition to that, you know, they're unhappy or negative a lot of the time, and that tends to bring down the rest of the team. And I can think of people that fit that bill that I've hired in years come past. And the reason that the person is unhappy and isn't doing the job is because no one looked at the behaviors that were required for the job, and whether or not that person possessed those natural behavioral strengths.

And let's give an example. An experienced technical person who is good at relating to people will not necessarily make a great technical salesperson if they don't possess the drive to overcome objections and achieve sales objectives. Now how do you check that? You know, you could ask them the question in the interview, and they may say yes they do. But do they? You know, it really is a bit of a hit and miss affair when you're sort of trying to formulate questions during an interview to try and check that.

**Chris:** We're talking about behavior in the interview process, and a lot of times, you know, if you read the books on behavioral interviewing, it starts, "Tell me about a time when..." And so would you talk a little bit about in a roles on the team and thinking behind, taking behavior account in the hiring process? So how do you measure those things that we would typically try to get at by that "tell me about a time when..." question?

**Bob:** Well generally, so the questions "tell me about a time when..." are not going to uncover the behavioral preferences of a person. They're more directed towards uncovering competencies that are basically related about how a person went about things. So that's more focused towards sort of process type thinking. As you said yourself, interviews are also precious situations, you know, where the candidates can either get tongue tied or embellish on history, tell you what you hear, and it's a natural thing that if you like the look of the candidate, you may hear what you want to hear, if you know what I mean.

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Bob:** So the question is how do you ensure that you get to the real person, and ensure an objective, and common assessment of behavioral preferences? That's the key question. Personally I've, for the last sort of 20 years I've been using Belbin Team Role Profiling to judge the suitability of the candidate for the team. And this behavioral assessment chore, and by the way it's not a personality assessment. It is a behavioral assessment backed up by solid research over the last 40 years. And I found it an extremely useful tool where I can learn more about a person from their assessment reports than I could do by working with them for three months. So it's very, very revealing.

**Chris:** Okay, so...

**Bob:** Yeah sorry?

**Chris:** Sorry to interrupt. So I'm assuming the next thing, and if it's not, go ahead with what you were going to say, but explain to us then how we're working with competence and suitability together?

**Bob:** Okay, so if I can just clarify that when you're using the Belbin, you're actually defining

team roles of a person. And Belbin has defined a team role as a tendency to behave, contribute, and interrelate with others in a particular way. Now there are nine team roles in total. Each of them has their own behavioral contribution, and also allowable weaknesses, and the key word there is allowable.

And it's rather like getting a coin, you know? You've got two sides to a coin, you know, which side is facing up? Are you seeing the contributions or are you seeing the allowable weaknesses? So let's just take an example. A person who is high in one team role called completer finisher is detailed, painstaking, conscientious, and anxious. They search out areas, they polish and perfect basically. Their main allowable weaknesses are that they are inclined to worry unduly. And as a result of wanting to do their work at high standards or too high standards, they can be reluctant to delegate work. So if you are high in completer finisher, they'd be, you know, people with that would be good in roles where accuracy, attention to detail is paramount. You know, proofreading for instance in the marcoms area. Don't look to them for ideas. They're more used to actually implementing to high standards.

One of the things that's interesting to note with completer- finishers is that because they believe that nobody can do the work to the standard that they can, when they do make a mistake, then there is nobody that whips themselves harder than a complete to finisher. So as a manager, you're best off giving praise, telling them not to worry, soothing them, etc. If you go in there, you know, all guns blazing, oh you missed this, then you will completely wipe them out. So you know, knowing people's preferred team roles will help you manage people better and get more out of them.

Shoot with a question because I feel as I'm doing all the talking here.

**Chris:** Well that's how it's supposed to be. So that's good. So just to clarify, you said nine team roles, so I think people can imagine maybe what some of those are, and you've given a nice example of one of those. You know, certainly many marcom teams would like to have one of those people on their team, but they don't want six of them on their team, right? And so I think you get a sense of the whole hiring for behavior...

So now you've got different needs on your team for different competencies. And in many cases, the suitability factors that you're looking for will be somewhat defined by the competencies. For example, you said, you know, you need a proofreader on a marcom team.

So whoever's going to get that job needs to be a completer finisher. It's also possible that isn't their primary job. They do something else, but anything that needs proofread, everybody on the team knows to say, "give it to that person".

So I guess in the general hiring process, you're looking for competencies, of course. That's probably the first thing because you have a role to fill in terms of a skillset you need. And you may have already, I presume, already have identified the different suitability or behavioral types on your team. And so you would also be looking to match someone with the right competencies and fill perhaps a gap on the behavioral side. Is that fair?

**Bob:** To some extent that is fair. One has to look at what is the definition of a team, and what is the difference between a team and a group. Now a team usually has a common objective and they're all working towards that. And that's absolutely key for defining a team. And in that context, you would need, or you would be best to have a balance of the nine team roles in the team. Now that doesn't mean to say you have to have nine people in one of each of the team roles. In fact, most people have between one and three team roles are what's termed their preferred behaviors.

Now preferred behaviors are important to identify because the other type of behaviors that you can exhibit with no effort whatsoever. So for instance, if you're under stress, then you resort to type, as they say. And this is when definitely your preferred team roles actually come to the fore. So if you are in a team where the team hasn't got, for instance, a completer finisher, but you've got it as one of your manageable roles, in other words, you could put a little bit more effort into exhibiting those behaviors, then you can actually make a contribution to the team, you know, and fill in doing the proofreading, for instance.

But the one thing that is definite is that the other group of team roles you have is the least preferred team roles. Now these are the ones you need to really watch out for because if, for instance, you've got completer finisher as your least preferred team role, you might be able to put a lot more effort to say doing the proofreading. But the results are not likely to be as good as somebody that has it as their preferred team role. And you'll get to the end of the job or the task and you'll say, "Thank God that's over."

Now, you know, that's all right for short bursts. But if it is that you are put in a job where you're using your least preferred team roles on a daily basis, then you will become one of

the moaners of the organization because you won't enjoy the job, you won't be successful even with all the qualifications and experience. And you need to be mindful of this, and basically remove yourself because sure as heck somebody else will remove you from that job. But it's not something that people can put into words unless they use a tool like Belbin Team Role Profiling.

**Chris:** Okay, so yeah. That all makes complete sense. I want to get to the part...so you and I have spoken briefly about this before, and I want to have you describe the two by two matrix that you described for me, and we'll certainly link to a lot of this in the show notes so people can actually see what you're talking about. But with competence one axis and suitability on another, and where you should be trying to place new hires so that in terms of development, they're in the right role, and that they're not...and that they're suitably challenged. So can you describe that for us?

**Bob:** Yeah, sure. If the listeners draw a square on a piece of paper and subdivide it into four squares so that you have basically a Boston matrix, on the left hand axis is eligibility, and it's eligibility of a person for the job, and the big square represents the job. Eligibility is qualifications, experience, skills, those sorts of things. Suitability is on the bottom axis. And the suitability is the behavioral requirements for the job. If you have the top left hand axis 100% and the bottom right hand axis 100%, and the bottom left is 0%, there you have the plot, if you like, of plotting eligibility against suitability.

Now obviously looking at a small square on the bottom left hand corner where its zero represent eligible and 0% suitable, we wouldn't look for people like that. They would be unsuitable, ineligible, and basically unhappy from day one. And that's pretty logical. On the other hand, if you look at the top left where the person is 100% eligible, has all the experience, and the qualifications, and the skillsets, etc., but it has 0% suitable, these basically will end up being the moaners of the organization. They'll be unhappy. My description is that they need to be surgically removed from the job and put into a job where they are much more suitable. They will be unhappy, and it's just not worth going there.

I had a team of...a tech support team in Ambion who judged that a person was 100% eligible, and really less than 50% suitable for the job. But they really wanted the person to come onboard because they could speak French, and this was to give tech support to France. So we hired him. He wasn't happy. They weren't happy. We extended the



probationary period. And the end of six months, we said, "I'm sorry. It doesn't appear to be working." His response was, "Thank you. I'm glad you've come to that conclusion." But we wasted six months, plus another three months in trying to hire another person. So really, you really must guard against hiring just based on eligibility.

Somebody who is at the bottom right, they're 100% suitable and 0% eligible, this person will have all the can do factor, but none of the skills, or qualifications, or experience to be able to contribute instantly. However, they make really good apprentices, and if anyone's organization's big enough to carry them, you know, while they're getting trained and such like, then they really make good hires. But it needs to be a conscious decision that you're going to hire that person.

Now the trap is that when you look at the top right of the Boston matrix, where somebody is 100% eligible and 100% suitable, the logic is that they would be the absolute right person for the job. They'd be the best hire. Well unfortunately, because that person could do the job standing on their heads, there would be no challenge for them. And they'd get bored, and leave within 6 to 12 months. You know, having a challenge and therefore a space to grow in experience, is absolutely critical for somebody to enjoy their job, feel as though they're achieving something, and seeing how they're developing, and notice how they're developing. And the bottom line is that, you know, people like challenges. And if you've got no challenge, there is what's the purpose? It's almost like the meaning of life.

**Chris:** Exactly.

**Bob:** So the question is where do I look for, you know, the right person to fit the job? And I basically look for people who are greater than 50% eligible, but greater than 75% suitable. And the basis of this is that somebody with a high level of suitability, in other words, can do factor enjoyment, can really overcome a lot of obstacles, and still get things done whilst enjoying their work. It also leaves them growth room on the eligibility scale to learn new competencies, experience, and skills. Hence, they feel as though they're growing, they're developing, they're achieving things, which in turn is rewarding and fun. And I think the word fun needs to be focused on. People need to have fun in their job.

**Chris:** Wow, thank you for saying that.

**Bob:** So you know...

**Chris:** Really, I know I think people...

**Bob:** Sorry, it sounds obvious...critical.

**Chris:** Well you would think people would recognize that, but they might be afraid to actually say that. But if anyone looked honestly at their own job, you know, if it's not fun, you might be able to do it for a while, but not for long. And what I really like about what you've just described here is now here is a logical way to work fun into the equation, short of putting a Ping-Pong table in the break room. You've redefined what makes a job fun in terms of challenging and suitability. So I think it's just a great way to look at it where people can say, "We can get the right person who's going to love this job if we look in this part of the matrix."

**Bob:** Absolutely, absolutely, you know, to me it's critical to get people in who have a really good chance of A, being successful, and B, enjoying the job because they come into work the next morning saying, "I want more." As opposed to those people who are unhappy in the job because the work they're doing is not suited to the behaviors. They come in, they wake up in the morning and think, "Oh my God, I've got to go to work." You know, I want people leaping out of bed coming to work, you know, wanting to come to work. And it's a critical thing. And I think employers and managers need to really, really take that message onboard.

**Chris:** Yeah, it's just so easy to not think of it when you're under the pressure of filling a gap, and you're looking, and you think that naturally I want the person who is most qualified for this job, and because going back to what we said at the beginning, you never get trained in this aspect of hiring or how to write a job description, how to look for exactly the right person, and what makes sense about what you would be evaluating. And how to make an objective measure of those behaviors in what is often a compressed process, I think...

**Bob:** And you know, using this matrix is... it's helpful. It's a guide. It puts everything in perspective. It's still a subjective judgement at the end. It's still your judgement. It's not a black and white tool. This is to help you formulate a decision, okay? And certainly by using

a combination...and it's a process. The combination of the Belbin and a competency screening checklist to judge eligibility, you could become much more objective and arrive at far better judgement, utilizing something that's common across all candidates.

**Chris:** Yeah. And I think everybody can appreciate that. I mean, honestly I've been a bad fit for a job, and I've hired people who were a bad fit for a job. And I've been a great fit for other jobs and hired great people. So you know, if you've seen all of those, you can appreciate the value of having a tool like this.

**Bob:** Yeah, it's a tool, it's a process. It, to me, well because of my team role, preferred team roles, it's gotta be logical. So you know, it gives me something on which I can put my back up against it and make a rational decision. And you know, I mentioned earlier about the cornerstones of a great company and philosophies, I very much believe that one of those should be making the right decision for the right reason.

**Chris:** Yeah, well Bob Penney, this has been a fascinating and really helpful interview. I think marketers or anyone listening who's thinking about hiring someone, or worries in the long term about how to build a team, because I think also the other challenge is some teams, you don't get this opportunity very often, and you think, eh, you know, it's one thing. But in the long run, somebody in that company should be thinking, you know, bigger picture about how teams come together. So that's valuable. And I really just appreciate you taking the time to lay this out for us.

So I'm going to put some links into the show notes, but where can people find out more about you or Mercatius, and get in touch with you?

**Bob:** I think the best thing to do is to look on LinkedIn under Bob Penney. My contact details are there. I don't have a website, and the reason I don't have a website is because I work on references only, and your listeners being referred to me by you and your program is fine by me. So my details are there, and just email me. I'm happy to help people.

And I should say one thing, Chris, that's actually quite important, that actually knowing your own team role profile will enable you to take charge of your career. Because if you know your preferred team roles, you could look for jobs that are going to obviously have the team roles that you have.

So for instance, a sales job, you know, you know that sales job requires self-starting, outgoing person developing contacts, being objective focused, overcoming obstacles, etc. And they are basically associated with two team roles. One's called resource investigator and the other one is shaper. And if you've got those in your preferred roles, especially if they're your top roles, then you are likely to be good at the job and enjoy it.

So you can, by knowing your preferred team roles, take charge of assessing the behaviors that are potentially going to be required in a job that you're going for. And you can ask the interviewers questions based around behaviors.

**Chris:** Yeah, thank you so much for bringing that up because we have been talking about this whole thing in the context of hiring someone, but we haven't really touched on how do I take advantage of this for myself to make sure that I'm advancing the way I want to. So I really appreciate you bringing that up.

**Bob:** And people don't need to come to me for doing their own Belbins. They can go to the Belbin website. It's available online. It's, you know, payable online, it's doable online, and you get an email of your Belbin profile. So it's actually really easy to do.

**Chris:** I'm probably going to do that. I'm an assessment taker, and obsessive assessor. So all right, once again...

**Bob:** For you, I'll do it free of charge, so you know...

**Chris:** All right, thank you again very again, Bob Penney. I will put all those links, your LinkedIn profile, the Belbin site, and so on in the show notes for this episode.

**Bob:** Super, Chris, and thanks for having me on. Much appreciated.

**Chris:** My pleasure.

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