

K I L L T H E

RESUME

*Build a talent-dense company,
one right hire at a time*

Josh Hill

Kill the Resume

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Introduction

A while back I hired a creative strategist I was sure about. We ran the interviews properly, we checked what we thought needed checking, and she wanted the role as much as we wanted her in it. I was confident before she'd worked a single day.

A month in, it started to go wrong. We'd put her in one of our marketing pods, a small team that runs the same client accounts together, beside a growth strategist. One role was there to own the growth plan and the other to own the creative idea. That sounds like a clean split until you watch the work happen. Both people interpreted why the ads were working or weren't, and both thought they decided what got made next.

We had never put the two roles side by side and asked where one stopped and the other started. From the first weeks they were trying to own the same decisions, each certain those decisions belonged to them. The job she'd joined wasn't the job she'd understood she was accepting. I had checked the person and missed an important part of the job we were asking her to do.

I'm the VP of People and Culture at a marketing agency, so hiring is part of the work I'm meant to be good at. It took me a while to separate my disappointment with the result from a judgement about her. She could do creative strategy. What we hadn't established was how her work would fit beside the work already being done. A different division of responsibility might have helped, but that possibility doesn't turn the original decision into a good one.

This failure matters because it was ours to investigate. Calling it a personality clash would have let us avoid a harder question: what had we promised two people that they could

each own? Nor could I call the discovery complete and blame everything that followed on onboarding. We had missed something before she started.

I've made hiring decisions with more confidence than the evidence deserved. The page looked strong, the conversation felt right, and I could explain why the person should succeed. What I couldn't always explain was what I'd checked about the work itself, or what would make me change my mind. That's the habit this book is about.

When hiring is your responsibility

If you lead people or operations in a small business, a hiring request can arrive as a decision already made. Someone needs an account manager, an operations lead or a replacement, and you are meant to find them. You know the pressure on the team. You may also suspect that the role will not solve the problem. Raising that doubt takes time when everyone is asking for a shortlist.

Then someone arrives who seems capable of taking the weight off. It's easy to start hoping before you've finished checking. You picture the team getting some relief and the client no longer asking when things will improve. That hope can make a plausible candidate feel like an answer to a question the business hasn't settled.

The consequences depend on the role and the business. A poor decision in a large company can do serious harm too. Small teams often have fewer people who can absorb missed work, and a founder may have no one to hand the problem to. A person responsible for a crucial client relationship or a difficult technical decision can affect far more than their share of the headcount.

The candidate has made a consequential decision as well. They may have left a job, turned down another offer or rearranged their life around conditions you described. When the actual work differs from the promise, both sides can discover the problem too late. Hiring well means taking their decision as seriously as your own.

This book is for people and operations leaders in agencies and small businesses. You may run hiring without controlling the budget, the founder's priorities or the work a manager will delegate. Recruiters and founders will recognise these decisions too. I want to help you investigate the work, challenge an unsupported demand and make a better recommendation, while being honest about which changes require someone else's agreement.

You don't need to agree with every argument I make. You do need a way to distinguish what you've learned from what you've assumed, and a process that gives you a reasonable chance of finding out when you're wrong.

What the page leaves out

A resume can tell you where someone has worked, what they say they did and which questions to ask next. It can help you check a qualification or find a relevant piece of experience. The mistake is giving that summary authority over a much larger question: whether this person can do the work your business needs, in the conditions you're actually offering.

The same title can describe very different jobs. One account manager inherits established clients, clear contracts and a team that can meet its promises. Another has to repair damaged relationships, challenge requests and negotiate priorities with a founder who changes direction. Experience

in the first job may help with the second. It doesn't tell you, by itself, which parts will transfer or where the person will need support.

That is what I mean by context: the conditions in which the work gets done. Who can decide? What information is available? What has already been agreed with the client? Which colleagues make the work possible? What happens when two urgent requests conflict?

Ability still matters. A person cannot succeed at work they don't know how to do merely because the setting is pleasant. Conditions matter too, and a capable person can struggle when authority, expectations or support differ from what they understood. We need evidence about both. A list of skills is a start, not a complete account of either the person or the job.

In the strategist hire, we didn't need a more impressive resume. We needed to understand a decision that two existing role descriptions had each seemed to answer. That information was available in the business, but we hadn't brought it into the hiring decision.

Begin with the work

Hiring often starts when someone asks for a person. A manager needs another account manager. A founder needs an operations lead. A departing employee needs a replacement. The title gives everyone something familiar to search for, and the search can begin before anyone asks whether the familiar job is the one the business now needs.

I want you to pause at that point. What outcome is missing? What is preventing it? Is the obstacle a lack of capacity, a skill nobody has, a decision nobody owns or work that no longer

needs doing? Adding a person can solve some of those problems. It can also put another person inside a problem you haven't solved.

If a hire is needed, describe the work before you describe the ideal candidate. Be specific about the decisions, the limits and the support. Then choose evidence that will help you judge whether someone can meet those requirements. Ask what the person needs from the role, explain what you can provide and take any gap seriously.

This takes effort. It doesn't require knowing everything before the first conversation, and it won't remove uncertainty. Some requirements become clearer only when candidates ask questions you hadn't considered. The discipline is to make those changes visible, revisit earlier decisions when necessary and apply the revised requirements fairly.

The process also continues after an offer. A promise about autonomy means little if the manager still approves every small decision. A role designed around client work will change if internal reporting takes over the week. Learning that something is wrong only helps when someone takes responsibility for changing it, or admits that it cannot change.

What this book promises

The opening chapters examine why familiar hiring signals can mislead us, why those habits persist and what a poor decision costs. Then we turn to understanding the work,

designing a role and helping both sides make an informed choice. Work Drivers provide a way to talk about what people want from work, alongside evidence about what they can do.

Chapter 9 follows one invented hire through the hiring decision and offer. It shows why the business hires, how it resolves conflicting accounts of the role, how it narrows the field, what it asks candidates to do and how it weighs that evidence. The case is labelled as invented throughout.

The later chapters consider where AI can help and who remains responsible for decisions. Chapter 11 follows the invented hire's early working period, when the job may differ from what everyone expected. We finish with the team you're trying to build. A person can make colleagues' work easier or harder, but that doesn't turn people into a single score or make steady contribution a failure.

The printed toolkit contains the questions, completed teaching extracts and decision records needed to try the approach. It includes a choice not to hire, a fair work sample and a way to turn a post-hire discovery into an action with an owner and a review date. You don't need to buy our service to use those principles.

I've drawn on research where it speaks to the question, and on my own experience where that's what I have. Those are different kinds of evidence. A study of a particular hiring method doesn't validate every part of our process. A failure I've seen can show you a risk without proving how often it occurs. Where an idea is my belief or a hypothesis, I'll say so.

AI makes some of these distinctions more pressing. It can help write applications, organise evidence and conduct parts of an assessment. A polished answer may be easier to produce, but we remain responsible for deciding what it

establishes. Whatever the tools become capable of, I believe understanding the work and checking the evidence will remain essential.

Your first move

Take the next role you expect to fill and write down the result it needs to produce. Then ask someone who depends on that work to describe a recent occasion when the result didn't happen. Compare their account with yours before you write the job ad.

You may find that the business needs a different person from the one requested, or that a new hire would need authority the manager intends to keep. Take that finding to the person who can decide. You have made useful progress if the next conversation is about that choice, rather than another list of candidates.

Kill the Resume is a challenge to a starting habit. It asks you to stop treating a person's summary of their past as the answer to a job you haven't yet understood. The background still has a place. The work gives it meaning.

PART ONE

The Stakes



CHAPTER 1

The resume is theatre

A strong resume can make a hiring decision feel half finished before you've met the person. You recognise the companies, the titles resemble the role you're filling, and the years of experience seem reassuring. By the time the interview begins, you may already be looking for reasons to confirm your first impression.

I've trusted that feeling. The mistake is easy to make because the information isn't necessarily false. Someone may have held the title, worked for the company and contributed to the result. What remains unclear is how they did it, what others supplied and whether the conditions in your business will let them do it again.

The resume is a performance in this limited sense: the applicant chooses what you see and how it is presented. That's a reasonable response to being asked to compete for a job. It gives you a reason to check the account, not a reason to assume the person is dishonest.

The trouble begins when we treat that selected account as enough evidence to decide who deserves a closer look. We can exclude capable people before we know what they can do, while giving a familiar-looking career more credit than it has earned.

What the title doesn't tell you

Think about the best hire you've made and what made their work valuable. The answer probably needs more detail than a job title. Perhaps they could find the cause of a recurring error, explain an unwelcome trade-off to a client or keep

several people working towards the same result. Those are things you can investigate. The title is only a clue about where to start.

Consider a hypothetical engineer moving from a large company to a small business. In the previous role, another team may have decided priorities, tested the work and handled urgent customer problems. In the new role, the engineer may need to do all three as well as build the product. The technical experience still counts. The question is which additional requirements the move introduces and what evidence you have about them.

If the engineer struggles, it would be premature to conclude either that the experience was worthless or that the person simply needs a nicer environment. You might have misjudged a capability, provided too little support or combined several jobs into one. Understanding the difference changes what you should do next.

The iceberg image brings us back to the conditions around the visible record: the team, tools, authority, support and the person's own contribution. Those are questions about context that the summary alone cannot settle.

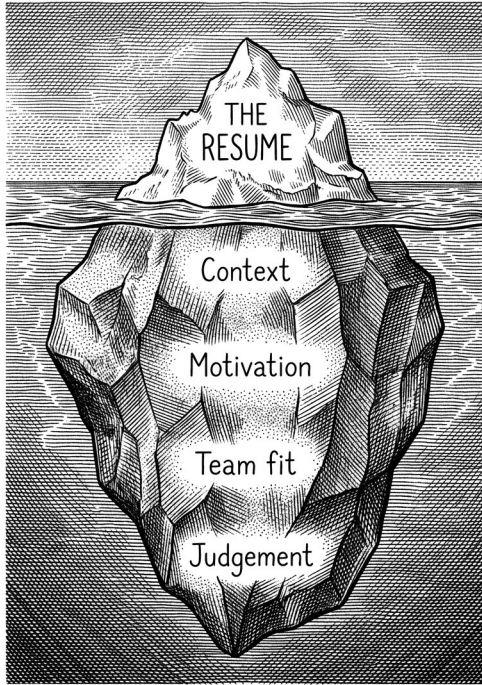


FIGURE 1 A career summary gives you starting information. Investigate the work and conditions beneath it. The drawing does not represent causal shares.

A candidate who says they grew an account may have led the decision that mattered, carried out an established plan or benefited from a change outside their control. Ask what happened, what they decided, what other people did and what evidence would let you check the result. You are trying to understand their contribution, not catch them out for having worked with others.

The same standard should apply to a less impressive-looking background. A person in a smaller company may have done substantial work without the title your search expects. If the

role requires a capability, decide how someone can demonstrate it. Don't insist on one career route merely because it is easy to recognise.

A summary is not a selection system

When we ask a resume to serve as a complete, consistent record for selection, we make it a failed data structure. It cannot supply everything the decision needs.

Applicants choose different information. One describes responsibilities, another lists results, and another gives little detail because their previous work was confidential. Some have had help writing the document. Others haven't. Comparing the polish of those accounts is easier than comparing the work, but it answers a different question.

You can improve matters by asking everyone for the same small set of relevant information. If a qualification is required, ask for it directly and check it. If the role involves resolving client problems, ask for a brief example and specify what you need to understand. Give people a reasonable way to describe comparable work from another setting.

That still relies partly on self-report. It becomes useful when you treat it as evidence to examine alongside other evidence. A precise account you can follow up is more helpful than a broad claim such as excellent communication skills, whichever document contains it.

There is also a limit to what an employer can reasonably ask at the first stage. A candidate hasn't yet learned whether the job suits them. Requiring a long unpaid project from everyone who expresses interest solves your information problem by transferring the cost to them. The answer to a weak first screen is a better, proportionate first screen.

What the research supports

Selection researchers ask how well information gathered before hiring predicts later job performance. That question is related to the quality of a resume, but it isn't the same thing. Years of experience, job knowledge, interviews and work samples are different measures. A finding about one shouldn't be presented as a direct test of every resume or every person with that background.

Frank Schmidt and John Hunter brought together a large body of selection research in 1998.¹ Their synthesis became influential partly because it let practitioners compare common methods. Those estimates have since been revisited. Paul Sackett and colleagues found that earlier statistical corrections had overstated many estimates, and the changes affected their relative standing.²

Structured interviews emerged particularly strongly in that revised research. A subsequent discussion by the researchers also emphasised the variation hidden by an average. Selection should consider the particular job, the quality of the assessment and its costs and consequences. There isn't one method that is best for every role.³

For a hiring decision, that means gathering evidence of relevant capability through well-designed questions and, where appropriate, a work sample. A count of years or a familiar employer cannot establish that someone meets your requirements. Skill still matters. You need evidence of it that bears on the job.

The design matters as much as the label. Calling an exercise a simulation does not make it representative of the job. Calling an interview structured does not help if each candidate faces different standards or the questions test something irrelevant. You still have to explain what you're trying to learn and how the evidence will inform the decision.

The interview can improve on the page

An unstructured interview can become a second performance. The candidate tells the stories they have prepared, the employer describes the company at its best, and an easy conversation becomes evidence of fit. It can feel revealing without testing much that the job will require.

A structured interview has a different purpose. You decide which requirements to examine, ask comparable questions and assess answers against criteria set in advance. You can follow up to clarify an answer while keeping the underlying standard consistent. The question is whether you obtained relevant evidence, not whether every conversation sounded identical.

Suppose a role requires someone to handle conflicting client requests. You might ask each candidate to describe a time they had to choose between competing commitments. What was promised? What could they change? Who needed to agree? What did they communicate, and what happened? An answer becomes useful through those details, not through the candidate's confidence alone.

A pause doesn't prove depth. A fluent answer doesn't prove superficiality. Some people need a moment to organise their thoughts, some communicate most clearly in writing, and some have practised telling a true story well. Judge the content against the requirement, and consider an appropriate way for the candidate to demonstrate it.

We also need to notice affinity bias, the pull towards someone who seems familiar. Enjoying the conversation is real information about that conversation. It is not sufficient evidence of how the person will handle a client escalation or a difficult handover. Keep those judgements separate in your notes.

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky described the illusion of validity, in which a coherent account can support confidence beyond what its predictive evidence warrants.⁴ That is a useful warning for an interviewer. If you're certain about a candidate, ask which observations support that certainty and what important requirement remains untested.

Structure also matters when you combine evidence. Research comparing rule-based and overall judgement approaches has often favoured consistent combination over an assessor's final impression. The size and reliability of the advantage vary across analyses and outcomes.⁵ That is a reason to set requirements beforehand, record evidence separately and explain whether a strength can compensate for a weakness. It is not evidence that any particular score you devise will predict performance.

What AI changes about the document

AI can help an applicant describe their experience more clearly, and that assistance isn't proof of dishonesty. It can also make a vague account sound specific and confident. From the employer's side, polished language is an increasingly poor reason to stop asking questions.

The same caution applies to screening. Software can help organise applications, but a rule that rejects relevant experience under an unfamiliar title can discard people you would otherwise want to assess. Automating the rule doesn't make the requirement sound.

Harvard Business School and Accenture's 2021 *Hidden Workers* report examined how recruiting practices can exclude qualified people. Employers reported that exacting criteria could screen out people able to do the work.⁶ That is

evidence of a problem worth checking, not a measured error rate for every hiring system or a claim that every rejected applicant is qualified.

Chapter 2 examines the pressure this creates for applicants and employers. For now, the useful distinction is between improving someone's account and establishing that the account demonstrates the required work. You can prompt-engineer a resume. You still need to investigate the match.

A work sample with a clear purpose

Imagine you are hiring a customer-support lead who must handle requests the business may not be able to meet. Decide what the person must know on arrival and what you will teach. Work samples and job-knowledge tests are less suitable when they test knowledge or skills candidates will develop after hiring.³ Here, you want evidence of judgement using information you supply.

You might give shortlisted candidates three invented or properly anonymised tickets, the relevant policy and enough information about their authority. Ask them to explain their next steps and draft one response. Tell them the time allowed, which tools they may use and whether AI assistance is permitted. Offer a route to request an adjustment, and pay for substantial work.

Set the criteria before reading the responses. You might look for accurate use of the supplied facts, a sensible escalation where authority is missing, a clear response to the customer and attention to any recurring problem. Have someone who understands the work assess it. A candidate should not lose marks for failing to guess an internal policy you withheld.

The sample can show how someone approached that task under those conditions. It can't establish everything about leading a support team, working over several months or

learning an unfamiliar product. Use other evidence for those questions. The candidate should also have a chance to ask what the exercise reveals about the real job.

The conversation about motivation needs the same attention to the actual work. Ask what attracts someone to the duties, which conditions matter and what trade-offs they would accept. Those answers tell you more than generic enthusiasm. Someone who needs a dependable income can still care deeply about doing good work, and financial need should not become a test of character.

When there are 400 applicants

You cannot have a long conversation with all 400 applicants. Narrowing that field needs an explicit process.

First, distinguish essential requirements from preferences and things you can teach. Check whether each supposed essential really follows from the work. A legal qualification may be essential. Experience in your exact software might not be, especially if an experienced person could learn it quickly.

Ask for a small amount of relevant first-stage information. That might be a qualification check, availability for genuinely necessary working hours and one brief account of comparable work. Explain the process and the pay range so people can decide whether to continue. Don't ask for personal details that have no bearing on the requirement.

Use the same criteria to make a manageable shortlist. Have a person review uncertain cases rather than treating missing wording as proof of missing capability. Keep a record of the reason for exclusion, and allow a material error or missing fact to be corrected. A candidate with an unconventional background should be able to show equivalent evidence.

Reserve the more demanding assessment for a smaller group. Tell those people what will be involved before they agree, then assess the work consistently. This doesn't eliminate judgement or guarantee that you will identify every capable applicant. It makes the judgement more relevant and gives you something specific to examine if the process fails.

A resume may supply useful information at several points in that sequence. The change is that your understanding of the job determines what you look for, rather than the layout of a career determining what you decide to value.

Mistaking that presentation for the work is the danger in the resume as theatre. Chapter 9 shows how to put a person's background alongside other evidence in a hire. First, we need to understand why a process that leaves so much unanswered remains so hard to change.

BEFORE YOU SHORTLIST

Write the essential requirements and the evidence you will accept for each. Distinguish qualifications, demonstrated capability and conditions the role can offer. Check which requirement a resume screen actually tests, and which capable applicants it might exclude. Save substantial work samples for a shortlist and explain their conditions in advance.

CHAPTER 2

Why weak hiring habits persist

If a familiar hiring process keeps disappointing you, changing it should seem straightforward. Define the work more carefully, gather better evidence and stop rewarding a polished account over a relevant one. Yet those changes happen inside a business that still needs someone to start, a recruiter who has other searches to run and a candidate who cannot wait indefinitely.

The old process has an advantage before anyone argues for it: people know how to use it. The manager can request a title, the recruiter can find similar titles, and applicants know which document to send. Everyone can get moving while the harder questions remain unanswered.

That is one reason a weak process can survive. It coordinates activity even when it does not produce enough understanding. To change it, a founder needs to examine what the process asks people to do and what it rewards them for doing.

Familiar can feel like proven

In 1988, William Samuelson and Richard Zeckhauser studied status-quo bias, the tendency to favour an existing option over alternatives.¹ They were studying a broader behaviour than resume use, but their work gives us a question to ask about hiring: are we retaining this step because it serves the decision, or because removing it feels riskier than keeping it?

There may be good reasons to retain a familiar step. A qualification check can be necessary. A consistent application form can make relevant information easier to compare.

Switching systems can impose real costs. The point is to examine those reasons rather than treating the age or popularity of a practice as evidence of its quality.

Organisations also learn from one another. Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell described pressures that make organisations in a field become more alike, including imitation under uncertainty.² Their broader theory offers one possible explanation for why copying a respectable competitor can feel safer than designing a process around your own work. It leaves you to establish why your company uses a particular step.

If a hire fails after the usual interviews, it can be described as an unfortunate result from a normal process. If a new approach fails, the approach itself is more likely to be questioned. That difference can discourage experiments even when nobody is particularly satisfied with the default.

I have heard common practice described as best practice often enough to distrust the phrase. Doing something for years gives you experience of doing it. It does not, by itself, show that it helps you decide well.

What gets rewarded gets done

Hiring has a supply side and a demand side. The supply side concerns people who might do the job: finding them, reaching them and understanding what they can offer. The demand side concerns the work: the result the business needs, the conditions around it and the contribution the team is missing.

The supply side is visible. A recruiter can report how many people were contacted, how many applications arrived and how many interviews are booked. Work spent resolving a

disagreement about the role may produce no new candidate to show the client that week, even when it prevents a much more expensive mistake.

This creates pressure to start with the search. A manager asks for candidates and the recruiter provides them. The manager sees people moving through stages and feels that the vacancy is being handled. Everyone can be busy before anyone has established what a good decision would require.

Fees can reinforce that pressure. When payment depends on filling a role, there is a reason to concentrate effort on reaching an accepted offer. That does not mean every recruiter on that arrangement disregards quality. Reputation, repeat business, replacement terms and professional standards matter too. The useful question is whether your particular arrangement gives someone time and responsibility to challenge the brief.

The same problem can exist in an internal team. A founder who asks only when the shortlist will arrive should not be surprised when the recruiter prioritises producing one. An employee asked to fill roles quickly may find it difficult to delay a search in order to question whether the job has been designed sensibly.

If that is your position, bring a recent example and the decision it exposed. The role may be described as setting priorities independently, while the manager expects to approve each change. Explain what each arrangement would require of a candidate and recommend one. Chapter 6 follows what happens when the person with authority disagrees.

Demand first, supply second is the correction I favour. Understand enough about the work to make the search purposeful, then keep learning as you meet people. That leaves room to revise the role as you learn, without demanding weeks of paperwork before the first contact.

If you use a recruiting partner, ask what they need to learn before searching and who will resolve unanswered questions. Ask how they will assess a candidate against the role, what they will show you when evidence conflicts and how you will review the result after the person starts. Those answers tell you more about the service than a promise of a large shortlist.

When volume makes the information worse

Applications and screening can create a self-reinforcing problem. Employers receive more material than they can examine carefully, so they introduce narrower filters. Applicants try to satisfy those filters and send more applications to improve their chances of being seen. Employers then have still more material to manage.

AI can reduce the effort needed on both sides. It can help a candidate tailor a genuine account, and it can help an employer organise relevant evidence. It can also make it easier to produce large amounts of material that look suitable while telling either side very little. The effect depends on how the tools are used.

I call this a Flywheel of Pain because a response that helps one person can make the next person's problem worse. The founder wants relief from an empty role, the recruiter needs a process they can manage, and the candidate wants a fair chance and a timely answer. Requiring a long form can save the employer interview time but consume hours across

unsuccessful applicants. Sending hundreds of applications can improve a candidate's chances of contact while adding to the volume each employer must sort. These are choices people can change, even when each seems reasonable in isolation.

Neither the volume of applications nor the use of writing assistance establishes dishonesty. Check whether the account is accurate and the evidence relevant before excluding someone for the tool they used.

The candidate is dealing with your process too

I've watched friends put care into applications and get silence in return. When my brother was looking for work, we sat down together to think through how he should approach the process.

An applicant left without an answer has little basis for deciding what to change. A keyword filter may have screened them out, another candidate may have offered stronger evidence, or something inside the business may have changed. They may decide to apply more broadly or make the page resemble what they think employers want. They may stop applying to jobs they could do. Silence leaves room for the conclusion that volume matters more than care.

As an employer, you control part of this experience. You can state what is genuinely required, explain the stages, avoid asking the same information repeatedly and tell candidates when the search changes. Distinguish what you need to assess from what would merely be convenient to have, so the request for someone's time is easier to understand.

The employer has constraints too. A small business may not be able to give every applicant a detailed explanation. It can still provide a clear decision, avoid misleading claims about what will happen next and give shortlisted candidates enough information to decide whether continuing is worthwhile.

The part you can change

You do not have to redesign the labour market to improve one search. Start with the point where your process turns an assumption into an instruction.

Here is a hypothetical example. A founder tells a recruiter to find a senior account manager with several years in the same industry. Before searching, the recruiter asks what the person must accomplish. The founder describes missed handovers and clients receiving updates too late. The team describes a different problem: no one can confirm priorities until the founder approves them.

If the recruiter starts with the title, the shortlist may be full of experienced account managers who will encounter the same bottleneck. If the recruiter tests the disagreement, the business can decide whether it needs an account manager, coordination capacity or a change in authority. Chapter 9 develops a version of that decision in a complete worked example.

This pause has a cost. Someone must examine recent work, listen to the people involved and make a decision. The comparison is not between careful hiring and a process that costs nothing. It is between spending some effort before the search and discovering the same problem after making an offer.

Give that work an owner. The recruiter may lead the enquiry, but a founder or manager must have authority to settle the role's purpose and limits. Otherwise every unanswered

question returns as another search criterion, and the ideal candidate becomes a person expected to compensate for decisions the business has avoided.

It also helps to agree what progress means. A shorter time to fill can be useful, especially when a vacancy imposes real costs. It should sit beside evidence about the quality of the decision, the candidate effort required and what happens after the person starts. A slow process can be poor too. Care is not measured in elapsed weeks.

Look at the rules before buying another tool

If a system screens for a degree the job does not require, the first repair is to examine the requirement. If a manager dismisses people for lacking an exact title, the first repair is to define acceptable evidence of the work. Buying more sophisticated screening may make the existing rule easier to apply without making it a better rule.

Tools can help once the purpose is clear. Consistent records can expose missing evidence, and a shared view of the role can prevent interviewers from judging different jobs. Automation can reduce repeated administration. Used this way, the software supports the enquiry.

The same is true of standardisation. Some consistency protects candidates. Asking comparable questions, giving equal access to task information and using agreed criteria can make a process fairer and easier to examine. The objection is to standardising the wrong thing, such as one career history, while leaving the actual judgement entirely personal.

Change the question you review

When a hire disappoints, ask both what the process encouraged and what you chose. A rushed brief may have reflected pressure from the founder. A narrow shortlist may have followed requirements nobody tested. An attractive interview may have received more weight than the work evidence. Naming those decisions gives you something to change.

Do not use the system as a way to remove your own responsibility, and do not make a single recruiter carry a problem the business helped create. Work through what each person knew, what they were asked to deliver and where a different decision was possible.

The next chapter follows the consequences when those decisions go wrong, including costs that never arrive as an invoice.

REVIEW ONE HIRING RULE

Choose one requirement or stage in your next search. Write down the decision it supports, the evidence that makes it useful and who bears its cost. Ask which capable applicants it might exclude. Keep it, change it or remove it for a stated reason, then check the result after hiring.

CHAPTER 3

The real cost of a poor hiring decision

Some hiring problems announce themselves quickly. Others become visible through work the team starts doing twice. A meeting needs another meeting to settle the same question. A decision is reopened a week later. A colleague checks a piece of work before it reaches the client, then gradually takes over finishing it.

These are reasons to investigate. They are not enough to conclude that the new person is the problem. The role may be unclear, training may be missing or two managers may be asking for incompatible results. What matters is that the work is not happening as intended and other people are absorbing the difference.

That difference can stay hidden because people are trying to help. The client receives an acceptable result, so the extra effort doesn't appear in the complaint log. A manager completes a task at night, so the missed deadline doesn't appear in the report. The apparent result can look better than the process producing it.

This is why the cost of a mis-hire needs a closer look than adding up salary and a recruitment fee. You need to understand what happened to the work, the people doing it and the decisions that followed. You also need to leave room for the possibility that the business failed to provide the conditions it promised.

People may start to distrust handovers when they repeatedly receive incomplete work. They may become reluctant to take a promise to a client because they no longer know whether it can be kept. Those effects matter even when you cannot price them reliably.

Extra work is another warning. Sometimes a colleague volunteers because they have spare capacity or want to help someone learn. Sometimes the help becomes a continuing second job. Ask what changed, how often it happens and what it displaces. Don't assume that a capable person will always absorb it without complaint, or that somebody who speaks up is less committed.

I have spoken with leaders who became less confident after a poor hire. A later decision feels harder because they can still explain why the earlier one seemed sensible. That uncertainty can be useful if it leads to better checking. It can also lead to avoiding a necessary hire or demanding impossible certainty from the next candidate.

For the person in the role, repeated failure can be discouraging and humiliating. They may be trying hard at a job that was described inaccurately, missing support they expected or discovering that a capability they thought would transfer needs further development. None of those possibilities is resolved by telling them to show more ownership.

You don't need to diagnose their mental health to take that seriously. Ask about the work, the expectations and the support. Let them choose what personal information to share. Record the employment issue you can act on rather than speculating about what is happening inside their head.

Keep an account of these effects in ordinary language alongside the cost estimate you make. Which commitments became less reliable? Who carried additional work? What has

the employee said about the gap between the promised role and the actual one? You can then consider a response without pretending each consequence has a price tag.

Costs you can record

Start with spending you can identify. An additional recruitment fee, paid temporary cover, repeated training or a client credit may be directly attributable to the problem. Keep the invoice or record and note why you have included it. Money already spent on productive work should not automatically become a loss because the employment later ended.

Then examine time. How much work had to be repeated? Who repeated it? How much additional management time did the problem require? An estimate can be useful if its basis is visible. The point is to understand the scale of the problem, not produce a falsely exact total.

Next, look at delayed or lost work. A postponed project may have delayed revenue, reduced margin or simply moved delivery to a later date. Those are different consequences. A client leaving may have several causes. Write down what is known, what is estimated and what cannot fairly be attributed to this hire.

The iceberg image is useful here as a reminder to look beyond the invoice. You still have to establish what the first count missed, how large those costs are and which can reasonably be expressed in money.

An estimate that doesn't count the same loss twice

The following example is invented to show how to calculate, not a typical cost of a bad hire. A business has paid \$2,000 for temporary cover. It also records 20 hours of colleague rework and 10 hours of additional management time, valued for this exercise at an internal cost of \$50 an hour. The recorded spending and estimated time cost total \$3,500.

The time figures are not additional cash paid unless they created extra paid hours. They describe capacity used on this problem instead of something else. Label that distinction so the estimate cannot later be quoted as \$3,500 of new expenditure.

Suppose the same rework delayed another project. You could estimate the margin lost through that delay instead of valuing the displaced hours. Do not automatically add both estimates. If they describe the same lost capacity, doing so counts the loss twice. If there is a separate, documented consequence, such as a contractual client credit, show it separately and explain the relationship.

Nor should you add the person's entire salary as a loss while ignoring useful work they completed. Salary, rework and lost output can overlap. Ask which cost arose because the intended result was not achieved, compared with a realistic alternative. That alternative might be a different hire, temporary cover, a redesigned role or leaving the position open for a while.

You don't need a complicated model. Use four columns: item, basis, amount and confidence. Separate cash spending from estimated time or lost margin. Add a note about possible overlap. Where you cannot make a defensible estimate, describe the consequence instead of inventing a number.

This estimate is a management aid, not proof that one person caused every problem around them. Review it with someone who understands the work and will challenge your assumptions. If you are using it to compare options, use the same rules for each option.

Urgency can make the next decision worse

When a role is not working, the backlog grows. The manager becomes more desperate for relief and the next search starts under greater pressure. That pressure can encourage the same shortcuts that contributed to the original problem.

That is the risk I call the Hiring Death Spiral: urgency can reduce investigation, weak investigation can leave requirements untested, and a poor decision can create more urgency.

There are several places to interrupt it. You can reduce or delay lower-priority work. You can arrange temporary cover for a specific task. You can give the team a clear account of what will not be delivered while the vacancy remains open. Those choices have costs, but they may buy the attention needed to make a considered decision.

Use any time you gain to improve the evidence. Extra weeks spent waiting for approvals or repeating interviews may add nothing useful. What matters is whether the process gives you the evidence this role requires at a reasonable cost to everyone involved.

Before starting again, write down what you learned from the previous attempt. If the issue was unclear authority, decide how authority will work. If a skill was missing, specify how

the next process will assess it. If the work itself changed, revise the role. Otherwise a new person inherits the same unresolved problem.

The risk follows the responsibility

Small businesses can be particularly exposed when one person holds a large share of a critical capability or relationship. There may be no spare manager to supervise closely and no second team to take over the work. A founder can end up trying to run the business while quietly covering the role that was meant to free their time.

But headcount alone does not measure that risk. One person in a team of five is a fifth of its people, not necessarily a fifth of its output. A senior hire in a large organisation can affect many teams. A specialist responsible for a crucial system may create a risk that cannot be averaged across the payroll.

Ask where the work depends on one person, how quickly a problem would become visible and what the business could do in response. You may need a better handover, clearer checks or a deputy as well as a better selection process. Hiring carefully does not remove the need to design work that can tolerate mistakes and absence.

A people or operations leader may see this cost before anyone agrees to spend money on changing the process. You do not need an alarming estimate to make the case. Show which work is being repeated, who is carrying it and what it prevents them from doing. Keep that separate from costs the business would have incurred anyway. The person deciding the budget then has a specific problem to weigh against the cost of investigating it.

There is a smaller starting point. Define the result and conditions, agree the essential requirements, collect relevant evidence from a manageable shortlist and record the trade-

off behind the decision. Chapter 9 shows the sequence, and the toolkit gives you teaching forms to use. The depth should reflect the role's consequences, not a fixed number of meetings or a claim that every vacancy needs the same programme.

A poor result has more than one explanation

It is tempting to decide that the person was a bad hire in some permanent sense. It can be equally tempting to insist that every failure is a capable person in the wrong setting. Both explanations are too easy if you have not examined the work.

A capability gap is one possibility. The person may not yet be able to do an essential part of the job. A mismatch between expectations and actual duties is another. The business may have provided inadequate support or changed the role after hiring. Personal circumstances can change too. Misconduct requires its own response and should not be disguised as a problem of fit.

Consider a hypothetical operations manager moving from an established company into a small agency. They may know how to improve an existing process but have less experience creating one while managing daily delivery. The agency may also expect them to decide priorities that the founder is unwilling to delegate. Training could address the first gap. It cannot, by itself, resolve the second.

If you call both problems a lack of initiative, the employee receives feedback they cannot use and the founder avoids a decision about authority. If you assume context explains everything, you might ignore a genuine capability requirement. A useful diagnosis distinguishes the problems and tests what could change them.

Use the cost to choose a response

Once you have an account of the problem, compare realistic next steps. Clarifying responsibility may be enough in one case. Another may need training, a change in duties or an honest decision that the role is not workable for the person. Waiting is also a decision, with consequences for the employee and the team.

State what you expect each proposed change to achieve and when you will look again. If the problem is repeated rework, define which errors should reduce and who will provide support. If approvals are blocking delivery, identify who can change the approval route. A general promise to improve communication is too easy for everyone to agree to and too vague to assess later.

Be careful with the comparison to leaving the role empty. A vacancy has costs, but a person who contributes useful work while learning should not be treated as equivalent to nobody. Compare actual alternatives. You are trying to choose a responsible response, not assemble a case for the conclusion you already prefer.

REVIEW A HIRING PROBLEM

Describe the missed result before judging the person. Record additional spending, estimated time and other effects separately. Check for double-counting and competing explanations. Choose an action that addresses the identified cause, give it an owner and set a date to review what changed.

PART TWO

The Reframe

CHAPTER 4

Discovery before the decision

Early in my HR work, I noticed that we didn't have a performance-improvement process. So I built one and pushed it out. I had found a gap, made something to fill it and expected people to use it.

The response was that it didn't fit what people needed. The timing was wrong. It felt like an off-the-shelf solution. I had treated the absence of a process as evidence that this was the process we needed next. I hadn't done the discovery that might have sent me towards a different solution altogether.¹

That is an uncomfortable mistake to admit when your job is to help people work better. Building something feels useful. Asking more questions can feel like postponing the work. But the effort I put into the process did nothing to establish whether I had chosen the right problem.

I've seen the same habit in leadership conversations. Someone asks why good employees are leaving, and the discussion turns to tighter processes, less waste and getting more from the team. Those changes might help. What do people need to do the work well? Which part of the job differs from what they expected? Until we ask, we are choosing a remedy before understanding the problem.

I call the capacity to slow down and understand another person the analogue flame. I recognise how easily that curiosity and attention disappear when I feel I should already know what to do.

The practical name for the work is discovery: investigating the person, problem and conditions before deciding how to act. It includes asking questions, checking accounts against

events and changing your explanation when the evidence requires it. It also includes deciding when further enquiry is unlikely to change the choice.

Borrow the discipline, not the certainty

Teresa Torres describes continuous discovery in product work as regular contact with customers in pursuit of an outcome.² What I took from her work was the need to keep returning to the people whose experience we were trying to understand. Learning about them could be part of the work itself, rather than research we finished before getting on with it.

That is an influence on this method, not evidence that a product-discovery practice has been validated as a hiring system. The contexts differ. A candidate is making a decision about their livelihood, and an employee may have good reason to be careful about what they tell a manager. We need to account for those conditions rather than copy a practice simply because it worked in another field.

The enquiry continues when you act on what you've learned and examine what happens. A conversation that reveals a problem but changes nothing can become another demand on the person who told you about it.

Make the next step clear. If you can change a condition, say who will act and when. If you need to investigate, say what you will check. If you cannot make the change, explain the constraint. An honest limit is more useful than encouragement that leaves someone expecting a promise you have not made.

Creative strategy, but for people

In a piece I published about discovery, I described a check-in with a creative strategist who'd recently joined Tier 11. I return to that account here for her insight, not as a documented repair or outcome of the opening hire.

It wasn't a performance review or a survey. I wanted to understand what was working for her, what wasn't and what she needed. We talked about the Work Drivers exercise she'd completed before joining, how her priorities had changed with the move from freelancing to full-time work, and where the lines between her responsibilities and other people's were still blurry.

From her onboarding, the conversation moved to the work itself. She described studying an audience, finding patterns in how the creative performed and looking at the data from different perspectives to check her assumptions. She was trying to catch problems while they were still small. Then she said, "It's like creative strategy, but for people. That's what you guys are doing."

She'd found words for something I hadn't managed to describe. When a piece of creative failed, she wanted to know what it could tell her. She'd use what she learned to change the next attempt, then watch what happened. That constant revision was part of what she enjoyed about the work, even when a failure stung.

Listening to her, I recognised my own work in what she was saying. We were applying the same discipline to different problems, and both depended on being willing to question our first explanation.



FIGURE 2 The analogue flame is the curiosity and attention we bring to understanding another person. Discovery turns that attention into questions, checks and decisions.

An explanation is something to test

Managers need to make decisions, often with incomplete information. The alternative to a hasty explanation is not endless listening. It is a better account of what you know, what you assume and which uncertainty matters to the decision.

Suppose work is arriving late. A manager says the team needs more ownership. A team member says every decision waits for approval. Another says the brief changes after the work is finished. Each account may contain part of the truth, and each suggests a different response.

If you ask only whether people feel accountable, you may get another conversation about attitudes. Ask about a recent piece of work instead. What was requested? When was the

brief agreed? Who could approve the next step? What changed, and who knew? The event gives you something specific to compare.

You are not looking for a person whose account can be declared the whole truth. Someone may understand one part of the process and miss another. Seniority doesn't make an account complete, and agreement among several people doesn't prove it. The aim is an explanation that fits the available evidence well enough to support a responsible action.

Writing the explanation down can expose a gap. There is a difference between saying a person lacks initiative and saying they waited two days for an approval the process required. The first sounds like a trait. The second lets you ask whether they should have escalated, whether the approval was necessary and whether anyone had authority to act in the approver's absence.

Keep alternatives visible until you have a reason to set them aside. Perhaps the person misunderstood the process. Perhaps the manager believes authority was delegated when the employee was never told. Perhaps there are two problems. A useful investigation can make the situation more specific before it makes it simpler.

Ask about what happened

Broad questions have a place. Asking how the role is going can give someone room to raise an issue you had not anticipated. But when an answer could change a hiring decision or a role design, follow it into an example.

If someone says they thrive with autonomy, ask what autonomy looked like in work they enjoyed. Which decisions could they make? What limits were clear? When did they seek help? If a founder promises autonomy, ask what a new hire could decide without approval during an ordinary week.

You may discover that the same word describes different expectations. One person means choosing how to complete an agreed task. Another means setting priorities. A third means being trusted to challenge whether the task should be done at all. A matching word on both sides is not yet an agreement.

Follow-up questions should help someone explain, not lead them towards your preferred answer. Ask what happened next, what they considered and who else was involved. Where a detail is unclear, say what you have understood and invite a correction. If their account conflicts with another source, explain the conflict without treating it as evidence of bad faith.

There are boundaries. A candidate should not have to disclose personal finances, health information or family circumstances to justify wanting predictable hours or adequate pay. You can discuss the job's requirements and the conditions someone needs without demanding the private story behind every preference.

Would the proposed role have changed the result?

Take a recent delayed piece of work and compare it with the role you intend to add. Look at when the request arrived, who promised the date, which dependencies were identified and who could change the order of work. Compare the delivery record with the accounts of the people involved.

Put the responsibilities beside one another. Name who owns the result, who contributes and who makes the decision when priorities conflict. Then test the arrangement against the recent job. Would the proposed role have changed what happened? At which point? What would still have waited?

Where the accounts disagree, record the difference. Decide which observation would help resolve it, who can make the role-design decision and what cannot honestly be promised to a candidate in the meantime. A vague instruction to be collaborative leaves the disagreement unsettled.

This is the comparison I missed in the failed hire from the introduction. Each strategist's role description looked plausible alone, yet two capable people reached for ownership of the same work: **two chefs in one kitchen**. The unanswered question sat where their responsibilities met: who could decide what happened next? Adding detail to one description alone would not have settled it. This account does not document a repair or a later outcome.



FIGURE 3 Two roles can overlap in ownership even when each looks sensible alone. Compare their responsibilities and decision rights before hiring.

Four habits you can practise

The first is to keep track of your assumptions. Before a conversation, note what you think is happening and why. Give yourself a way to notice evidence that doesn't fit that working explanation. If every answer can be interpreted as support, you haven't designed a useful enquiry.

The second is to build shared understanding. Ask, listen and say back what you heard in plain language. Invite the person to correct you. This doesn't require agreement about everything. It means that a disagreement concerns the actual issue rather than two different meanings hidden inside the same word.

The third is to check what happens over time. The work may change after a hire, and a condition that was acceptable at the start may become difficult. Agree when to revisit important

assumptions. A new role or a major change may need more frequent attention than stable work. The purpose of the conversation should determine the cadence.

The fourth is to connect what you learn to a decision. A concern may justify a change, a further check or an explanation that the condition will remain. Keep observations separate from interpretations. A slower response to a message is an observation. Concluding that someone no longer cares is an interpretation that needs more evidence.

These habits also apply when you receive unwelcome feedback about the hiring process. If a candidate says an exercise was unclear, don't assume they disliked being challenged. Examine whether the instructions supplied the information the task required. If the instructions were sound, you can explain why. If they weren't, change them and consider whether earlier candidates were affected.

Decide with uncertainty still present

Discovery cannot guarantee a good hire. People can misunderstand a question, describe their own behaviour inaccurately or act differently when conditions change. You may not have access to the evidence that would settle a difficult judgement. More conversation can sometimes repeat the same uncertainty rather than reduce it.

I recommend a pre-action pause before a consequential decision. Note what you know, what you're assuming and which unanswered question could change your choice. The check may be a short question, a look at recent work or a correction to your notes. It needn't mean another meeting.

If the uncertainty concerns an essential requirement, pause until you have adequate evidence or decide not to proceed. If it concerns something trainable, consider the support

available and whether the risk is acceptable to both sides. If it is unlikely to matter, record it without turning it into another assessment stage.

This matters because the candidate's time has a cost too. A process can sound careful while asking someone to repeat themselves across several interviews. Before adding a stage, name the new evidence it should produce and who is qualified to assess it. If you cannot explain that, the stage may be habit rather than care.

You can also discover that the job itself cannot yet be offered honestly. Perhaps leaders disagree about its purpose or nobody will commit to the authority it requires. More candidate interviews won't fix that. Return to the business decision before asking someone to accept the role.

If the hire goes wrong, examine what the process missed as well as what changed afterwards. Having paused does not transfer responsibility for the decision to somebody else.

The pressure to act before understanding will return. A vacancy becomes urgent, a confident candidate becomes available or a client wants a date. You need a process that keeps the important questions visible at those moments, rather than depending on everyone remembering to be curious.

Those questions need a clear account of the work: what someone contributes, the conditions they work under and what both sides expect from the arrangement. A job title leaves too much of that unstated. The next chapter begins there.

BEFORE THE NEXT HIRING DECISION

Name the assumption most likely to change your choice. Test it against a recent event or relevant work evidence. Compare conflicting accounts without deciding by seniority alone. Record what remains unknown, then choose an action and a point at which you will check its result.

CHAPTER 5

What is work, really?

When a brilliant player struggles after changing teams, we look at what the new team asks of them as well as how they play.

I've watched skilled people struggle in work that looked close to something they'd done well before. I've also watched people deliver more than we expected once they had the support and authority the work needed. Before calling someone a bad hire, I want to understand what happened around them.

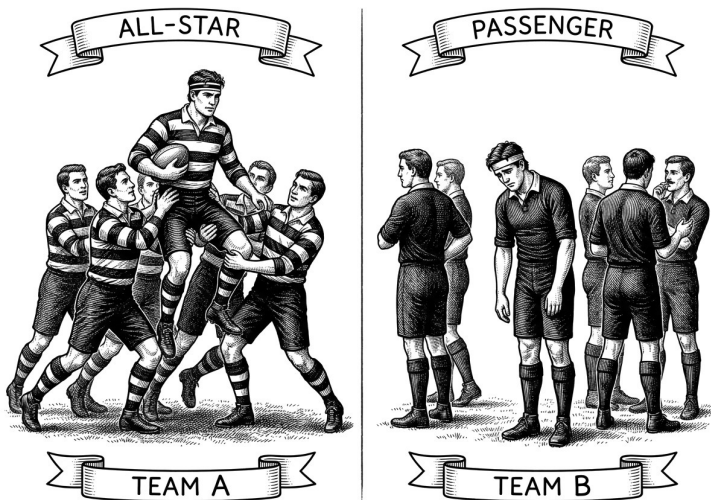


FIGURE 4 A player's contribution depends partly on the team and the role. A move changes the conditions in which their ability is used.

The definition I use is **work is human energy applied in a context**. A person brings effort, judgement and attention, then uses them under particular conditions. A list of duties

tells us little about those conditions. If we're going to say they matter, we need to describe them clearly enough to do something about them.

Describe what happens around the task

Consider two illustrative marketing roles. Both managers plan campaigns, work with designers and report on results. In one company, the manager can approve a small experiment and change it the next day. The designer sits alongside them, the budget is available and a failed test is an accepted cost of learning. In the other, the manager works in a regulated market. Claims need review, several teams share the designer and a change can affect work already approved for release.

The first manager must judge when the evidence is good enough to try something. The second must also know which decisions need review and how to keep work moving through it. Both need care and sound judgement, but the consequences of a mistake and the appropriate pace differ.

Describing the second company as “slow” would miss what its review process protects. Calling the first “entrepreneurial” would leave a candidate guessing what freedom they would actually have. Context becomes useful when you can name who decides, what support exists, how mistakes are handled and where the work depends on someone else.

Ask the same questions when you look backwards. A result on a resume may reflect considerable skill, a strong team, an established customer base, or systems the candidate won't have in your business. You need to understand what the person contributed, what others contributed and what they would need to produce a similar result here.

Four ways to look at the work

I use four headings to organise that description:

Part	What to investigate
Human Energy	The effort, attention and judgement the work requires, and what helps a person sustain them.
Context	The tools, resources, relationships and decision rights around the work.
Behaviours	The observable actions that help someone deliver in these conditions.
Alignment	Whether those actions serve the business outcome and whether the work offers something the person values.

The headings overlap. They organise an investigation rather than calculate a prediction. What a person knows and chooses matters alongside what the setting allows.

Alignment runs in two directions. The company needs useful work, and the person needs the job to be worth doing. A role can deliver a business result while exhausting the person in it. Enjoyable work can also stop serving a useful business purpose. Both belong in the description before you decide whether the role should continue in its current form.

Gino Wickman's phrase, the right person in the right seat, points towards this relationship.¹ To use it, you still have to find out what the seat contains and gather evidence about the person.

Describe the outcome

The outcome gives the tasks their purpose. For the regulated marketing role, publishing more campaigns is not sufficient. They must meet the relevant requirements and reach the intended audience. For the faster team, running more tests achieves little if nobody learns from them.

Some useful work prevents trouble rather than producing something immediately visible. It can happen in a conversation you weren't in. Checking a risky claim, maintaining a relationship or helping a colleague understand a difficult problem can matter even when no new document appears at the end of the day. A description focused only on volume may encourage people to skip exactly that work. Hours worked cannot settle the question either. You need to distinguish useful effort from time spent overcoming avoidable obstacles.

What the person wants the work to do

Clayton Christensen's work on Jobs To Be Done asks us to look at the progress someone seeks when they choose a product.² Bob Moesta helped develop this way of investigating customer choices, and later applied it to career moves with Ethan Bernstein and Michael Horn in *Job Moves*.^{3,4} I draw on these ideas to understand what people want their work to make possible.

A hammer helps you hang the picture you want on your wall. What is this person hoping the job will make possible?

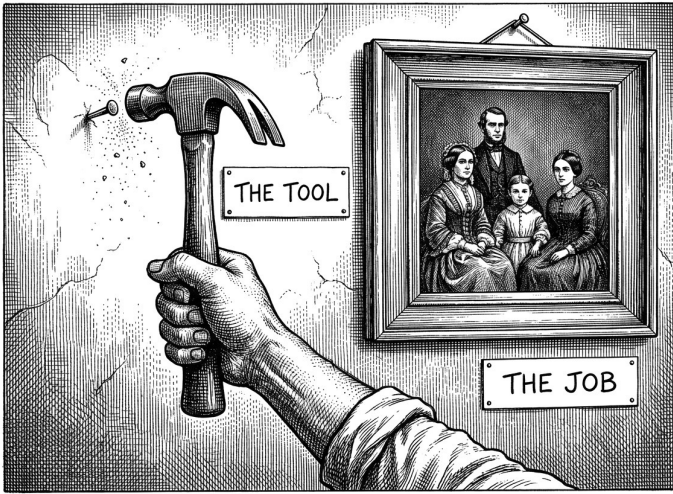


FIGURE 5 In this illustration of Jobs To Be Done, the hammer helps hang a picture. Ask what progress someone wants their work to make possible.

The answer might be reliable pay, room to become better at a craft, work that matters to them or a week they can plan around. Several can matter at once, and their importance may change with the person's circumstances. That doesn't make them less committed to doing good work.

In conversations about work, I ask what people want more of and what they want less of. A title doesn't tell me either. Two people considering the same management role may want quite different things from it. One wants to develop other people. Another wants more say over decisions they already help deliver. Both might be capable managers, but the role needs to offer the responsibility each thinks they are accepting.

More responsibility isn't necessarily a substitute for predictable hours. A friendly team doesn't settle a pay gap. Before assuming that the attractive parts of your job outweigh its difficulties, find out which parts matter to the person considering it.

You don't need to investigate their private life to do that. If a candidate needs predictable finishing times, ask what schedule they can commit to and whether the role can provide it. They don't owe you a personal justification.

Put the description on paper

A job description can contain all of this. The problem is the information we leave out, not the name at the top of the document. A reader should be able to imagine making a real decision in the role and understand what support would be available.

For the illustrative marketing role, “own campaign delivery” is a start. A useful description would explain how the person turns an agreed campaign objective into a plan, coordinates the designer and obtains approvals before launch. It would name who approves claims, who can change the budget, what happens when those people disagree and which parts of the process the new manager can change.

The description records what you currently understand, including its limits. Before filling the role, you have to decide which conditions to keep, which to change and whether another hire is needed at all. Dart Lindsley's view of work as a product helps us make those choices.⁵

DESCRIBE THE WORK

Describe one role's outcome, decisions, dependencies and trade-offs. Follow a recent piece of work to check the description. Note which conditions help someone deliver and which ones the business needs to change.

CHAPTER 6

Work as a product

A role can take shape without anyone deciding what it should be. Someone leaves and their duties go to the nearest available person. A new client brings an extra responsibility. A title changes to make a salary band work. Eventually, the company advertises the accumulated job as though somebody designed the whole thing.

That is the fixed box I want you to question. Some of its contents will be necessary. Others may be habits, temporary arrangements or unresolved disagreements that have become part of someone's working week. Hiring a more capable person doesn't settle which is which. Before asking someone else to take it on, we have to examine what we are offering them.

Design the work for both sides

Dart Lindsley hosts *Work for Humans*, which, as titles go, isn't a bad name to build a whole methodology under. His view of **Work as a Product** has helped me think about employees as customers of the work a company offers.¹ A person chooses the work for what it offers them. The business needs that work to produce an outcome. The manager has to understand both and improve the conditions in which the work happens.

When I spoke with Jennah Robichaud about this approach, she described being wary of its language at first. She wanted to move away from a view of organisations built around extracting more from people. Treating work or employee experience as a product sounded as though it could carry that same thinking into another part of the business. As she

explored the ideas, she found an approach closer to the human-centred design that interested her, with ways to put it into practice.²

Her concern belongs in this chapter. If work as a product becomes a clever way to get people to accept more demands, it deserves the suspicion. The idea asks us to examine the work the company offers: whether it is worth choosing, whether the promises are credible and whether the person can do something useful under those conditions. The company has something to answer for before it starts judging the customer.

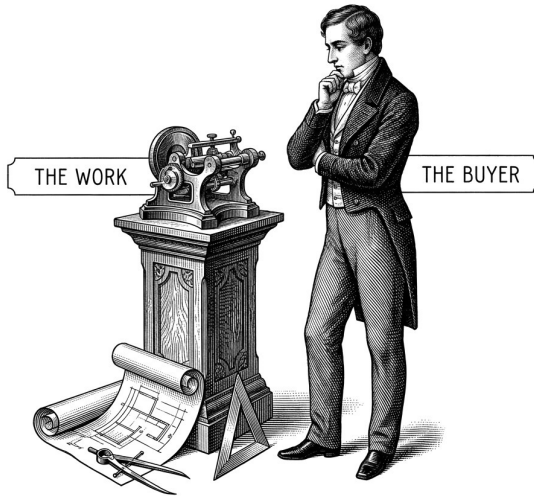


FIGURE 6 The work is the product. Design it to produce a business outcome and offer conditions a person can knowingly choose.

The product is the work, not the human. Employment also carries obligations and constraints that a purchase doesn't. People have bills, notice periods and unequal access to other jobs, while the company usually has more power over the terms. Someone accepting a difficult arrangement because

they have few alternatives deserves an accurate account of it. Their acceptance doesn't establish that the arrangement is fair or will work well.

The business has limits too. Customers need service, work must be completed and resources are finite. A role cannot offer every condition somebody might want. We can still distinguish a necessary constraint from an old habit, and an honest limit from a promise nobody has agreed to keep.

Decide whether the job needs to exist

When a team is under pressure, a request to hire can feel like a diagnosis. It is usually a proposed solution.

Start with the outcome that isn't being achieved and what is stopping it. Would changing the process remove the need for another person? Could the business reduce the work accepted, move responsibility to someone with capacity or buy limited specialist help? Waiting may be reasonable while demand remains uncertain and the cost of delay is tolerable.

These are choices to put before whoever can make them. Each has costs, including work declined or postponed and demands placed on people already there. If more capacity is necessary now, explain why. If a smaller change could settle the question, propose what to try and when to look again. Chapter 9 follows that decision through a worked hire. The purpose of the pause is to establish which work needs doing, rather than make the request for a person disappear into another process.

Ask people who already know the work

A current role holder, their manager and the colleagues who depend on them may each describe a different job. Ask what makes a good day possible, what repeatedly gets in the way

and what they wish someone else understood about the work. Follow broad answers into the week itself. Freedom might mean choosing how to deliver an agreed result, or deciding which result matters. Support might mean a manager available for a difficult decision, rather than more progress checks.

Jennah raised another way a role can become unworkable: a specialist is still expected to carry a full load of their own work, while managing people is added on the side. Then the organisation wonders why the management gets squeezed. A final bullet about developing the team does not create the time to do it. If the company wants the person to lead, it has to decide what that leadership involves and what room it will make for it.

That is a question about the work we offer a manager as much as the work they offer their team. The person may need to learn how to manage. They also need a job in which managing is possible. A people leader can help expose the conflict, but cannot quietly take over every neglected conversation and make the arrangement sustainable by working harder.

Jennah also asked how a role could be clear enough to guide someone while remaining flexible enough for changing priorities. My answer put responsibility on the leaders closest to the work. From an HR role, I cannot know every change taking place inside every specialist job. The manager needs to recognise those changes, discuss what they mean and keep the account of the role current. HR can help establish that habit. It cannot maintain an accurate description of work that managers keep changing without telling anyone.

Clarity does not require a promise that nothing will change. It requires us to notice when we are asking for something different. A new responsibility takes time from somewhere. A changed priority may make an earlier commitment

impossible. Those consequences belong in the conversation before the old description becomes the basis for judging the person.

Resolve a disagreement through a real decision

I have had room to develop these ideas at Tier 11. In the conversation with Jennah, I described a CEO who valued my contribution and gave me considerable freedom to try things. That support matters. I should not write as though every people leader has it.

You may be responsible for hiring while someone else decides the budget, the priorities and how much authority they will share. Understanding the problem does not give you control over those decisions. It can, however, give you a much better case to put before the person who has it.

Take a hypothetical agency where the founder calls a proposed coordinator independent, but the account managers say changes to delivery dates still come back to the founder. Averaging those accounts into some autonomy leaves the disagreement intact. Reconstruct one delayed job instead. Who noticed the risk? Who could move the date? Who spoke to the client? What approval was required, and who actually gave it?

The founder may be describing the organisation they intend to run. The team may be describing what happens when a deadline approaches. Neither account has to be dishonest. The difference still needs a decision.

Perhaps the founder is willing to let the delivery lead settle ordinary priorities while retaining contract and price exceptions. That would let the coordinator maintain the shared list, check dependencies and bring risks to someone

who can act. The founder and delivery lead would need to agree to the arrangement. Writing it into a role description before they do would turn your proposal into a promise the candidate had no reason to doubt.

The founder may instead choose to keep those decisions. Then examine the role on those terms. A coordinator could make risks visible and bring forward options, but would depend on access to the founder for a decision. You need to establish whether that access is realistic and whether the remaining work still justifies the hire. If it does, describe the boundary honestly. Responsibility for a delay caused by an unavailable decision cannot simply be handed to the person who reported it.

If the arrangement still cannot support the required work, recommend changing the role or pausing the search, and take the unresolved choice to the person accountable for it. They may reject the recommendation. Keep the consequence specific: which result cannot reasonably be promised, which dependency remains and what the candidate would actually be accepting. You may not control whether the business hires. You remain responsible for the account of the job you give a candidate.

A written agreement is useful because people can inspect it, question it and return to it. It cannot make a founder surrender a decision or stop them taking it back. If practice departs from the agreement, the work needs another conversation and a decision from someone who can change it. A more polished document will not settle that problem.

Separate what can change from what must stay

Some constraints deserve to remain. Client contact may require a shared working window. A review may protect the business from a consequential error. A limited budget puts a real boundary around the responsibilities it can buy. Designing work does not mean removing every restriction in the name of autonomy.

Other conditions are preferences we have stopped examining. A founder may want everybody in the office. They can explain why they value that, but calling it unavoidable closes a discussion about whether it helps the outcome. Your role may be to bring evidence and alternatives to that discussion, while the final choice remains theirs.

Changes have costs even when they add no salary. Clearer authority requires time from the delivery lead and a willingness to stop solving every problem through the founder. Better handovers take time from account managers. Someone must agree to supply that effort. A candidate's enthusiasm cannot stand in for it.

If the company cannot provide essential support, the job may need to be smaller, more senior or postponed. Choosing among those options can be uncomfortable. Leaving the choice unresolved passes the difficulty to a new person, who may discover it only after turning down other work to join you.

Make the offer of work specific

For our hypothetical coordinator, bringing order to busy client work may be an appealing responsibility. The same job can involve repeated follow-up on other people's commitments while final decisions remain elsewhere.

Someone may enjoy making dependencies clear and dislike the chasing, or welcome contributing without owning every commercial decision. Those are things to discuss alongside what they can do.

A candidate may propose a better reporting rhythm or identify a skill they could learn with support. The suggestion may be worth taking back to the manager. It becomes part of the offer only when the people who must deliver it have agreed. The hiring conversation should not create a second version of the job that the future manager will discover after the person starts.

Put agreed conditions in the offer and handover material, alongside anything still uncertain. A promise to revisit hours is different from a commitment to change them. A possible promotion is different from an available role. The candidate needs to know which they are being offered.

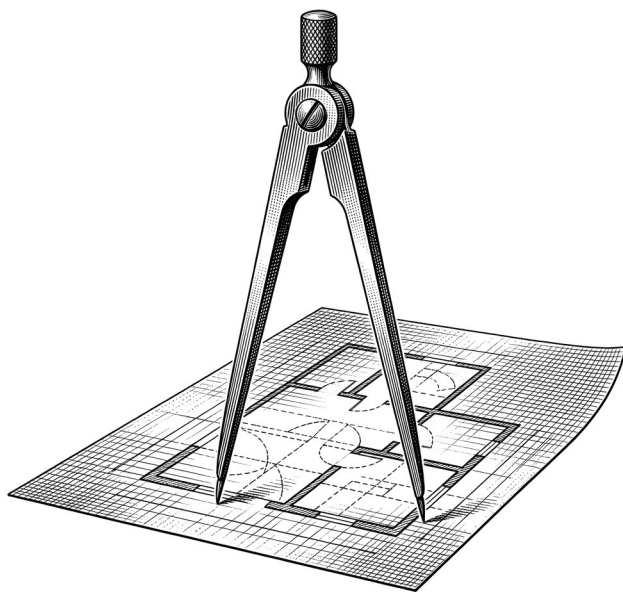
Work as a product asks something difficult of an employer: to make the work worth choosing and be truthful about what it contains. A people leader can help the company see what it has built. What we cannot resolve before hiring remains part of the job someone else will have to do.

BEFORE OPENING THE ROLE

Compare hiring with changing, removing, sharing or delaying work. Identify who can decide, what you recommend and what remains unresolved. Confirm the authority and support the company has agreed to supply before presenting them to a candidate as part of the job.

PART THREE

The Method



CHAPTER 7

Matchmaking, not convincing

There is a moment in an offer conversation when a concern can become an objection to overcome. The candidate says the hours worry them. The company needs an answer. Someone explains the opportunity again, talks about future growth and hopes the candidate will stop worrying long enough to say yes.

The concern hasn't changed. The conversation has moved away from it.

I think of hiring as **matchmaking, not convincing**. You can explain a role, advocate for its strengths, negotiate better terms and help someone reconsider an assumption that isn't true. The purpose is to leave them better able to decide, including deciding against you. Their uncertainty may need reassurance. It may also be telling you something about the job.

Make the strongest honest case

A candidate may know little about your company or reasonably doubt a promise they have heard before. They need reasons to consider the work. Show them the decisions they would own, the people they would work with and the support available.

If you say the manager develops people, give a relevant example and let the candidate speak with someone who has worked with that manager. If you say the hours are predictable, explain the exceptions as well as the usual week.

“It’s fast-paced” leaves almost everything open. Do priorities change during the day? How often does urgent work arrive? What happens to existing commitments when it does?

A candidate may find those conditions appealing, acceptable or impossible. Each response helps you understand the possible match. Truthful expectations also matter to people who accept. Research on realistic job previews finds modest effects on turnover and suggests that an employer’s perceived honesty can help explain them.¹ That is one possible mechanism, not a guarantee of retention.

The company then has to make a serious effort to deliver what it described. A detailed preview cannot build lasting trust by itself. Chapter 11 returns to checking those commitments once someone starts.

Money is part of the match

Better pay, a more useful title or a move away from a poor manager can be sound reasons to change jobs. They can remain important long after the offer. It would make little sense to recognise compensation and leadership as legitimate needs, then distrust someone for acting on them.

A higher salary may make the role possible for a candidate. It cannot make an unacceptable schedule disappear, just as interesting work cannot remove the need for adequate pay. The candidate decides which trade-offs they can accept. The company decides which terms it can offer.

Have that discussion early. State the compensation range and fixed working conditions, and say where there is room to negotiate. Asking for more money is an invitation to discuss a term of employment, not evidence of weak interest in the work.

You don't need to test commitment by asking whether someone would take a pay cut. That mixes a hiring decision with a negotiation and rewards candidates who can afford to give the answer you want. Ask instead what would make a move worthwhile and what would rule it out. They can answer without explaining their household finances.

Discovery happens in a workable order

Discovery-Led Hiring begins with the work. Before searching for a person, establish the business need, the real conditions and the requirements you will assess. Candidates then have something concrete to consider, and the shortlist doesn't end up defining the role by accident.

The sequence is **Discover -> Design -> Source -> Match**. Discover the work with people who know it, design the role around the outcome, source a relevant pool, then develop and compare evidence with actual candidates.

Once those conversations begin, discovery becomes two-way. You learn what each person can do and wants from work. They learn what the role demands and whether your account of the company is credible. What you learn can change the design, the search or their interest.

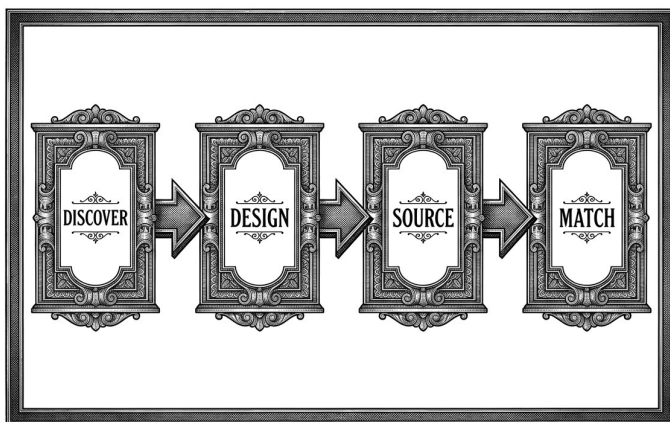


FIGURE 7 Understand and design the work before sourcing. Discover actual candidates' capability and needs during the search, then assess the match together.

A short intake call may identify what needs investigation. It is less likely to resolve conflicting responsibilities, unclear authority or an outcome the founder hasn't defined. Spend the time the uncertainty and consequences require. Length alone makes no process better.

You can begin sourcing once you can describe the role honestly and assess relevant evidence. Record what remains open. When a material detail changes, tell the candidates affected so they can reconsider the job you are now offering.

Give the candidate something to investigate

Reciprocal discovery gives the candidate a real opportunity to examine the company while the company examines their suitability. Each needs relevant evidence. That doesn't require identical hours or equally private disclosures.

When you ask about previous work, give the candidate access to people and information that help them understand this role. They may want to know how priorities are set or to meet the future manager. Find out which decision they are trying to understand and what a conversation could establish. Both sides should be able to challenge an account politely, ask for an example and correct a misunderstanding.

The same care helps when you ask what they want. A broad answer such as “more ownership” needs a follow-up. What could they decide in a recent role? Which decisions would they like to make now, and what responsibility comes with them? Ask which parts of their previous work they would choose again and which they would avoid.

Uncertainty about unfamiliar work or a changing role may call for a further conversation or a small work sample. Treat the person's account as something to explore with them, not a hidden personality test. Their curiosity about you is part of the work.

An offer conversation that can end either way

In this invented exchange, a candidate for a coordinator role asks how they can be accountable for progress when they cannot move a deadline.

“You’ll have plenty of freedom once you’ve settled in” would offer reassurance without answering the question. A useful answer is narrower: “You’ll make delays visible and bring forward options. We won’t assess you as though you control decisions that stay with the delivery lead and account managers.” The manager would then explain who sets priorities and who agrees any changed promise with the client.

The candidate might say they need reliable access to the delivery lead when two jobs compete. Before the recruiter promises it, the lead needs to agree how that access will work. Record the agreement in the handover. If the lead cannot provide it, reassurance from someone else does not settle the problem.

Other concerns may remain. The candidate may need more pay than the company can afford, or want final authority over client commitments. The company can consider a change it can sustain, explain a boundary it has reason to keep, or accept that agreement isn’t possible. It cannot settle the gap by calling the candidate poorly motivated or promising an unauthorised later increase.

A candidate can understand the role and decline it, even after investing time. If they want it, continue the assessment agreed at the start. Gino Wickman’s GWC questions in *Traction* are useful prompts: does the person understand the work, want it and have the capacity to do it?² Answer with relevant evidence. Capacity means the requirements of the job, not speculation about someone’s private circumstances.

If you're using a recruiter, ask for the candidate's strengths, trade-offs and remaining uncertainties, with the evidence behind the recommendation. A founder hiring directly owes the future manager the same account. "Perfect fit" becomes dangerous when the next person assumes somebody else has checked what it means.

Return to the concern

When you notice yourself describing the upside while a question about hours, authority or pay remains unanswered, return to it. The response may require information, a sustainable change, more time to decide or a clear limit the company cannot change.

A candidate may soften a concern because they need the job. Make room for questions, avoid pressure for an immediate answer and explain any real deadline. Calling a process reciprocal doesn't remove the difference in power.

MAKE THE OFFER CLEAR

Answer each material concern with evidence, a sustainable change or an honest limit. Record agreed pay, hours, responsibility and support. Give the candidate room to question or decline the offer without treating that choice as a character judgement.

CHAPTER 8

Skills, context and Work Drivers

Consider an illustrative candidate who asks for a clearer role. You might hear that as discomfort with ambiguity. Ask what clarity means to them. They may be willing to work through an uncertain problem but unwilling to have three people issue conflicting instructions. Agreeing who decides would help them work without removing uncertainty from the job.

What Work Drivers can help you discuss

Work Drivers is our set of prompts for exploring what a person wants work to provide. It groups 32 drivers into functional, social and emotional dimensions. The full reference list is in the printed toolkit, available without a service or account.

Functional drivers include practical conditions such as compensation, location, working hours and role clarity. Social drivers include relationships, recognition and opportunities to lead or contribute. Emotional drivers include autonomy, mastery, purpose and the satisfaction of doing work that matters to the person. The groups organise the conversation without ranking some needs as deeper or more deserving.

Their boundaries overlap, and the list cannot give a complete account of human motivation. Let people describe a need in their own words, including something that sits awkwardly under a driver name. Completing our categories matters less than understanding what they are saying.

The ideas have a history. Research on job design examines how features of work relate to motivation, while self-determination theory gives particular attention to autonomy, competence and relatedness.^{1,2} Those traditions help explain why I ask about more than salary and tasks.

We have not established that the instrument predicts performance or retention, and it should not be used as a validated selection test.

Keep importance, rank and fulfilment separate

A driver response can answer three different questions. How important is this to you? Where does it sit relative to the other things you are considering? How well does your current work provide it? The answers are related but not interchangeable.

Our card sort ranks preferences within each dimension. First among functional drivers is not necessarily the person's single most important need across all 32. A trade-off between dimensions needs a conversation, not an overall order invented from separate rankings.

Fulfilment asks how well the current role provides something. It doesn't measure how strongly someone wants it. A person unhappy with current pay may consider pay very important. A low fulfilment number cannot be read as permission to offer less.

Nor does high fulfilment mean someone would readily give a condition up. Predictable hours may be so established in their current job that they rarely mention them. A new role with frequent late requests could still be unacceptable. Ask about the proposed work before inferring whether they would move.

Forced ranking brings a further limit. Moving one item up pushes another down, so the ranks depend on each other.³ Two people placing a driver third haven't necessarily assigned it the same importance. Adding a fulfilment rating doesn't make their ranks comparable. They can expose trade-offs within a person's choices, but they cannot produce a fair league table of candidates.

You can use the printed list without reproducing a formal assessment. Ask which conditions deserve discussion, what the person means by them and where they have experienced them. If you collect ratings, label the question and scale clearly. Ratings collected for different purposes must remain separate.

Follow the response into the work

Consider two further illustrative responses, this time about autonomy and pay.

One candidate places autonomy high among their emotional drivers. You might assume they want little management. A conversation could reveal that they want control over how to complete an agreed task while welcoming help with priorities. A clear outcome and regular access to a manager could meet that need. You would still need evidence that they can exercise the required judgement.

A candidate with low fulfilment on compensation may need a higher salary. You need to discuss the range and what the role can offer, not infer capability or commitment from the request. If the gap cannot close, the financial requirement gives you a clear reason to part without making a character judgement.

None of these responses produces a score or a verdict. The decision depends on the person's explanation, the actual work and the evidence of their ability to do it.

Discuss an apparent conflict before deciding

When the role cannot offer a highly ranked driver, first check what it means to the candidate. Explain what the work offers and where its limits lie. There may be a change the company can make or a trade-off the person knowingly wants to accept.

Someone who values variety may prefer a more predictable role for their next career stage. Someone who wants advancement may accept that a small company has no immediate management opening. Their choice need not be yours. Record the agreement without promising that the missing condition will appear later.

Some conflicts remain decisive. If the job requires coverage the person cannot provide and the company cannot change, the arrangement may not work. That conclusion comes from an explicit requirement and a conversation. A difference between two preference profiles cannot establish it.

I would not use a top-driver mismatch as an automatic veto or proof that someone will leave. The framework has not earned that power, nor does it allow an employer to overrule the person's account of their own priorities. Clarify the trade-off, check that the terms are understood and assess the remaining evidence.

Better working conditions also do not justify paying less than the work warrants. I remain interested in ways people can share more fairly in what they help build, including profit share and ownership. A driver ranking doesn't settle how to do that, and I don't have a single answer to offer here.

Assess the capability the job needs

Understanding what someone wants from work leaves a separate question: can they do what the job requires?

Start with what the person must be able to do on entry. Other capabilities may be learned with the time and support available. If a work sample assumes specialist knowledge you intend to teach, it may exclude people the job was meant to train. Enthusiasm for learning, on the other hand, cannot replace a capability someone must use safely and independently from the beginning.

I can't tell you to accept someone with 70 per cent of the skills without knowing which 30 per cent is missing. One gap may take a few hours of practice. Another may require years of development or an authority the person cannot legally exercise. Name the gap, its consequences, the support needed and when the person must be able to perform.

Then ask whether they want that development. Someone may be capable of learning more customer work without wanting it to become their career. Calling it a growth opportunity doesn't settle the mismatch. An honest training plan needs their informed interest too.

Ask what the previous result required

Riding a motorbike through busy Bangkok traffic and driving a truck on a quiet Montana highway both involve driving. Each calls on knowledge and judgement the shared label doesn't describe. Which abilities transfer, and which conditions require new learning?

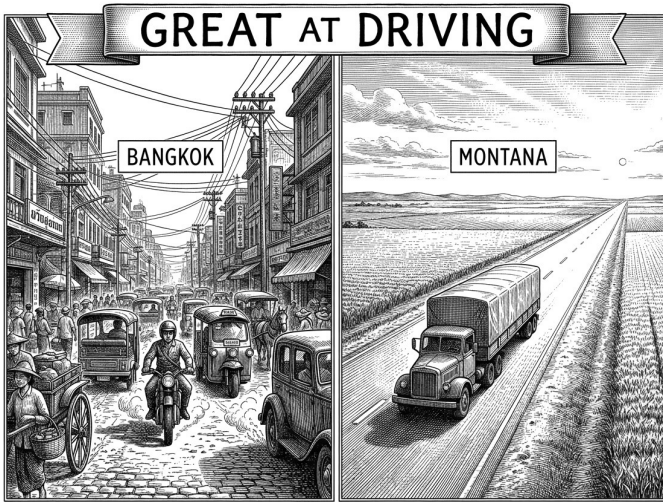


FIGURE 8 A broad skill label can hide different demands. Ask which abilities the role needs and under what conditions they must be used.

Compare a candidate's previous working conditions with yours. If they managed delivery with a dedicated analyst and you have no analyst, find out who did the analytical work and how dependent the result was on it. You may need to provide support, change the job or assess a capability you had assumed. Removing that support after hiring and treating the changed result as proof of exaggeration would be unfair.

Investigate whether the evidence applies here. A title, employer or certificate cannot settle it alone. Demonstrated expertise continues to matter after someone clears a minimum requirement.

Use a framework to widen the questions

Joseph Grenny and his colleagues describe six sources of influence in *Crucial Influence*.⁴ They consider motivation and ability at personal, social and structural levels: what a person knows and wants to do, and the people, resources and incentives around them.

I find this useful when the first explanation of poor performance is that someone needs to try harder. They may need to change something. The team may also reward the wrong behaviour, a necessary tool may be missing or the manager may have made the required decision impossible. Those possibilities suggest different remedies to test.

These six sources suggest questions to investigate, not measured shares of what caused a result. If one reveals a contextual problem, examine it alongside the evidence of the person's capability.

Combine the evidence without hiding a gap

Keep the different kinds of evidence visible when you decide:

Question	Relevant evidence	What it leaves open
Can they do the required work?	Job-related questions, relevant previous work, knowledge checks and a fair work sample where appropriate.	A limited assessment cannot show every condition or future task.
What would help or hinder them here?	Comparison of previous working conditions with the actual role, including authority, tools and support.	The company may describe its intentions more accurately than its current practice.
Do the work and terms make sense for them?	Their stated requirements, examples, questions and informed response to an honest preview.	Priorities and circumstances can change, and acceptance cannot guarantee retention.

When evidence conflicts, stay with the specific uncertainty. Someone may describe independent decisions well but ask for more direction in the task. Was the brief unclear? Did the decision carry an unstated risk? Or does their independent judgement need more assessment? Examine the work and follow up before attaching a personality label.

If you decide that a remaining uncertainty is reasonable to accept, record it with the support promised and what needs checking after the person starts.

To see how these questions change a hire, we need to follow one through the decision.

KEEP THE EVIDENCE DISTINCT

Assess essential capability, investigate working conditions and discuss the person's requirements. Keep importance, rank and fulfilment separate. Explain any unresolved conflict before making a decision, and carry agreed support into onboarding.

CHAPTER 9

The discovery-led playbook

Monday arrives, a client is unhappy and someone asks when the job ad will be ready. You agree that the role needs to be clear, that candidates deserve an honest account of it and that you should examine relevant work. What happens first? What must be settled before you speak to people, and what can you only learn once you do?

This chapter follows one hire from the first request to the offer and handover. The agency, candidates, answers and later events are all invented for teaching. They are not a disguised client case or evidence that the method works. The example shows why the search might wait, how to distinguish a sound response from confident overreach, and what support makes a learning gap acceptable. Chapter 11 follows the hire into the job.

The four stages are **Discover, Design, Source, Match**. You may have to go back when a candidate exposes a requirement you haven't thought through or a work sample shows that you designed the wrong assessment. Record what changed and why. The printed toolkit contains the forms and exercise used here, so you can run it without buying a service.

Discover the problem before opening the role

Our example is a 15-person agency. Client work is arriving late, hand-offs keep slipping and the founder is drawn into delivery decisions every day. The first request is for a senior operations manager who can take the problem away.

The delivery lead sees it differently. They believe the team has enough senior judgement. It lacks a reliable way to get approvals, keep dates current and make priority changes visible. Another senior person could add a layer of argument without reducing the delays.

The founder's title cannot settle this, and a vote wouldn't explain what is happening. They take four recent jobs that were late and reconstruct the hand-offs: the promised date, work still needed, who had the information and who could approve the next step.

One job sat waiting for the founder's approval even though the delivery lead believed it had been delegated. On another, a specialist received a new priority directly from the founder while the account manager continued telling the client the old date would hold. The founder has described the organisation they intended to create. The team has described how decisions have been made. They need an explicit agreement about how those decisions will work next.

The delivery lead proposes a two-week trial before recruiting. The founder agrees to delegate ordinary priority conflicts to the lead, while retaining decisions that change a contract or price. They create one shared delivery list, name an approval owner and deputy, and remove a duplicate status report.

If this removes the problem and existing staff can carry the remaining work, there is no vacancy. Temporary work might justify short-term support. If the agency cannot fund a role and its training, it may have to reduce commitments or wait. A full inbox alone doesn't tell them which choice to make.

Approvals improve during the trial. Coordination still pulls two account managers away from client work, and neither has spare capacity. The delivery lead examines what remains, rather than treating every hour previously spent on confusion as a future job. Dependencies still need checking, the delivery list needs maintaining and agreed actions need follow-up.

That supports a client-delivery coordinator reporting to the delivery lead. The agency has reduced part of the problem itself and identified the capacity still needed. It no longer has a reason for the original senior operations manager request.

In this example, the founder agrees to keep the approval route that made the trial possible. Without that agreement, the delivery lead would need to recommend a different role or a pause and explain why. The person running the search might not be able to stop it. They would still have to correct any claim about authority that the founder had not granted. An unresolved disagreement inside the business must not become a settled promise to a candidate.

Design the job people will actually do

The **Role Decision Sheet** in the toolkit records why the job exists, what it owns and what evidence will support the hiring decision. Start with the business problem the agency has just clarified.

The coordinator's purpose is to make the state of client delivery visible early enough for people with authority to act. They keep the delivery list current, check dependencies, confirm owners and dates, and flag risks. Their responsibility does not extend to every result that could affect a deadline.

The delivery lead sets priorities and allocates capacity. Account managers own client promises and updates. Creative specialists own work quality. The founder decides contract and price exceptions. The coordinator can organise a hand-off and follow up agreed actions, but cannot promise a client a new deadline or overrule the delivery lead.

Writing this down exposes a practical question: what happens when the delivery lead is unavailable? The sheet names a deputy. Without one, “take ownership” would leave the coordinator responsible for progress without a way to get a decision.

The agency needs evidence that someone can track several dependencies, distinguish urgent work from important work, write a clear update and escalate at the right time. They need basic competence with shared task records. A particular software brand is unnecessary if the person can learn it with the support available.

Agency experience could reduce the learning required, so it remains useful. The delivery lead must decide which knowledge is needed on arrival and which can be taught, by whom and within what realistic period. Calling something trainable does not supply the time or the teacher.

The sheet also describes the harder conditions. Client requests can change. The coordinator will chase colleagues who are busy or senior to them. The team needs an agreed daily overlap window. Routine follow-up fills part of the week, alongside occasional pressure. None of that needs dressing up as an adventure.

The founder, delivery lead and account managers check the sheet against the incidents they examined. If one still expects the coordinator to make a decision another plans to retain, the design is unfinished. The person accountable must make that decision and leave its consequences visible, even if the wording isn't everyone's preference.

Source widely, then narrow for a reason

The agency publishes a plain account of the work, pay range, working pattern, decision rights and selection steps. It invites applications and uses relevant referrals and direct outreach to reach people who may miss the advertisement.

Applying does not make someone less capable, any more than having to be approached makes them stronger. Employment status tells the agency about availability. It cannot substitute for evidence of the work.

The first screen is small. Candidates provide an existing example or a short description of coordinating work with competing deadlines. They are told not to share confidential client material. A description is acceptable because not everyone has permission to take work away from an employer. The agency also checks essential conditions, including the overlap window and pay range.

Before reading applications, the delivery lead records what will move someone forward: an intelligible example of handling dependencies, a credible account of their own

contribution and no unresolved conflict with an essential condition. A brief answer may provide that evidence. A polished essay may not.

If applications arrive in large numbers, the agency reviews batches against the same requirements, records its reasons and checks uncertain exclusions. It seeks a short clarification where missing information could change the decision. A large applicant pool doesn't justify handing everyone an unpaid assignment to reduce the employer's reading.

The shortlist must allow the agency to examine plausible options and give each person the attention promised. No fixed number can guarantee that. If nobody supplies the necessary evidence, the agency reviews the search or requirements. It cannot quietly lower an essential requirement to meet a deadline.

Referrals go through the same process. A trusted colleague's recommendation can help find someone, but doesn't establish how they will handle this work.

Match with questions and a fair piece of work

The interview begins with the role, including what the employer hasn't made easy. Candidates need that account to ask useful questions and decide whether to continue. These conversations also let the agency learn their individual priorities.

The delivery lead uses the same core questions for each shortlisted person: a hand-off that went wrong, competing deadlines, an unclear decision boundary and a time they questioned a manager's request. Follow-ups seek the candidate's actions, information available at the time and what happened afterwards.

The best answer isn't necessarily the story closest to the interviewer's career. Someone from another industry may have faced the same underlying problem. Someone with little experience may need a relevant scenario to show their reasoning. Past examples and hypothetical situations can both help if the assessor is clear about what each establishes. Neither gives direct access to a person's character.

Candidates can test the employer's account too. Who changes deadlines? What happens when the founder bypasses the delivery lead? Which tasks are repetitive? What support will help them learn the agency? An unanswered question belongs in the decision record.

Next comes a short simulation, the **Firefighter Morning**, using a fictional problem that resembles the role. No live client output is requested or used. The complete brief and two invented response extracts are in the toolkit.

Both candidates have 30 minutes to prepare and 20 minutes to discuss their response. This states the intended demand, rather than rewarding whoever finishes fastest. The agency offers accessible formats and adjustments, supplies equivalent tools and explains what information is available. Candidates may ask clarifying questions. An answer that changes a material fact goes to everyone.

Normal tools and optional AI are allowed. Candidates explain what they used and remain responsible for checking the result, without surrendering personal accounts or private notes. A different role requiring unaided writing would need a different, clearly stated rule. Changing the standard after seeing a polished answer would undermine the assessment. Any substantial further assignment would require payment, scope and use to be agreed beforehand.

The criteria are visible before the exercise: establish the immediate risk, order actions using the facts, respect decision rights, communicate clearly and identify uncertainty. A delivery lead who understands the work assesses the responses. Another reviewer can challenge that assessment but cannot replace it with an impression of confidence.

Here is the problem. A client deliverable is due at noon. At 9 am, a reviewer finds an error that may affect the recommendation. A specialist needs 30 minutes to assess it. The account manager is on a call until 9.30 am, the delivery lead is available, and another client expects a routine update at 10 am.

Candidates receive the role boundaries and are asked for a first-hour plan, a brief internal update and one uncertainty or action they would defer. They are coordinating a response, not supplying the technical answer to the client's problem.

Candidate A has less agency experience. Their answer first checks the error with the specialist and alerts the delivery lead. It keeps the account manager informed without inventing a new client promise. A also leaves a route for the routine update, rather than forgetting it when something more dramatic appears.

Candidate B has more agency experience and knows the language of client delivery. Their initial plan immediately promises the client that the work will arrive at noon, then asks the team to make it happen. The answer sounds decisive. Capacity and the error are still being checked, however, and the coordinator does not own the promise.

The assessor asks both what they would change if the specialist said the error needed another two hours. A adjusts the internal escalation and asks the account manager to agree an updated client message. B still assumes the coordinator can commit the team without the delivery lead's decision.

That gives the concern about B a job-related basis. After clarification, the response still crosses a consequential authority boundary.

A has shown a plausible approach to a short, stated problem. The agency hasn't observed weeks of follow-up, all the technical knowledge involved or a difficult day. The interview, relevant prior work and later checks still matter. This is evidence about part of the job, not proof of the whole person.

Decide on the evidence, including what is missing

The decision record puts requirements beside evidence. It doesn't rank enthusiasm or turn an impression into a decimal score.

A has stronger evidence of ordering actions and communicating within the role's authority. B's agency knowledge could shorten the learning period, but the response leaves a concern about commitments outside the role's authority. A will need help learning the agency's dependencies. The choice involves those particular strengths and gaps, not a verdict that one person is generally good and the other bad.

Reviewers make initial notes separately, then compare them. A disagreement sends them back to the answer that produced the judgement. “I liked them” is not something another reviewer can inspect. “They changed the deadline without checking who could approve it” is.

They decide to offer the role to A, provided the working pattern and support can be agreed. A needs to learn how the agency moves work from client approval through specialist production and review. For the first two weeks, the delivery lead sets aside half an hour each morning to work through A's delivery list, check dependencies and explain unfamiliar hand-offs. This teaching time replaces part of the lead's normal internal reporting work. Without that capacity, the reason for accepting the gap disappears. The agency would need to pause, change the role or keep searching.

This is the useful part of a **candidate package**: what the role needs, what was observed, where accounts disagree, what remains uncertain and why the recommendation follows. A resume can sit beside it as background without carrying a decision it cannot explain.

The record must also allow a no. If both candidates lack evidence of an essential requirement, choosing the less worrying one won't supply it. A hiring deadline may justify a different staffing plan. It cannot turn missing evidence into positive evidence.

Make the offer honest enough to decline

A wants a dependable daily overlap window and clarity about what happens outside it. The employer wants coverage for delivery decisions. They agree a window and an emergency rota, rather than allowing “flexibility” to become permanent availability.

The agency has published a pay range and agrees terms within it. A can ask for more, and the agency can state what it can afford without turning the negotiation into a judgement of A's values.

The delivery lead explains the training, deputy arrangement and work A can own. There is no guaranteed promotion to operations manager, and routine chasing will remain. A job can be worth choosing without providing everything someone might eventually want.

The employer can advocate for the work and explain why it thinks A could do it well. A can negotiate, seek information or decline. If essential hours cannot be reconciled, a reasoned no helps both sides. Agreement reached by concealing the hard part is a debt someone will collect after the start.

Hand over what you learned, then check what happens

The delivery lead receives the role record, selection evidence, known uncertainties and offer commitments. In the first week, A gets a bounded delivery list and guided review of its dependencies, beginning useful work while learning the agency.

They plan check-ins for the end of week one and days 30, 45 and 90. These dates belong to this example. For another role, the manager would need occasions that reveal enough real work early enough to act.

The handover gives the manager a record to test against the work. Chapter 11 returns to this hire at day 30, when the first difficulties need a response.

Use the depth the decision needs

An ordinary role with known work may need a few focused conversations, recent examples and a clear decision sheet. A senior role crossing several functions may need much more investigation. Regulated or safety-critical work also needs the relevant specialist standards. Match the time spent to the uncertainty and consequences.

Elapsed search time is different from time spent understanding a role, and neither becomes valuable because it is long. Ask whether another round of work is likely to change a consequential decision and whether an important uncertainty has been left without an owner.

You now have a sequence of decisions against which to judge what AI might do: the information needed, errors that would matter and responsibility someone must retain.

TRY THE SEQUENCE ON ONE ROLE

Start with the missing outcome and test whether hiring is necessary. Write the responsibilities, requirements and conditions before shortlisting. Record the evidence behind the final trade-off, then give each important post-hire finding an action, an owner and a review date.

PART FOUR

The Payoff

CHAPTER 10

Human-led, AI-augmented

My instinct was that people would tell a human more than they would tell a machine. Hiring depends on understanding the story behind an answer, so I assumed an automated interview would leave us with less of what mattered. That instinct helped shape how I work. It is also a claim that evidence can challenge, and the evidence now does.

A 2026 working paper by Brian Jabarian and Luca Henkel studied entry-level customer-service hiring in the Philippines. Of 70,884 applications, 67,056 eligible applications were randomly assigned to a human interviewer, an AI voice interviewer, or a choice between them. Humans made the final hiring decisions. Offer rates were 8.70 per cent in the human-interview group and 9.73 per cent in the AI-interview group. One-month employment was 4.98 per cent and 5.89 per cent of all applications in those two groups, respectively. The often-reported 18 per cent increase concerns that whole application pool, not retention among people hired. The researchers also found that AI interviews gathered more hiring-relevant information while remaining responsive to applicants.¹

That is evidence against a blanket claim that a machine-led conversation must be thin. It comes from one hiring setting, with human decisions and follow-up reaching four months. It does not establish that an automated system can replace the discovery required for every role in this book. It does mean I should stop treating the opposite as settled.

My position is **discovery-led, human-led, AI-augmented**. Discovery establishes what we need to learn. A named human owns the decision and its consequences. AI

helps with the work where we have reason to trust it, under checks that match the cost of an error. This is an operating policy, not a prediction that machines will always be worse at understanding people.

For the person responsible for hiring, the useful questions are which tasks a tool can handle, how mistakes become visible and who can act on them.

Start with the decision you are making

Chapter 2 described the pressure created when application tools and screening tools respond to each other. A faster filter may help with volume. It cannot tell you whether the requirements you gave it describe the job you should be hiring for.

Before automating a step, name the decision it supports. Finding profiles, checking an essential requirement and choosing between two finalists are different tasks. They need different evidence and different checks. A missed meeting invitation is inconvenient. A summary that removes a candidate's qualification can exclude someone before anybody speaks to them.

Even a rule that looks objective contains a choice. Requiring a licence may be necessary for particular work. Requiring a familiar job title may be a poor substitute for asking whether someone has done the relevant work under another name. A location rule might describe a real on-site requirement, or an old preference nobody has reconsidered. The software can apply either rule faithfully. You still own the rule.

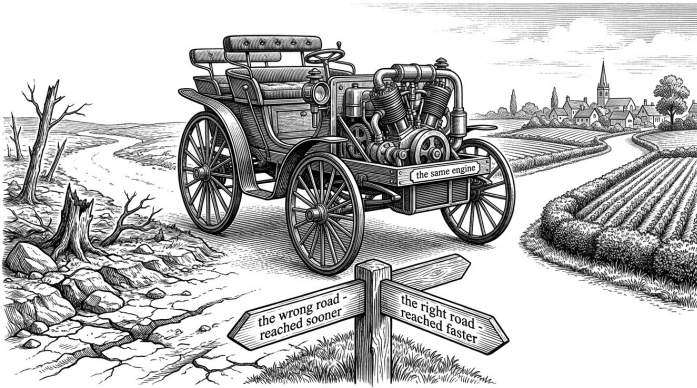


FIGURE 9 AI can help carry out a hiring process. The people using it remain responsible for the requirements, direction and checks.

There is also a difference between missing evidence and evidence of absence. A profile that does not mention a required skill has left a question unanswered. It has not established that the person lacks the skill. Sometimes a short application question can settle it. Sometimes the available evidence is too weak to justify further assessment. Make that decision consciously, with the burden proportionate to the role and the number of people applying.

Whoever makes the choice must be able to explain it, including when they reject a machine's recommendation.

Give the tool a bounded job

AI can help prepare a search, organise evidence, transcribe a conversation, compare a draft against agreed requirements and produce documents for review. These tasks can save time

that would otherwise disappear into administration. The useful question is what must be checked before their output affects a person.

Task	Useful assistance	Check before using the result
Research a role or candidate	Find possible sources and relevant work.	Open the sources. Check identity, dates and what the evidence actually shows.
Screen an essential requirement	Flag a stated mismatch or missing answer.	Confirm the requirement is necessary. Separate a clear mismatch from an unanswered question.
Summarise an interview	Organise statements under the agreed criteria.	Trace consequential statements to the record. Preserve uncertainty and contrary evidence.
Compare candidates	Put comparable evidence side by side and expose gaps.	Check omissions and apply the same criteria. Record the reason for a decision or override.
Draft a role document or offer material	Turn agreed facts into a readable draft.	Verify duties, authority, conditions and promises before anyone receives it.

A tool's ability to do one of these well does not establish its ability to do the others. A good transcription service has not thereby become a valid selection test. A convincing summary may still leave out the detail that changes the hiring decision.

Consider an invented example, separate from any candidate's private interview. A candidate describes preparing client recovery plans while a delivery lead approved any promise

that changed the schedule. An AI summary turns this into independent ownership of client recovery. That sounds stronger, but it has removed a limit on authority.

The reviewer checks the summary against the interview record and corrects it: the candidate prepared the plans, while the delivery lead approved changed commitments. A follow-up now has a clear purpose. What decisions could the candidate make alone, and what would they do if the person who approved the work was unavailable? The candidate may have excellent judgement. The original evidence simply had not yet answered that question.

The same correction matters when the error makes a person look weaker. If a summary says someone lacks client-facing experience because they called the people they served members rather than clients, the reviewer needs to restore the actual work before comparing them with others. Neither error should survive because the paragraph reads well.

Keep the source, the draft and the correction distinguishable. Otherwise the polished version becomes the record, and the next person cannot see what was assumed. You need enough traceability to answer a challenge without reconstructing the whole process from memory.

Check the people you never meet

The easiest screening errors to notice are candidates who progress and then prove unsuitable. The harder ones are qualified people who disappear before the conversation. These are false negatives, and a process that never looks for them can become very confident in its own judgement.

Review a sample of rejected applications against the actual requirements, including cases near the screening boundary and a random selection from further below it. Do not begin by showing the reviewer the tool's verdict. Ask whether the

available evidence supported exclusion, justified progression or required clarification. Compare those answers with what the tool did.

This review does not prove the rejected people would have succeeded in the job. You usually do not observe that outcome. It can reveal a narrower, actionable problem: a relevant example was overlooked, a missing answer became a negative, or a weak requirement excluded people for no useful reason. Correct the rule and check who else it affected.

A candidate also needs a practical way to correct a consequential error. Explain where AI is used, what it contributes and how a person can raise an issue. An alternative route should address a genuine access or assessment problem rather than penalise someone for having it. If the process records interviews or sends personal information to a service, understand what is collected, who can see it and how it is handled before switching it on.

That is more work than buying a tool and accepting its ranking. It is also part of using a tool that affects people's opportunities. A human screen deserves the same scrutiny. Familiar names, impressive employers and confident speech can hide a weak decision just as easily as a polished automated report.

Human ownership has to mean something

Putting a human at the end of a process is not enough if that person's only job is to click approve. They need access to the underlying evidence, time to inspect it and authority to change the recommendation. They also need agreed criteria, so that changing it does not become an excuse to choose the person they liked most. If you are assigned that review

without those conditions, name the missing condition to whoever owns the process. Your signature cannot stand for an examination you were unable to make.

Use the evidence-comparison approach from Chapter 9. Decide what matters before meeting the candidates. Gather comparable evidence. Record what supports each requirement, what conflicts with it and what is still unknown. If you override the assessment, write down the evidence that changed your mind. Another person should be able to follow the reason, even if they would have weighed it differently.

In my work, I prefer a human to lead the deeper conversations: questioning a founder's assumptions, testing an account of a role and discussing a difficult trade-off with a candidate. These are responsibilities I want someone to own directly. That person still needs to show that the conversation was useful, however confident they felt about it.

The question I return to is: **what breaks if we are wrong?** A named owner must be able to answer it for every consequential use of AI. If a mistaken summary could rule someone out, check it before exclusion. If an uncertain result could be settled with one focused question, ask it. If nobody understands why a recommendation was made, do not make it the decisive evidence.

Know what would change your mind

A tool should earn a larger role through observed performance in the task you need done. Start with a bounded use and a record of the current process. Check whether it saves total time after correction, whether it loses relevant information, what candidates experience and what kinds of

errors recur. Include people who withdraw or are rejected where you can, rather than collecting feedback only from successful applicants.

Follow hiring decisions into the job. Did the new person do the work the assessment was meant to predict? Were early difficulties linked to something the assessment missed, a broken promise or a later change? Keep observation dates and unknown outcomes visible. A small number of hires may help you find a specific defect, but it will not establish that a tool caused better retention.

Vendor evidence can inform this decision, but read the comparison. A gain against unstructured interviews is not automatically a gain against your structured process. A result from high-volume customer-service hiring does not settle the question for a senior role with different work and fewer observations. The relevant claim is always narrower than AI works or AI does not work.

I would change my view about a tool's role if it showed that it could gather and preserve the information we need, support sound decisions and allow errors to be corrected under our conditions. I would reduce its role if it concealed uncertainty, added candidate burden or made mistakes we could not reliably find. Those are useful conditions to write down before enthusiasm makes the decision for us.

Where this breaks: A small company may not have enough hires to compare long-term outcomes with confidence. That limits what you can claim, not whether you can inspect a transcript, test a screening rule or correct an error. Keep the initial use narrow enough to review properly. If the review costs more than the task saves, or the consequences exceed your ability to check it, that is a reason to change the use.

The benefit I want from AI is more time and better information for decisions that deserve attention. Sometimes that means doing an administrative task faster. Sometimes it means surfacing a contradiction I missed. The test is whether the process helps us understand the work and the person better, then act responsibly on what we learn.

The decision does not end when a candidate accepts. That is when we begin to see whether the work matches what we promised, and whether our assessment matches the work they do.

CHECK ONE USE OF AI

Name the decision a tool supports and the mistake that would matter most. Show how somebody would find and correct that mistake, including in rejected applications. Record what would justify expanding, reducing or stopping the use.

CHAPTER 11

The match doesn't end at the offer

An offer records only part of what a candidate agrees to. The conversations around it also create expectations about authority, support, workload, flexibility and the work itself. A role that promised room to make decisions may arrive with an approval requirement nobody mentioned. A manager who promised training may have assumed somebody else would provide it.

When we worked on onboarding at Tier 11, the new starter, hiring manager and capability leader did not always need the same thing at the same time. The starter was trying to understand the systems and the people. The business also needed them to become productive. A plan that made sense to one person could leave another struggling.

We spoke with people as they went through the experience and brought the different expectations together. We kept revising the process through conversations, a first version, feedback and another version.¹

We kept learning about the demands we were placing on people instead of treating the first onboarding plan as finished. Those changes do not establish that retention or performance improved.

Carry the promises into the job

The first useful onboarding document is a short account of what both sides understood. The manager and new employee should be able to read it together and correct it. It needs the early outcomes, the important working conditions, the

decisions the person can make and the support required to get started. It also needs the uncertainties you carried into the hire.

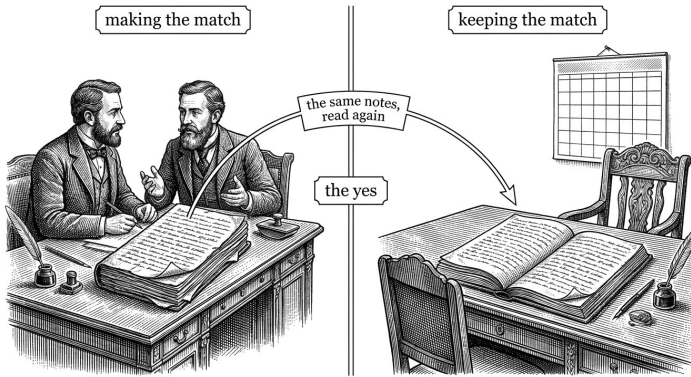


FIGURE 10 Use the hiring record to support the person after acceptance. Keep the promises, known uncertainties and the chance to correct the record visible.

In our illustrative coordinator case, the hiring decision included a trainable gap in agency experience. That should become paid learning time and access to somebody who knows the work. It should not disappear into an assessment folder while the new person is criticised for asking basic questions. The agreed overlap hours should reach the person scheduling meetings. The delivery lead's ownership of priorities should remain visible when the founder wants something done urgently.

Research on newcomer adjustment supports paying attention to these conditions. A meta-analysis by Talya Bauer and colleagues examined role clarity, confidence in doing the work and social acceptance, and their relationships with satisfaction, performance and turnover.² Those relationships do not establish that an onboarding worksheet will prevent early failures.

Here is a manageable brief for the coordinator, using teaching extracts from our invented case.

Part of the brief	What it means in this role
Early work	Maintain the agreed delivery list, check dependencies and flag risks while there is still time to act.
Decision rights	The coordinator maintains the list. The delivery lead decides priorities. Account managers own client promises. The founder decides contract and price exceptions.
Support	Provide the promised paid training and a route for questions about agency work.
Working conditions	Respect the agreed overlap hours and make any requested change explicit.
Known uncertainty	Check whether follow-up remains reliable as the number of active jobs grows.
Review	The delivery lead and coordinator compare the brief with actual work at agreed check-ins, including the first-month review.

Keep private candidate disclosures out of a general management handover unless the person agrees they are needed. A manager needs to know that an agreed working condition matters. They do not automatically need the personal story behind it. A discovery profile should help someone start well, not become a permanent file of explanations about their character.

Renewal is a question, not a retention trick

I sometimes describe employment as **a subscription renewed every day**. The useful question is whether the work remains worth choosing for the person doing it. That question keeps the employer's part of the relationship visible after the contract is signed.

The analogy has a limit. Leaving a job can threaten someone's income and security, and the employer usually has more power. A person staying is not proof that the work is right for them. Nor should a difficult week be read as a decision to leave. The work is what we keep examining, not the person's worth or loyalty.

Onboarding is the **first renewal** in this sense: the first chance to compare the experience with the promise. Ask which parts of the job are as expected, which are different and what is harder than it needs to be. If the person raises a gap, decide whether the company can change it. When it cannot, say so and explain why. Repeatedly inviting concerns without acting on them gives people little reason to keep answering.

Work Drivers can help frame this conversation, provided they stay open to correction. Someone who valued learning during recruitment may now be telling you that constant novelty makes it difficult to become competent. That is not a contradiction to score against them. Ask what kind of learning they meant, what the job is providing and what would help. The earlier discussion is a starting point, not an answer that lasts forever.

Find the problem before choosing the remedy

When performance falls short, start with the work you can describe. Which requirement was missed? What happened, on what occasion, with what effect? Compare that with the expectation the person received. A complaint that somebody lacks ownership is much harder to investigate than a record that two agreed follow-ups did not happen.

Then test competing explanations. Was the expectation clear? Did the person have the time, information, tools and authority it required? Has the work changed? Did training happen? Is there evidence of a capability gap that the original assessment missed? What does the person say was happening? More than one explanation can be true.

Keep the original hiring judgement open to question. If every successful hire proves the method and every unsuccessful hire proves the manager failed to use it, the method can never be wrong. Choose the explanation from the evidence, including the person's skills, judgement, effort and conduct as well as the conditions.

This makes the **manager as enabler** a practical role. The manager removes avoidable obstacles, gives clear feedback and holds the agreed requirements. Enabling someone does not mean avoiding a difficult conversation or doing their work indefinitely. It means making sure the conditions and expectations are clear enough that both sides can see what needs to improve.

Turn the conversation into a change

Return to the invented coordinator case from Chapter 9. At day 30, some hand-offs are still slipping. The founder has sent urgent work directly to specialists outside the shared

list. A, the coordinator, has also missed a follow-up for which the necessary information was available. The manager examines the incidents before deciding that A cannot cope or the organisation has failed A.

Both findings belong in the record. The delivery lead asks the founder to route priority changes through the list for two weeks. The founder agrees, and the lead owns checking whether that happens. A practises the follow-up check on the next set of hand-offs, with the promised support, and records commitments in the shared list. They agree to examine the results on day 45.

If the founder had refused, the lead could still help A improve the missed follow-up. But the requested change to how priorities were communicated would remain unagreed. It would be wrong to assess A as though the promised change had happened, or to tell the founder that recording the problem had resolved it.

At day 45, fewer priority changes are missing from the list, but one hand-off still slips. Before expanding A's responsibility, the manager examines it. The cause of that remaining miss is still unknown. It could reveal further learning needed, an unrealistic workload, another broken hand-off or a capability the original assessment missed. The next decision depends on what they find.

Use the first-90-days worksheet to keep the observation, competing explanations, chosen action, owner and date together. Add what changed at the next review. If the action did not help, the explanation or action needs to change.

Ninety days is a convenient planning window here, not a scientific deadline for deciding whether a person belongs.

For some problems the honest decision is that a condition cannot be changed. For others, a reasonable period of support still leaves an essential requirement unmet. Those

outcomes also belong in the record. Discovery is not a promise of endless redesign, and a conversation does not replace the need to manage serious conduct or persistent performance problems fairly.

Ask before interpreting the silence

Someone who used to volunteer ideas may become quieter. Replies may take longer. They may stop raising concerns. These changes can justify a conversation, but they do not tell you that the person has mentally resigned. Workload, unclear priorities, a communication problem or something they do not wish to disclose could all be involved.

Ask about the work and the change you have observed without claiming to know its meaning. You can say that fewer concerns have been raised lately and ask whether there is anything making them harder to discuss. Leave room for an answer you did not expect. Do not monitor pronouns, tone or private messages to build a hidden disengagement score.

The manager does not need a diagnosis of somebody's private life. They need enough understanding to address work requirements and offer appropriate support. The person decides what personal information to share. An agreed adjustment can be recorded without turning its private reason into team knowledge.

Keep the habit proportionate

Teresa Torres' work on continuous discovery helped me think about learning as an ongoing habit rather than a phase that ends before delivery.³ Applying that idea to employment is an

adaptation. An employee is not an interchangeable research participant, and repeatedly asking questions creates obligations for the person asking them.

My practice is to meet more often during a new hire's start, a role change or an unresolved difficulty, then adjust as the work becomes stable. Agree a cadence that suits the job and the person. Weekly meetings may help in one setting and be excessive in another. Their frequency alone cannot tell us whether discovery is happening.

A useful check-in has a question about how the work is going, enough time to explore the answer and a route to action. Some weeks it should be short because the earlier change worked and there is little more to resolve. At other times an established routine needs a longer conversation. Keep the attention consistent without turning every meeting into another assessment.

Where this breaks: Listening can become a way of postponing a decision. If the same issue returns with no action, owner or honest refusal, the process is not helping. Set a review date and decide what evidence would justify continuing, changing the support or acknowledging that the role is not working. Keep that decision open to the possibility that the original hiring judgement was wrong.

ACT ON WHAT YOU LEARN

Review the original role and promises with the employee. Choose one specific gap, consider competing explanations and agree the next action. Give it an owner and a date, then record what actually changed.

CHAPTER 12

The talent-dense company

The coordinator in our worked example is not there to become the agency's most impressive strategist. The role exists because missed hand-offs and scattered requests are taking account managers away from their work. A dependable person who keeps commitments visible, follows up and raises a risk early can make that whole team more effective. Calling their contribution merely adequate would miss the reason for hiring them.

That is the question behind talent density: what can this group do well together, and what does the next person help it do better? It asks more of a hiring decision than whether a vacancy has been filled. It also asks more of the employer than collecting people with impressive records and expecting them to work it out.

Reed Hastings and Netflix helped popularise the term.¹ I use it as a way to think about team capability, not as a percentage of people I would label stars. The aim is a team with the skills, judgement and working relationships its work requires. Some contributions will be conspicuous. Others will be valuable because they make reliable work possible without demanding attention.

Dependable is a contribution

There is an important difference between harmful conduct, a person who cannot meet a role's requirements and somebody who does their job well without constantly exceeding it. If we put all three in a category called mediocre, we lose the ability to decide what to do.

Harmful conduct needs a response to the conduct. An unmet requirement needs a clear account of the gap, its cause and whether support or a change can address it. Dependable work needs to be valued against what the role exists to provide. A team does not become stronger because everybody is made anxious about being the least exceptional person in the room.

If somebody meets expectations but you are disappointed, examine the expectations. Perhaps the role now needs a capability it did not need before. Perhaps you wanted more initiative but never gave the person authority to act. Perhaps the work is simply less visible than the work you tend to celebrate. These possibilities call for different decisions.

I still want a high standard. That means being specific about the standard and willing to act when it is not met. It does not mean turning every stable contributor into a problem. The person who prevents an avoidable error may contribute more than the person praised for fixing it later. A senior specialist should not have to prove their value by holding on to routine work that somebody else could own well.

The coordinator example helps make this concrete. If the role eventually gives account managers more reliable time for client work, the benefit is partly in what those colleagues can now do. If the coordinator creates another layer of approval without resolving the delays, the hire may have added cost

without solving the problem. You need to inspect that contribution. Neither the person's title nor how busy they look will answer it.

Skill travels, but conditions may not

What will this team need to provide for the next person to do the work well? Look at how their previous results were achieved, the support they had and what will be different here, alongside evidence of the capability itself.

Groysberg, Lee and Nanda studied the portability of star securities analysts' performance. Analysts who changed firms experienced an average decline in their rankings, especially when moving alone or to firms with weaker capabilities. The researchers found no statistically significant decline for those moving with colleagues or to stronger firms.² That does not prove the effect was zero, and an observational study of analyst rankings is not a universal rule for every job. It gives us a good reason to investigate the resources and relationships behind a record of success.

Ask what the previous team supplied that your team would have to replace. A candidate may have worked with a specialist who checked their technical decisions, a strong manager who settled priorities or established systems that made the work predictable. You might be able to provide those conditions. You might instead need somebody with evidence of working effectively without them. Either answer is more useful than deciding that impressive experience must travel intact or cannot travel at all.

The same applies to a person whose previous results were modest. A different environment may help them, but that possibility is not proof of hidden excellence. Look for evidence of the capability you need and be honest about the support you are prepared to provide.

Hire for the gap in the team

Before deciding what the next person should add, identify where the current work becomes difficult. Look at recent decisions and hand-offs. Where does work wait? Where is it redone? Which questions reach the founder because nobody else can answer them? Which important capability depends on one person always being available?

Write down the contribution in terms somebody else could recognise. Then decide what evidence would support it. If the team needs better challenge of assumptions, ask candidates to examine a relevant decision and explain where the evidence is weak. If it needs reliable coordination, inspect how they handle dependencies and commitments. Avoid replacing these requirements with labels such as confident, high energy or entrepreneurial. Those words can cover very different behaviour.

You are not asking the new person to repair everything. Specify what belongs to the manager and existing team too. If people regularly make promises without consulting delivery, hiring a coordinator does not remove their responsibility to change. A role designed to absorb everybody else's unresolved habits will be difficult to keep working, however capable its occupant.

Fit must leave room for difference

There is a risk in any method that asks who fits. We can quietly redefine fit as familiar: somebody who speaks like us, approaches problems as we do and makes the interview feel easy. Benjamin Schneider's attraction-selection-attrition framework describes how the people attracted to, selected by

and remaining in an organisation can make it increasingly alike.³ It is a useful warning about how a team reproduces itself, not a formula for choosing its next member.

Make the missing contribution explicit instead of searching for a different personality. A team that commits quickly may need somebody who is good at testing whether a promise is feasible. That is a work requirement you can assess. It does not mean choosing somebody because you have decided they belong to a cautious personality type. The same person might act quickly when the evidence is clear and pause when it is not.

Use comparable tasks and questions to examine that contribution. A candidate who disagrees with your first answer may be doing exactly the work you need. Look at how they make the disagreement useful: what they noticed, what evidence they sought and how they helped the group reach a decision. The aim is neither automatic agreement nor disagreement as a performance.

Also examine who can reach the process. Referrals alone can reproduce the same networks. An unnecessarily narrow experience requirement can hide relevant work done elsewhere. An assessment format may make it harder for someone to show a capability that the job itself does not require them to demonstrate in that way. These are reasons to inspect access and criteria, rather than assume a welcoming sentence in the job ad has resolved the issue.

People should not have to resemble the founder to meet a clear standard of work. Nor should one person be hired as a symbol of difference and then expected to carry every challenge the group avoids. The manager has to make room for the contribution they said they wanted.

Measure the work you hoped to improve

I cannot give you a single validated talent-density score. It would hide too many different things inside one number. That does not make measurement useless. Without it, a founder's feeling that the team is getting better can become as hard to challenge as an automated ranking.

Choose a small set of measures connected to the reason for the hire, and interpret them alongside the conversations. Record the starting point where you can. Keep the period, definition and missing information visible so that a better-looking number does not quietly mean something different.

Question	Evidence worth keeping	Limit to remember
Is the work becoming more reliable?	Agreed commitments met, avoidable rework and the reasons for missed hand-offs.	The volume and difficulty of work may have changed.
Has a bottleneck eased?	Time waiting for an agreed decision and who had authority to make it.	A faster decision is not necessarily a better one.
Is the new role enabling others?	Work returned to its intended owner, with examples of how that time was used.	Moving a task is not a benefit if the problem was merely passed on.
Were promises kept?	Agreed support, hours and authority compared with actual experience.	Staying in the role does not itself establish satisfaction.
What happened after hiring?	Start dates, dated reviews, departures and unknown follow-up.	A small record cannot prove what caused the outcome.

Measures need to show improvements alongside unresolved problems. Otherwise you risk expanding a role too soon or overlooking a useful change and choosing the wrong remedy.

A short record reviewed with the people doing the work may be enough to inform the next decision, including the uncomfortable one that the hire did not address the original problem.

Strong teams need enough capacity

The appeal of a small, highly capable team can become an excuse to keep loading work onto people who are already stretched. Better coordination may remove waste. It cannot create unlimited hours or make every responsibility safe to concentrate in one person.

When you review the team's needs, include cover for absence, time to learn and space to improve how work is done. If one person must always rescue a deadline, investigate why. Sometimes the answer is a missing capability. Sometimes it is too much work, a promise the business should not have made or an approval rule that keeps creating emergencies.

Hiring another person can be the right response. So can reducing the work or changing a commitment. Talent density should help you make that choice thoughtfully. It should not make a larger team seem like a failure or a smaller team seem efficient before you examine the result.

The people in the team have a stake in this too. They need work they can do well, reasonable conditions and colleagues whose contribution they can rely on. A role that helps the business while repeatedly breaking its promises to the person doing it is not a durable achievement. Neither is a pleasant role whose necessary work is continually left to others.

Where this breaks: Team contribution can become an excuse for vague personal judgement. If you cannot name the work, the effect on others and the evidence behind your concern, pause before labelling somebody a poor fit. At the same time, clear harm or an unmet essential requirement should not be ignored because the person is well liked. The standard needs to be specific enough to support both decisions.

CHECK THE CONTRIBUTION

Name a recurring team problem and the contribution that would help. Choose evidence that can show whether it improves, including effects on other people's work. Check capacity and authority before asking a new person to solve it.

CHAPTER 13

Kill the resume

The hiring mistake I opened with was not caused by a candidate lying. We had failed to compare the role we described with the work and ownership beside it. The documents looked sensible, the conversations felt positive and we still missed something important. I want you to leave this book with a way to challenge that kind of confidence, including your own.

That is what I mean by **kill the resume**. A CV can give you useful facts and questions to follow up. It should not carry a decision it cannot support. A familiar title does not establish that someone has done the work you need, and an unfamiliar one does not establish that they cannot do it.

You still have to narrow the field and make a decision with incomplete information. The practical change is to define the work and the evidence it needs before somebody's profile starts defining the job for you.

EVIDENCE NOTE

I do not yet know whether the complete SuperHired method improves long-term outcomes compared with a good alternative. Recent hires and missing follow-up leave that question open. Candidate feedback can tell us about the experience, and a guarantee can state our commitment. Neither proves better performance or retention. The approach must be judged against what happens. Careful discovery does not guarantee a good hire or make every failure somebody else's fault.

Your first move

Before reading applications for your next role, write down the outcome you need and one important piece of work that would give you evidence about it.

For an account manager, an illustrative first line might be: *When a client's results fall below expectations, this person needs to explain what is known, acknowledge what is not and agree a credible next step with the people who must deliver it.*

That gives you something more useful than confident communicator with five years' experience. You can ask for a real example, follow the decisions the person made and use a short, fair scenario to examine an important part of the work. Look at whether they make promises without checking, avoid difficult information or explain the problem in a way a client could use. Each source can show part of the work, but no single exercise proves the whole job.

Before turning the line into an assessment, check whether hiring is the right response. If clients are angry because the founder repeatedly promises work the team cannot deliver, a new account manager will inherit the problem. You may not be able to change those promises. You can show where they fail, explain what a hire could and could not fix, and ask the founder to choose what changes. If they decline, your recommendation still has to address whether the role can achieve its purpose.

Start with somebody who does or depends on the work. Ask for a recent example that supports your account and one that complicates it. Follow the difference until you understand which decision it requires and who can make it. You may leave that conversation with a clearer role, a difficult recommendation or a reason to oppose the hire. Someone is about to entrust part of their life to this work. They deserve to know what they are being asked to join.

The hiring toolkit

Use these pages to investigate, recommend and record a hiring decision. A people leader, operator, recruiter or founder can run the sequence. Name who can decide the role's scope and budget, who can authorise the offer, and who will manage the work after the start. These may be different people.

If you have not decided whether to hire, begin with the First-Move Worksheet. If the role is agreed, complete the Role Decision Sheet before sourcing. Use the interview guide and work sample with shortlisted candidates, then complete the decision and handover records. The renewal worksheet and team check are for the work that follows.

The filled examples continue Chapter 9's **hypothetical 15-person agency hiring a client-delivery coordinator**. The company events, candidate answers and later observations are invented teaching material. They are separate from the real strategist failure described elsewhere in the book.

The First-Move Worksheet

Before opening a vacancy, write down the outcome that is missing. A job title can wait until you know which work needs doing and why it is not happening.

The missing outcome. What should happen, for whom, and what evidence shows that it is not happening now?

In the example, client hand-offs are late and risks become visible too late for the delivery lead to act. The team examines four recent delayed jobs rather than starting with the founder's request for an operations manager.

The cause you need to test. Is the problem capacity, unclear ownership, missing authority, a skill gap, an unnecessary task or something else? Write the competing explanations. Do not settle this by choosing the most confident person in the room.

The founder thinks a senior operator is missing. The delivery lead thinks approvals and changing priorities are the main problem. They reconstruct who could decide at each delayed hand-off.

The alternatives to a hire. Consider removing work, simplifying it, reassigning it with realistic capacity, providing support for a temporary need or waiting. Name the cost of each option, including the work displaced and the burden on the people already there. Use Chapter 3's cost example where it helps.

The agency tries one shared delivery list, an approval owner and deputy, and removes a duplicate report. It runs the trial for two weeks before deciding what remains.

The decision and its condition. What would justify hiring? What would make you pause? Who decides, and on what date will you inspect the evidence?

Approvals improve, but necessary coordination still takes two account managers away from client work. Neither has spare capacity. The delivery lead proposes a coordinator, with the full employment and training cost included in the budget. The founder approves the hire and the authority arrangement. Without that agreement, the lead would recommend changing the role or pausing the search. Record the decision and any unresolved condition. Do not describe unapproved authority as part of the offer.

Your completed worksheet should end with a decision: hire this work, test a smaller change, use temporary support, or do not hire now. "We need someone good" does not yet tell you what to do.

The Role Decision Sheet

This short teaching form helps you settle a role before meeting candidates. It is not a substitute for a specialist role standard. Answer the prompts plainly, then ask the people who do and depend on the work to challenge them.

In our fuller method, the **Job Map** describes the role and the **Right Person Profile**, or **RPP**, records the assessment requirements. This sheet is a teaching aid, not a replacement for either complete client template.

Purpose and work. Why does the role exist, and what will the person spend time doing?

The client-delivery coordinator keeps the delivery list current, checks dependencies, confirms owners and dates, follows up and raises risks early. The role exists to make delivery problems visible while there is still time to act.

Ownership and authority. Who owns each important outcome, who contributes, and who decides when priorities conflict? What belongs to an adjacent role? Who acts when the decision-maker is absent?

The coordinator owns the current delivery record and agreed follow-up. The delivery lead allocates capacity and decides priorities, with a named deputy. Account managers own client promises and updates. Specialists own work quality. The founder retains contract and price exceptions. The coordinator cannot commit the team to a new client deadline.

Requirements and evidence. Which capabilities are essential on arrival? What could be learned, with what support? What evidence will you seek for each requirement?

Essential evidence: tracking dependencies, setting out priorities, writing clear updates and escalating within authority. The interview examines relevant prior examples. The fictional work sample examines a specific pressured hand-off. Agency terminology can be learned through guided work with the delivery lead. Familiarity with the agency's particular task software is useful, but not a separate rejection rule.

Conditions and promises. What pay, hours, location, support, authority and difficult conditions can you actually offer? What can be negotiated, and what cannot?

Publish the pay range and required overlap window. Explain routine chasing, changing client requests and the emergency rota. Offer training in agency dependencies. Do not promise permanent availability, instant autonomy over priorities or a guaranteed promotion.

Measures and unresolved questions. What work will show whether the role is helping? What remains uncertain? Who will settle it before the offer?

Check whether records are current, risks reach the delivery lead before promises fail, and follow-ups close. Distinguish delays within the coordinator's control from decisions owned elsewhere. Resolve the deputy arrangement before the search. Review whether the role has enough authority during onboarding.

Before signing off, take one recent incident through these answers. If two people still claim the same decision, record the conflict and have the accountable leader settle it. Do not average conflicting accounts into language vague enough for everyone to agree.

A bounded route from sourcing to shortlist

Publish or share the role conditions and steps. Use applications, referrals and direct outreach where they can reach relevant people. Do not treat applying, being unemployed or needing a change as evidence against capability.

Set the first-screen criteria before reading responses. In the coordinator example, request a short description or existing example of managing competing hand-offs, plus confirmation of the essential working conditions. Do not demand client-confidential material. An account of the work can be acceptable when the candidate cannot share the original.

Record **enough evidence to continue, needs clarification or does not meet a stated requirement**, with the reason. An unfamiliar title, an employment gap or an awkwardly written answer is not automatically the missing capability. Ask a short follow-up where information could change the decision.

For a large response, use batches and the same criteria. Keep a manageable shortlist for deeper assessment. Check uncertain exclusions and a sample of other rejections for mistakes. If the first screen does not distinguish candidates usefully, repair it. Do not compensate by asking every applicant to do a large unpaid task.

The 12-question interview guide

These prompts help you investigate job-related evidence. They are not a validated personality test or a score that predicts a hire. Select the questions relevant to the role,

decide their purpose before interviewing and use the same core questions for candidates in the same process. Follow-ups can differ because their accounts will differ.

The questions use the four headings in Chapter 5 as an organising aid. They do not divide performance into measured causal shares. A preference is not a capability, and fluent recall is not the same as good work.

Make notes on the example, action, result and uncertainty. A decision not to continue is still consequential, even if you call the conversation a filter. Explain it through the requirement and evidence rather than a character label.

Human energy: the work people want to sustain

1. "Tell me about a recent piece of work you wanted to keep working on. What held your attention?"

Use this when you need to understand the tasks a person finds engaging. Listen for what they did and which conditions helped, then compare those with the actual job. Losing track of time is not required evidence of commitment. A person may do excellent work with firm time boundaries, or enjoy a task they are still learning.

Ask, "Which part would you want regularly, and which part would become tiring?" The next step is to discuss how much of that work the role offers. Check capability separately. Do not reject someone because they lack an animated story.

2. "What kind of work drains you, even when you can do it well?"

Use this to examine recurring demands the role really contains. Seek a specific task or condition, how often it occurred and how the person managed it. A difficult period

may reflect overload, poor tools or conflict rather than a lasting aversion to the work. Someone may also hesitate because they think honesty will cost them the opportunity.

Ask what changed the experience and describe the demand here. If a core task remains a concern, explore support and frequency. A reasoned mutual no can follow an unresolved condition. An admission of fatigue is not itself a failure.

3. "Tell me about a time a standard you cared about conflicted with a deadline or another person's priority."

Use this when the role requires balancing quality, speed or competing needs. Look for the standard, the consequences and the decision they made. Careful work can be necessary, and rapid work can be careless. Neither is a fixed personality flaw.

Ask, "What could you decide yourself, what did you discuss, and what would you change now?" Compare the trade-off with this role. If the example does not cover an essential situation, use a relevant scenario rather than inventing an interpretation.

Context: the actual conditions of this job

4. "Describe a situation where the brief or responsibility was unclear. How did you decide what to do next?"

Use this when the job involves incomplete information or shared authority. Seek how the person identified the uncertainty, the consequences of acting and the decisions they could make. Asking a manager to clarify scope may be responsible. Acting without waiting may also be responsible when the action is safe and within the role.

Ask what they clarified, what they could progress meanwhile and what happened. Pausing or escalating can be the right action. Judge the reasoning against the authority this role provides, then investigate any consequential gap. Do not reward enthusiasm for chaos as a substitute for judgement.

5. "This role needs these working hours and response windows. Can you meet them, and what needs clarifying?"

State the actual schedule before asking. You need a clear agreement about coverage and availability. A question about flexibility might reveal an adjustable process, a time-zone misunderstanding or a real incompatibility.

Ask which requirement is unclear and what arrangement could work. Do not seek health, family or financial explanations when the work arrangement answers the question. Confirm an agreed pattern, revise an unnecessary restriction or explain why an essential condition cannot be changed.

6. "Tell me about a decision you disagreed with. What did you do, and what happened?"

Use this where the role must question and carry out decisions made by others. Seek the concern raised, the evidence used and the person's authority. Supporting a settled decision can be sensible. So can continuing to raise a concern when new evidence, safety or serious misconduct requires it. Agreement is not always good judgement, and disagreement is not automatically stubbornness.

Ask what would have changed their view and which escalation route was available. Compare their actions with the responsibilities here. Follow up an unresolved concern about conduct or judgement. Do not require unconditional obedience as the preferred answer.

Behaviours: what happened when work became difficult

7. "Tell me about a request you had to question, renegotiate or refuse."

Use this where the job requires handling competing commitments. Look for what made the request difficult, how the person assessed its impact and what they offered instead. Not everyone has previously had authority to say no. A suitable answer may involve obtaining a decision from someone who did.

Ask what the requester needed, what alternatives were discussed and what followed. If no past example is available, give a short role-relevant situation. Assess the boundary and communication rather than insisting on a dramatic refusal. Take unresolved authority questions back to the role design.

8. "Tell me about competing deadlines you could not all meet as planned. How did you handle them?"

Use this when the job requires prioritisation. Seek how they checked impact, dependencies and capacity, who could change the plan, and when others were told. Extra hours may occasionally help, but they do not explain what happens when extra effort cannot solve the conflict. A revised scope or a pause may be the better answer.

Ask what slipped, who agreed and what happened afterwards. Compare the account with a short work scenario if prioritisation is essential. Do not equate willingness to overwork with the ability to manage commitments.

9. "Tell me about a project that was going wrong. What did you do when you first recognised the problem?"

Use this where the role must respond to emerging risk. Seek the first warning, how the person checked it, what they protected and whom they informed. Analysis can be the necessary first action, particularly when acting on the wrong diagnosis would cause harm. Documentation can preserve information needed to recover.

Ask what they knew at each step and what would have justified acting sooner or waiting. Judge whether the response was proportionate to the risk. Investigate an unexplained delay or reckless action.

Alignment: a workable agreement between two sides

10. "What do you want your next role to provide, and which parts matter most now?"

Use this to compare the person's stated priorities with what you can offer. Ask for concrete conditions rather than a rehearsed career vision. Wanting income, security, learning, meaningful work or predictable hours can all be legitimate. Uncertainty can mean the person is considering a change, not that they lack ambition.

Ask which conditions are essential and which allow trade-offs. Explain the role's limits, including advancement you cannot promise. Confirm the person's understanding. Continue where an informed agreement is possible, and accept a no where it is not. A ranking alone does not decide selection.

11. "What did a previous role get right about how work should work for you, and what would you want to change?"

Use this to explore concrete working conditions. Seek examples of support, authority, collaboration or workload, without inviting confidential material. A complaint about a manager might describe poor treatment, an unclear agreement or an unresolved disagreement. It is not proof that the candidate will be difficult.

Ask what happened, what the person tried and what condition they need next. Describe the closest situation in your business honestly. If the same problem is likely here, examine whether it can change. Make the decision about that condition, rather than about whether the person spoke positively enough about an employer.

12. "The pay range and conditions are as described. What would need to be agreed for this to be a workable move?"

Use this to establish terms, not to test whether a candidate values the mission more than money. Evidence is what each side can offer and accept. Asking for higher pay may reflect the market, the responsibility or the person's priorities. You do not need their private financial story to respond.

Ask which terms need discussion, explain your limits and consider a fair adjustment where possible. Agree them in writing or accept that the move does not work. Do not ask whether the person would take a pay cut to prove fit, or infer future disloyalty from a request for more pay.

Work Drivers: the full reference list

These 32 labels give people language for discussing what they want from work. The three groups organise the conversation. They do not establish that there are exactly 32 universal human motives, that the groups are independent, or that a particular ranking predicts performance or departure.

Ask which conditions matter to the person, what those labels mean in practice and how this role might provide them. Keep importance separate from fulfilment: wanting more autonomy and reporting little autonomy in a current job are different statements. Preferences can change, and trade-offs belong in a conversation. Do not compare two people's ranks as though they were ability scores.

Functional: practical conditions (11)

- **Compensation & Rewards:** pay and other financial rewards.
- **Benefits & Security:** benefits and the security around the work.
- **Work-Life Balance:** the relationship between work and the rest of life.
- **Working Conditions:** the physical and practical setting.
- **Location & Flexibility:** where work happens and the choice available.
- **Company Reputation:** the standing of the organisation.
- **Industry & Sector:** the field in which the work takes place.
- **Role Clarity:** understanding responsibilities and expectations.
- **Advancement Path:** opportunities to progress.

- **Stability & Predictability:** how dependable the work and its conditions are.
- **Work Pace & Intensity:** the speed and demands of the work.

Social: relationships and standing (11)

- **Belonging & Community:** feeling part of a group.
- **Team Collaboration:** working with others.
- **Leadership & Management:** the experience of being led and managed.
- **Culture & Values:** how the organisation behaves and what it values.
- **Recognition & Appreciation:** having contribution noticed and valued.
- **Influence & Impact:** having a voice that affects what happens.
- **Mentorship & Support:** help and guidance in developing.
- **Diversity & Inclusion:** a workplace that welcomes and includes difference.
- **Service to Others:** helping people through the work.
- **Professional Network:** the relationships the work creates.
- **People Leadership:** opportunities to lead other people.

Emotional: meaning and experience (10)

- **Professional Authority:** being trusted for expertise.
- **Challenge & Achievement:** difficult work and the experience of accomplishing it.
- **Learning & Growth:** developing knowledge and capability.
- **Autonomy & Independence:** room to decide how to work.

- **Creativity & Innovation:** opportunities to develop new ideas or approaches.
- **Purpose & Meaning:** finding the work worthwhile.
- **Variety & Adventure:** change, novelty and unfamiliar work.
- **Mastery & Expertise:** becoming deeply capable in a field.
- **Risk & Entrepreneurship:** creating or building under uncertainty.
- **Passion & Fulfillment:** finding the work personally engaging and satisfying.

Use the labels as prompts, not findings about someone who has not explained their meaning. An important preference the role cannot meet deserves a clear discussion. The person may consider a trade-off, or either side may recognise an essential conflict. Capability evidence remains a separate part of the decision.

Three roles, with the conditions left in

These are possible role designs, not personality profiles for everyone with the title.

An operations manager reducing disorder. If priorities change daily and authority is unclear, look for evidence of establishing a workable decision process while keeping essential work moving. Do not require someone who enjoys permanent chaos. Reducing that chaos may be the reason for hiring. If authority is already clear and the main need is careful maintenance, the evidence you seek will change.

An account manager balancing client and delivery needs. Where requests regularly exceed agreed scope, examine a real example or scenario involving a reasonable request the team cannot absorb. Look for how the person

checks impact, offers options and obtains the right decision. Warmth alone does not show whether someone can hold a boundary. If account managers cannot negotiate scope, examine their escalation instead.

A media buyer responding to uncertain results.

Where live spend needs close oversight, examine how the person checks data quality, investigates changes, limits exposure within their authority and communicates uncertainty. Pausing to analyse may be exactly right. If the role is mainly longer-term research with a separate incident team, constant crisis response may be the wrong test. Technical knowledge and demonstrated skill still need assessment by someone who understands the work.

A fair work sample: the Firefighter Morning

This is the coordinator exercise from Chapter 9. Adapt the problem to your role before using it. A coordinator should not be assessed as though they were the senior operations manager, the technical specialist or the person who owns the client contract.

The candidate brief

Purpose. Show how you would coordinate a difficult delivery morning. This is a fictional case. We are assessing your handling of information, priorities, decision rights and communication, not your knowledge of our clients.

Situation. You are the client-delivery coordinator at a 15-person agency. A client deliverable is due at noon. At 9 am, a reviewer finds an error that may affect the recommendation. The specialist needs 30 minutes to assess it. The account manager is on a call until 9.30 am. The delivery lead is available. Another client expects a routine update at 10 am.

Authority. You can organise hand-offs, update the delivery record and follow up actions. The delivery lead decides priorities and capacity. Account managers own client promises and messages. Specialists decide whether their work is technically sound. You cannot approve the recommendation or promise a new client deadline.

Deliverables. Give us your first-hour plan, a short internal update and one important uncertainty or action you would defer. Brief notes are enough. Explain your choices in the discussion.

Time and access. Allow about 30 minutes to prepare and 20 minutes to discuss. This is not a typing-speed test. Tell us if you need an adjustment or a different accessible format. Ask questions about the brief. You do not need information about our real business. If a clarification changes a material fact, we will give it to every candidate.

Tools. Normal tools and optional AI are allowed on this fictional material. Tell us what you used and check the result. We can provide equivalent tools if needed. We will not ask for personal account access or private notes. The discussion concerns your decisions and the submitted work.

Payment and use. This brief is the entire short exercise. It is not live client work and we will not use your output commercially. Any substantial additional assignment will have payment, scope and use agreed beforehand. Tell us if the stated time does not allow a fair attempt, so we can resolve that before adding work.

What follows. The delivery lead will assess the published criteria below, discuss your answer with you and combine that evidence with the interview. We will explain the next step and its date. You will have time to ask about the role and correct any factual misunderstanding.

Criteria set before the answers arrive

The assessor records **evidence supports the requirement, needs follow-up** or **evidence raises a concern**, with the passage or action behind the judgement. These labels organise notes. They are not a validated prediction score, and they should not be totalled into a supposedly scientific answer.

- **Understanding the risk.** Does the response establish what the error might change, without inventing facts? Does it distinguish checking from guessing?
- **Priorities and dependencies.** Is the order reasonable given the time and people available? Does it account for the routine update as well as the urgent issue?
- **Decision rights.** Does the response get the right person to decide, without making promises outside the coordinator's authority?
- **Communication and uncertainty.** Can another person see the current problem, owner, next action and unresolved question? Are assumptions visible?

Use a qualified assessor who knows the work. Read the answer against each criterion before discussing general impressions. Ask relevant follow-ups and retain the original response alongside any correction. A different sensible sequence can meet the criteria. There is no requirement to guess the author's favourite wording.

Two illustrative answers

Both responses below are invented. They show how evidence can differ without reducing people to good and bad types.

Candidate A:

I would ask the specialist what needs checking and confirm when they can report back. I would alert the delivery lead now that the noon delivery is at risk, without assuming it must move. I would leave a short update for the account manager before their call ends. I would check who is preparing the 10 am update and keep it on the list. At 9.30 I would bring the specialist's finding to the delivery lead and account manager so they can agree the next action and client message. I would not approve the recommendation or promise a revised deadline.

This supports the authority and communication requirements. It also gives the routine update an owner rather than ignoring it. The assessor still needs to ask how A would record and follow up the actions. Nothing here proves familiarity with the agency's technical work or consistent performance over time.

Candidate B:

I would reassure the client immediately that we will still deliver at noon. Then I would bring the specialist and delivery lead together, put the correction first and move other tasks until it is done. I would put all the actions on the shared list and ask someone else to send the routine update. The client needs confidence that someone is in control. Once the team has a plan, I would send a fuller update through the account manager.

B identifies coordination, a shared record and the need to protect the routine update. Those are useful parts of the answer. The concern is the initial promise and unilateral reprioritisation, before the error is understood and outside the stated authority. Confidence is not the evidence being assessed.

Both candidates get the same follow-up: "The specialist now says the correction needs two more hours. What changes in your response?" A asks the delivery lead to decide the priority and the account manager to agree the revised client message. B still assumes the coordinator can commit the team to a new deadline. The concern therefore remains after clarification.

The assessor records that limit, rather than diagnosing B as reckless in every setting. Another role might give B more authority. This one does not. If the answer had changed after clarification, that change would also belong in the evidence.

Before adapting this exercise

Choose a problem that represents important work and can be assessed fairly in the time. Tell candidates what they can use, what information is missing and how they can ask questions.

Set the criteria before you see answers. Remove details that test accidental familiarity rather than the requirement. Agree payment for substantial work and never turn the process into a source of free client output.

The decision and offer record

For each essential requirement, record the relevant interview answer, work evidence, concern and follow-up. Write the recommendation after examining those rows. Two reviewers should make their first notes separately where possible, then compare the evidence behind differences.

Completed example. Candidate A has stronger evidence of coordinating priorities within authority and communicating uncertainty. A has less agency experience. Candidate B has more agency experience, but the work sample and follow-up leave an unresolved concern about client promises and priority decisions. A is preferred for this role, with training in agency dependencies named as a condition of the plan.

The trade-off. A needs to learn the agency's hand-offs from client approval through production and review. For the first two weeks, the delivery lead sets aside half an hour each morning to work through A's list, check dependencies and explain unfamiliar hand-offs. This replaces part of the lead's internal reporting work. If that time is unavailable, revisit the choice. The teaching period is an illustrative commitment, not a guarantee that A will have learned everything by its end.

The pause or no. Do not make an offer if an essential requirement remains unsupported in every candidate, or if the employer cannot supply a condition on which the choice depends. Record the missing evidence and choose whether to seek it, change the role or continue the search.

The offer conversation. Explain the role's value, difficult conditions, pay and support. Ask which terms need discussion. In the example, A and the employer agree a daily overlap window and an emergency rota. They agree pay within the published range and training support. The employer does not promise a promotion or continuous on-call work. If necessary hours cannot be reconciled, either side can decline.

The handover. Give the manager the role and authority record, work evidence, remaining uncertainties and commitments made to the candidate. Confirm who supplies each commitment and by when. Include the person's own account of what needs to work, with their understanding of what will be shared. Private interview notes do not all belong in a manager's file.

The First-90-Days Renewal Worksheet

Use this before the start, then update it with observed work. It does not assume that the original selection was right or wrong.

First useful work and support. What will the person own first? What information, access and learning do they need? Who provides each?

A begins with a bounded delivery list and guided review of dependencies. The delivery lead supplies training and introduces the deputy and client owners.

Promises to check. Which conditions did both sides agree? What uncertainty from selection needs watching?

Check the overlap window, emergency rota, training time and authority route. Observe the agency-specific learning that the work sample did not establish.

Observation and competing explanations. What happened, against which expectation? What does the person say? What evidence would distinguish a skill gap, workload, unclear authority, missing support or a mistaken initial assessment?

At day 30, the founder has sent urgent work directly to specialists outside the list. A has also missed a follow-up despite having the information. Record both. Do not turn either into the complete explanation.

Action, owner and date. What changes, who has agreed to it, who makes it happen, and when will you check? Record a requested change separately if the person who can authorise it has not agreed.

The founder agrees to route priority changes through the list for two weeks. The delivery lead checks whether this happens. A practises and uses a follow-up check. They review the next set of hand-offs on day 45. If the founder had refused the change, that condition would remain unresolved. It would not be recorded as support A had received.

Later observation and next decision. What changed? What remains unresolved? What do you do next?

At day 45, fewer priority changes are missing from the list, but one hand-off still slips. The manager examines that incident before expanding responsibility. The example does not claim a final success or retention result.

Set check-in dates that match the work and adjust them when needed. A quieter person, slower reply or change in language can prompt a respectful conversation, but does not diagnose disengagement. Keep the enquiry about work conditions and support. Do not demand a personal explanation to satisfy an employer's theory.

Four quick checks

1. Choosing a recruiter

Basic questions about salary, location and timing are necessary. They do not reveal the recruiter's motives by themselves. Ask how the recruiter will understand the work, test conflicting accounts, assess candidates and explain a recommendation. Inspect a suitably anonymised example of the reasoning, not only an attractive presentation.

Agree fees, responsibilities, communication, replacement terms and who owns the decision. Ask what happens when the brief is wrong or the search finds no suitable person. A useful answer makes the process and its limits visible. A confident promise is not a substitute.

2. The AI-Tool Buyer's Test

Ask what the tool actually does, which decisions it affects and what evidence supports that use in a comparable setting. Establish what data it needs, where that data goes, how it is

retained and who can inspect an error. Then ask how a candidate can correct a mistaken record and who reviews a consequential exclusion.

Test failures as well as convenient outputs. If the tool screens for a required working window, check whether it confuses a person's current location with their availability. Review a sample of excluded records and investigate patterns in mistakes. A human approval button does not fix an unchecked recommendation, and a tool that keeps repeating a biased rule does not become fair through consistency.

Start with a bounded use, name the owner and decide what result would make you stop or change it. The division of work should follow evidence and accountability, not a vendor's promise that either a machine or a person is incapable of bias.

3. Reviewing a hire that is not working

Check the original requirements, evidence and promised conditions alongside what happened after the start. Ask what the person can do, what the role permits, what support arrived and what changed. Investigate conduct directly when conduct is the problem. Neither blaming the person nor blaming the system is a diagnosis.

Write the competing explanations and the next evidence needed. Use the renewal worksheet to assign an action and review date. If a central capability was never established, say so. If the employer broke a commitment, say that too. Learning from a failure does not make it a success.

4. The pre-action pause

Before a consequential decision, ask what you know, what you are assuming, who sees a different part of the situation and what could change your view. Then decide whether another question is worth the delay. Curiosity should improve the decision, not make it impossible to reach one.

The Team-Shape Check

Look beyond the next vacancy. What work does the team need to deliver, which roles contribute to it and where are ownership or capability missing? Examine dependencies and avoid making every good person responsible for compensating for an unclear role beside them.

Separate reliable contribution, unmet requirements and harmful conduct. Someone who meets a steady need well does not become a problem because their work is less visible. Ask what would stop happening if that contribution disappeared.

Use a few measures tied to the work, such as quality, delivery promises met, avoidable rework and unresolved hand-offs. Read them with the people doing the work so you understand their limits. Do not roll them into a single score that pretends to capture the value of a team.

Before the next hire, decide which role you would redesign, what capability is missing and what difference the hire should make. Give that decision an owner and a later check. The useful result of this toolkit is a clearer choice followed by action, with enough of the reasoning written down to learn from what happens.

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