

Productivity Update

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## **Be Wary of ‘Gut’ Interview Impressions**

Joan was wrapping up an interview with an applicant for a senior management position. The applicant, Bill Manson, looked like a good match for the job. He had experience and presented himself well in the interview. Joan’s gut impression was positive.

About a month later, Joan walked out of a meeting that had included Bill Manson, shaking her head, thinking, “Who was that guy? He certainly didn’t look like the Bill Manson I interviewed. There may be some substance, after all, to the complaints I have been getting about his management style.” Three weeks later, Bill Manson was gone.

### **Gut Impressions and Intuition Versus Reason and Facts**

In an article in the April/May 2017 issue of Scientific American Mind, “Don’t Go with Your Gut,” author Matthew Hutson reported that gut impressions don’t always yield as accurate an impression of a person as does a careful evaluation of the factual information known about the person.

This is interesting, in light of the fact that it is often gut impressions about a job applicant in the interview that weigh heavily in the hire/no hire decision.

### **Do Gut Impressions Cripple the Effectiveness of the Interview?**

Research has consistently shown that the odds that the interview will predict success on the job hover around 50-50. These are “coin-toss” odds; that means that half the time the interview is able to predict success on the job, *and the other half of the time the interview doesn’t predict success well*. Could these so-so results be caused by unreliable ‘gut impressions’?

### **“Well, / Do Better Than 50-50!”**

It would be lovely to think so, but the statistical odds of the interview predicting success argue against it. So, why is it that most of us feel that we consistently do better than that? One reason is that our memory plays tricks on us. We tend to remember our success in picking winners and forget our hiring mistakes

### 3 More Reasons Why ‘Gut impressions’ Aren’t More Reliable

Our interviewing intuitions are also affected by a number of factors that usually operate just below our awareness:

#### 1. Having a Bad Day

“Bad” days can be caused by one or more irritating events. Sometimes we aren’t even aware that we’re having a “bad” day – a day when irritating events interfere with our concentration and normally good judgment.

A fender-bender on the way to work, squabbles with your significant other, or a run-in with the boss can distract your brain, making it easier to unconsciously just “go with your gut.”

#### 2. Implicit (Unconscious) Biases

We all have biases we are not aware of, some positive and some negative. They lurk around just below our awareness. For example, we tend to unconsciously dislike/distrust people who are not like us.

There’s actually a good biological reason for this tendency. Thousands of years of experience taught our distant ancestors that it was better to be wary of a stranger, or of any unknown, until it was proven not to be a survival threat.

Those days are largely gone, especially in interview situations, but if we acknowledge to ourselves that our unconscious, negative biases are there, we can control them more effectively.

Of course, not all implicit biases are negative. We tend to prefer tall people and attractive people, as well as people who have had experiences similar to our own. These positive implicit biases can work against us in the interview by exaggerating a positive impression of an applicant.

#### 3. Physical Factors

Body factors like hunger, illness, aches and pains, or bodily discomfort of any sort, can push the logical parts of our brain to the back of the line. A negative pall may be cast over an interview that actually has more to do with how we’re feeling in the moment than with the factual strengths or cautions of the candidate.

## **Two Ways to Sharpen Your Interviewing Skills**

1. Be wary of your gut impressions. Remind yourself to think carefully and logically about your impressions of the person you are interviewing. Think back to an interview in which you used your thinking skills to probe past your gut impressions to get at the heart of a potential problem. Remind yourself to keep that mindset going whenever you are going into an interview.
2. Be alert to similarities you may have with an applicant's background experiences or values. Having gone to the same school or worked for the same company can rev up your positive gut impressions, resulting in the "halo" effect. That is, without being aware of it, you attribute unwarranted positive characteristics to the person, which can make it more difficult for you to be aware of his or her liabilities.

## **What Your Gut Impressions Are Good For**

Your gut is pretty good at telling you that something about an applicant is tweaking your warning radar, even if you can't put your finger on what exactly is bothering you.

On the other hand, your gut is not as reliable an indicator about which of three equally suitable applicants would be the best suited for the job.

If your "gut" is sending you warning signals about a candidate, look for verified facts to back up your gut impressions, both positive and negative. Discuss your impressions with others who have interviewed the candidate. Look for factual reasons to believe or dis-believe each other's impressions.

In short, be wary of what your gut tells you. Although your gut impression may "feel" right, if it isn't backed up with what is factually known about the applicant, it might be wrong.