

COMMENTARIES

Executive Fit Is Negotiated, Not Selected

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Hollenbeck (2009) notes the apparent failure of behavioral and organizational science to identify individuals who will have a reasonably high probability of success in executive leadership roles. He presents this as an opportunity for industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology to make substantive and more valued contributions to advance the state of the art and the role of I–O practitioners to meet what we agree is a clearly critical need.

Our more radical view is that the concept of “selection” itself needs reframing and that doing so makes the challenge of helping to ensure executive success tractable. Current practice treats selection as a static, one-time decision made by organization stakeholders. In contrast, we view selection as a dynamic, extended decision-making process involving both organization stakeholders and executives themselves as they sense, evaluate, and respond to information about how well the appointment meets expectations from their perspectives.

Thus, we argue that developmental and ecological fit perspectives provide the

theoretical foundation for all selection. Doing so shifts the fundamental emphasis of selection from “getting it right” with a high-stakes guess (however well informed or scientifically informed) to “making it right” with effective person-to-role and person-to-organization fit management. Shifting the burden from selection to managing executive integration will reinforce the need for I–O and other practitioners to possess the consulting and problem-solving expertise clients really value.

In the rest of this article, we use this executive fit management framework—an executive integration framework—to discuss and extend the Hollenbeck (2009) key assumptions, observations, and recommendations.

Key Assumptions

We agree that executive performance directly affects organizations, executive success is predictable, values-based individual differences (i.e., “character”) can provide reasonably reliable guides for predicting future behavior, past performance can indicate the capability for future accomplishments, and context matters. These assumptions recognize that both individual differences and contexts are important for success, and that prediction is probabilistic.

We emphasize that contextual variables moderate the manner and extent to which

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individual differences can help or hurt leader performance (e.g., Mathieu, 2001), and that the influence of contextual variables in executive-level positions is profoundly complex to begin with and changes over time (e.g., Russell, 2001). For example, in the “honeymoon” phase, with expectations high all around, a new executive can expect positive and encouraging support from others. A generally positive individual with some tendency to defensiveness may well appear successful. However, as others begin looking for the results they expected, the honeymoon is over. Unless the new executive has established noteworthy successes, key relationships, and so on, others can become negative and critical, eliciting a defensive posture that can spiral downward.

Years of selection and validation research have shown that prediction improves with having the right predictor-criterion models, including predictors that are proximal to the criteria of interest. Accordingly, executive selection practices that fail to account for and control contextual factors and how they change and combine with individual differences at different points in time are far less successful than those that do. However, most importantly, we argue that executive success is a function of effective person-to-role fit management, not of the quality of a single past decision. Stated another way, in an executive integration approach to executive success, *prediction* of results is far less important than *control* of conditions predicted to influence success. Executive integration promotes taking effective and on-going corrective action, not pinning all hopes for future success on an initial appointment decision made months or years earlier.

What Is Right

We agree that 50 years of research and practice in the I–O field has produced many useful concepts, models, tools, and techniques. We note that tools and techniques dominate the Hollenbeck (2009) list of what is working well (e.g., better tests), with concepts and models dominating the list of

more recent “other factors being considered in the selection process” (e.g., relationship management; derailers). We welcome moving away from over reliance on tools and techniques toward expanding the set of concepts and models that provide the foundation for framing problems and building solutions. I–O psychology will have little impact on corporate decision making if all it can offer are specialized tools and techniques, many of which any smart, well-trained professional in business, engineering, or human resources can adopt and use (Pulakos, 2008).

We would add that successfully applying the tools of science to accomplish anything beyond the most rote tasks requires practitioner judgment guided by insight and knowledge. Executive integration is not a rote task, and each instance will be unique in important ways, requiring practitioners and researchers to raise their collective games.

What Is Wrong

Executive Failure and Selection Failure

Hollenbeck (2009) notes that executive placements fail at what most consider an unacceptably high rate, and he views this failure as a failure of selection. We do not view the rate of executive failures as credible evidence of selection failures.

Leaving aside the interesting question of how the “washout rate” for executives might compare to that of people in other extreme performance environments (e.g., athletics, music, military), being fired, forced to resign, leaving voluntarily, or even having your organization fail (whether or not you made the news) does not provide evidence vis-à-vis the quality of the initial selection decision. Too many factors influence separation decisions or organizational failures, and post-hoc scapegoating and theorizing is not a sound basis for advancing the state of the art.

We also noted that the information provided as evidence of selection failure either did not contain or discounted the

importance of critical contextual factors and seemed to attribute success or failure to individual attributes, stating in summary, “had the right people been chosen, the executives and their organizations would not have failed.”

Our view is that some of what is wrong is the tendency to attribute executive success or failure primarily to the individual and, by extension, to any single appointment decision. This limits insight and access to solutions. An executive integration perspective does not demand choosing between contextual and individual factors when identifying outcome drivers. Instead, it permits assessing, evaluating, and controlling a full range of possible outcome drivers alone and in combination. An executive integration process encourages practitioners to leverage any potentially useful tool. An understanding of the stages of executive integration can provide a road map for such endeavors (e.g., Kampa, Schalm, Capitano, & Davis, 2006).

For example, we view bringing on a new executive as requiring a strong change management component. A broader view of the critical factors that impact performance makes it possible to see managing executive selection and integration as a special case of managing change. Thus, failure to ensure that conditions in the organization support a new executive appointment can undermine it as that same oversight would undermine any other change initiative. An integration intervention combined with a robust selection process can significantly shift executive retention rates to as high as 80%–90%, even in companies with baseline retention rates of 50% or lower (Kampa et al., 2006; Schalm, 2006).

Involvement of I–O Psychologists

The Hollenbeck (2009) discussion of why I–O psychology is not at the executive selection table makes valid points about how the history of and successes in the I–O field created the relatively narrow technical and theoretical bases for much practitioner work.

His discussion of new ways to think about executive assessment, expanding the variables of interest (e.g., psychodynamic; intrapersonal), and the need to understand the nature of executive decision making and the complexities of the decision-making context is consistent with an executive integration perspective.

Taken together, his discussion suggested a strong, albeit implied, bottom line: I–O practitioners lack consulting skills. Successful consulting engagements do not begin by informing the client that you have a set of impressive tools and techniques to help them. Instead, they begin with solid up-front relationship building, problem diagnosis, and problem framing, and an accounting of the logistical, organizational, resource, and other factors that could influence the work. Only after these conversations can a consultant specify the tools, techniques, and processes needed to build any solution.

Thus, consulting is problem solving, and I–O practitioners need to engage with clients as knowledgeable consultant partners who will help achieve success, not as skilled technicians who might help predict it. Skilled technicians have a place in the back room, not at the table (consider the analogy of a consulting physician vs. a lab technician). Conventional selection tools and techniques used by I–O practitioners for executive selection are too mechanistic, simplistic, and short term to be either credible or effective.

Getting Back in the Game

We agree that “the road to relevance” for I–O psychology involves changing—reframing—how we conceptualize executive success and the related notion of “selection.” Such change will lead to invigorating research on criteria and predictors of executive success and improving practice overall.

However, we do not believe that decision making and judgment models alone point the way. After all, framing a selection problem in terms of decision making and

judgment still leaves it a selection problem. Our view is that an overemphasis on prediction to ensure executive success is unwarranted and offers little that is useful. Worse, we believe it draws attention away from what would be a more fruitful path of actively managing executive placements. For example, psychologists can play a role in helping clients find ways to manage anxieties around making a significant selection decision. Presenting clients with systemic and programmatic total solutions, not simply single-event interventions (e.g., selection tools), reduces stress on both clients and ourselves. We should not expect to develop any Holy Grail of executive selection tools.

Summary

Developmental and ecological fit perspectives provide the theoretical foundation for executive selection. This shifts the emphasis of selection from “getting it right” to also “making it right and keeping it right,” a more common practice among practitioners who support performance in extreme or high-stakes environments in which ensuring success is the ultimate objective.

However, are not all human capital management programs fit-creation and fit-maintenance functions? Employment trial periods, recruitment and hiring, coaching and mentoring, performance appraisal, and training and development all drive

alignment between the requirements of work and the capabilities of individuals. Fit management is already ubiquitous, valued, and implemented for executives and nonexecutives alike. The concepts, models, tools, and techniques exist today to manage executive success.

Executive success is too important and too complex to rely on the initial bets placed by all parties at placement; executive success deserves active, effective management provided by executive integration models and practices.

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