

Nice Work

Employers seek employees who are nice by nature and get help from technology to find them.

By Matt Bolch

At Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, caring and nurturing don't just happen while interacting with patients.

"Our CEO [James E. Tally] says that no one in the organization is more than three people removed from the bedside," says Linda Matzigkeit, senior vice president of human resources at Children's. "The qualities of being nurturing, kind and warm-hearted are absolutely critical for us. It takes a special person to take care of kids, and [even] if your job isn't patient-facing, you do have internal customers."

Although Matzigkeit doesn't specifically use the word "nice" to describe Children's employees, that is exactly the trait the pediatric hospital system has been building into its culture since formation in 1998 through the merger of two longtime Atlanta pediatric hospitals. Child magazine ranks Children's as one of the top three children's hospitals in the nation, and Fortune has listed the hospital as one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For" for the past two years. "When a company alludes to a nice culture or a desire for nice workers, there's typically a business purpose behind that," says Scott Erker, senior vice president of selection solutions at Development Dimensions International (DDI), a global provider of talent selection systems based in Pittsburgh. "That can mean employees who are customer-focused and collaborative and leaders who can coach and develop talent. Creating a culture of nice doesn't happen by accident. It happens in the way you hire, develop and recognize people. You feel it when you get there."

Children's began rolling out an online assessment test in October that prospective employees take when they apply online. The test complements the DDI Targeted Selection tool that the hospital system has been using for five years during interviews.

The hospital system notifies candidates, usually within an hour, as to whether they are a fit for the job and for the hospital. For those who move on to the next phase, a front-end assessment tool alerts recruiters of any areas where an applicant may need

development, should that person be hired. Many employers are using similar assessments to cut recruiting time and improve their hiring success.

Refining Testing

The power of the Internet to quickly deliver psychometric, behavioral, aptitude and other types of assessments has brought testing to the mainstream as a way for companies to make more intelligent hires.

In the pre-Internet days, companies often administered a battery of tests to the top two or three candidates or to the final selection to help confirm the skills and attitudes unearthed during the application and interview process. This occurred after recruiters and hiring managers spent hours poring over resumes, compiling prospect lists, scheduling and conducting interviews, writing reports on each candidate, and comparing notes with colleagues to develop a list of top applicants.

Today, testing has moved toward the top of the staffing process, with assessments delivered to those who pass the most rudimentary of screens, such as work availability, skill level, and proper training or certification required for a desired position. Information from these assessments can help hiring managers quickly weed out undesirable or poorly fitting candidates, allowing these staffing professionals to focus on the best candidates. The ability of assessments to make the hiring process more efficient often will be enough to pay for the cost of developing and deploying a testing solution, says Russell Becker, managing partner of assessments and testing at Kenexa Inc., based in Wayne, Pa. Kenexa offers talent acquisition and performance management solutions, and more than 12 million job applicants took Kenexa assessments last year. While testing for "niceness" is reserved mainly for filling customer-facing positions in retail, hospitality and call center areas, the concept has been applied to a variety of assignments, especially among companies such as Children's where cultural fit remains vital to employee success.

Niche Assessments

Many assessment vendors specialize in certain niches and offer off-the-shelf products to meet clients' testing needs. However, vendors can tailor assessment tools to help companies find

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employees who have the right skills and attitudes to thrive in particular environments and fit well within the companies' cultures.

Ken Lahti, director of client solutions for PreVisor, a Roswell, Ga.-based provider of validated employmentscreening products, says the science of identifying innately nice candidates is fundamental to personality testing. "There are a number of tests that get at pieces of nice through industry-specific tests, such as those [designed] for bank tellers, and more-generic measures such as customer service and teamwork," he says.

Lahti adds that more than one-half of PreVisor's major clients use testing early in the application process because that "lets science do the heavy lifting before the recruiters do.

"Testing tends to be one of the most predictive parts of the application process," Lahti notes. "The [predictive] results of a typical resume review are very close to zero, and, while an interview can be predictive if done right, interview quality can vary widely."

Empirical research done in the 1930s identified five major personality traits, commonly referred to by the acronym "OCEAN"--for openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Niceness is most closely aligned with the trait of "agreeableness," demonstrating whether a candidate is considerate, friendly and helpful. "Nice, in my mind, is important across industries," says John Schinnerer, founder and president of InfiNet Assessment Inc. in Alamo, Calif. "When we design tests, however, we don't call it nice. It's part of emotional awareness." Working directly with employers, InfiNet test designers can create, validate and roll out a custom assessment in as few as four weeks.

After identifying an employer's core competencies, a template test is designed and given to three representative sets of existing employees: high performers, average performers and poor performers. With that data in hand, each competency is weighted based on a predictive value before the final test is unveiled.

Schinnerer says candidates who score in the top 20 percent generally continue to the next step of the hiring process. The cost of a validation study that will withstand legal scrutiny in the case of a hiring discrimination lawsuit runs between \$7,000 and \$12,000, says Schinnerer, although other assessment executives expand the range from \$5,000 to \$20,000. Individual assessments

are extra and can cost \$10 to \$100 per test. (To shield themselves from lawsuits, companies should use only legally defensible tests.)

Off-the-shelf solutions that previously have been validated for certain classes of workers can cost less to implement but may not be as valuable as a custom solution for predicting behaviors. "You could take a high-performing person at one company, put him in another, and that person would fail miserably," says Becker from Kenexa. "Sometimes, the differences are more important than the similarities."

Hiring the Smile McDonald's U.K. selected Kenexa to provide frontend, online assessments for its hourly applicants in an effort to eliminate preliminary interviews and speed up the hiring process, says Nicky Ivory, a reputation and resourcing consultant. McDonald's has been using Kenexa for psychometric testing on prospective managers for more than three years. "We know it works if we create a good test," says Ivory, who notes that McDonald's U.K. spends about \$30.5 million annually on training.

Among hourly workers, McDonald's looks to "Hire the Smile," its maxim for employees who are friendly to customers and team members and effective with personal interactions and customer engagement. McDonald's recruiters also look for employees who provide customers with "Lovin' It Service," the ability to process orders quickly and accurately.

When the new process goes live this month, candidates will complete applications online, answering a series of screening questions before being assessed. Questions may include whether someone has retail or hospitality experience, has a reliable way to get to work, is willing to work nights and weekends, and wants to work at a particular location. Managers will receive a profile of each applicant who has taken the test in preparation for an interview.

Replicating A Successful Hire

Studying successful current employees can help recruiters determine what types of people fit well within an organization, says Peter Cohen, vice president for product marketing at Authoria Inc., a Waltham, Mass.-based provider of HR and talent management solutions. The firm works with large, multinational companies on recruiting, performance, succession- planning and compensation issues, mainly for salaried workers.

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Authoria's tools allow employers to study current employees and determine what commonalities those workers share, thereby helping recruiters streamline the process of searching resumes or deciding where to advertise for openings. "If I want to hire someone like Jim, how, without technology, am I going to evaluate 1,000 resumes to find a fit?" Cohen asks. Two categories are used to define workers. The first set of metrics is qualitative, focusing on educational background, certifications, previous employers and cultural fit--where the "nice" quotient comes into play. The second category involves past experiences and specific factors an employer may be looking for. "Different companies have different ideas of nice," says Cohen. "By defining successful hires within an organization, a recruiter will know what to look for when making new hires."

Embarq, a wired, wireless and Internet telecommunications carrier spun off from Sprint in 2006, uses assessments from PreVisor in three critical areas of high-volume or high-impact jobs: customer service and customer sales representatives; service technicians; and first-line supervisors, the latter currently in the pilot phase.

"Nice always is part of what you're looking for," says Kristopher Fritsche, selection and assessment program manager for the Overland Park, Kan.-based company. "In customer service positions, it's a core value."

Embarq's 13 call centers and 1,500 customer service representative positions had high turnover when Fritsche and Michael D. Blair, selection and assessment program manager, joined the company. Following a successful pilot project in three call center locations and full-scale rollout, churn has dropped by two-thirds. Additionally, those who scored highest on the assessment had a 24 percent higher-than-average sales rate and placed callers on hold for shorter periods of time than lower-scoring candidates did.

Following on that initial success, Embarq has brought assessments to other high-impact job titles and continues to look for opportunities to improve its hiring processes. "After focusing on high-volume jobs with a lot of turnover, we're now expanding to other customer-facing areas," says Blair.

Managers at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta have become convinced that widespread candidate testing will help the hospital system continue to thrive in a tough health care environment. Matzigkeit says Children's spends less than \$1 million annually on the DDI tools that it uses, less than she expected for the volume of testing that takes place. "We've looked at the ROI [return on investment] and believe it will happen through a reduction in first-year turnover and reduced recruiting costs," Matzigkeit says. And that will be nice for Children's, its employees and its young patients.