TO THE POINT

Hiring for Guilt: How a Simple Test Might Help You Hire More Ethical Employees

Knowing what people will do comes less from knowing how they think and more from knowing who they are.

How can an employer tell if someone is going to behave ethically? Is it the way he thinks? Her social demographics or beliefs? When attempting to predict behavior, we oftentimes give people hypothetical ethical dilemmas and test them on how they cognitively work through the issues. But recent research by Taya Cohen, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory at Carnegie Mellon, suggests that knowing what people will do comes less from knowing how they think and more from knowing who they are.

During her presentation at the Notre Dame Deloitte Center for Ethical Leadership’s 2014 forum, Cohen explained that it’s more useful for employers to get a sense of someone’s personality when attempting to predict their behaviors. Of note to employers are two of Cohen’s variables: Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB) and Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). These two concepts essentially boil down to behavior that harms a workplace versus behavior that elevates a workplace. An employee who demonstrates CWB might show up late, belittle her coworkers, or shirk blame for his errors, while an employee who exhibits OCB may help train a coworker, advise or mentor a new hire, or volunteer for projects. Cohen found that, regardless of other factors that might affect workplace conduct (e.g. intention to leave one’s job or interpersonal conflict at work), one trait predicted these positive or negative behaviors: something she calls “guilt proneness.”

Cohen describes guilt proneness as a “pre-disposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoing, even when the wrongdoing is private.” The trait is especially useful because it matters even when you take social monitoring away: people with high guilt proneness seem to have strong internalized values, making them more likely to do the right thing, whether or not they have an audience. Cohen states, “public surveillance is not required to prevent moral transgressions; instead, their consciences guide them.”
As we try to predict and promote ethical behavior, we can’t afford to miss the importance of individual character. When interviewing, companies should consider using character assessment tools. It could mean the difference between strengthening your company from within and hiring a proverbial weak link.

Key Points

The guilt-prone employee doesn’t need to be policed. She will act ethically because of her character.

But this test was used in laboratory settings where the participants’ answers had no consequences to them. So the question is: Could the test still be useful in a high-stakes personnel selection process? Recent research from Cohen suggests that it could be. When she and her team incorporated the GASP test into intensive psychological testing for applicants to public safety jobs in Colorado, they found that though the results were skewed toward the higher end of the scale, the job applicants whose guilt proneness scores were in the lowest tenth percentile in the sample were deemed unfit for employment by other psychological and behavioral measures. So, in pressurized settings, though people overrepresented their guilt proneness, the distribution was still telling.

Though this research must be expanded and repeated before it will be at the stage of implementation in personnel selection processes, the evidence is encouraging that the GASP test may be a new and important tool for vetting applicants.