

### **Interview Impressions: When to Trust Your Gut**

Have you had the experience of interviewing a candidate who looks good overall – experience, background, etc. – but your “gut feeling” says something isn’t right? The logical part of your brain is saying, “This guy looks fine; what’s the problem?” The problem is, you don’t know what the problem is. Your gut just feels something isn’t right about the guy.

I learned the lesson about trusting my gut the hard way. I was doing an executive level assessment on an applicant (call him John Smith, not his real name) for a CFO position. In preparation for the face-to-face part of the assessment, I reviewed Mr. Smith’s psychological profile. The profile looked good, with several strengths and no significant downsides. In our face-to-face meeting, Mr. Smith made a good impression. Everything about him seemed to confirm what I saw in his psychological profile. He looked good.

There was only one small thing: something about Mr. Smith just didn’t feel right. I couldn’t put my finger on it, even after I went back through all of my notes and his assessment information searching for something I could point to and say, “This is the reason why I have this vague, unsettled feeling about him.” I found nothing, but my uneasiness persisted.

The client was waiting for my evaluation of Mr. Smith. If I reported my gut feeling to the client, the first thing she was going to say was, “Why do you feel that way?” And I had no good answer.

In the end, I called the client and reported that all indicators were positive. Mr. Smith looked like a strong candidate for the position in question. A few months later, I got a phone call from the client that began this way, “You said John Smith was a strong candidate. Hah! Let me tell you what he did. He tried to embezzle from the company, but we caught him red-handed. Not only is he fired, we’re also pressing charges.”

I learned a good lesson from this experience. I should have shared my reservation with the client, admitting that I didn’t have specific “data” I could point to. And I should have shared advice about what to do, as I now do whenever similar situations happen.

When everything about a candidate looks good but your gut isn't convinced, do the following:

- Look at your own personal preferences and possibly unconscious reactions to the candidate to be sure that they are not influencing your uneasiness.
- Check references and verify the candidate's experience and background. Don't make assumptions based on what the candidate has told you.

If the decision is made to hire the candidate, continue to monitor his or her performance, as well as doing the following:

- Communicate your company's culture and rules to the new employee, as well as the consequences for breaking those rules.
- Set up a coaching mentor for the new employee (never assume that even strong candidates don't need coaching.) Coaching gives you the opportunity to correct small problems before they become big ones.

Candidates work at making a good impression so that you will hire them, or give them a positive referral. If their efforts work, and you are positively impressed, then they have succeeded in making a good impression. But take your good impression with a grain of salt – a candidate who is successful at making a good interview impression may not be as successful on the job without coaching and follow-through.