



## **Best Practices**

**September 2006**

### **Does He Play Well with Others?**

*--Evaluating a Candidates' Social Skills*

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Hiring decisions often focus largely on candidates' technical skills and expertise, with relatively little attention given to "soft skills". This can result in hiring employees who have the cognitive firepower to succeed but lack the social skills required to effectively use what they know. These employees tend to either rapidly leave due to interpersonal conflict and frustration, stall out in lower-level positions due to their inability to handle the social demands of leadership or bulldoze through the organization, leaving a trail of poor morale and increased turnover.

Hiring employees based on technical knowledge without looking at social skills is like designing a race car with a powerful engine and substandard steering and braking systems. Your car is likely to go somewhere fast, but not necessarily in the direction you want; it may even hurt a lot of innocent bystanders along the way. Fortunately, there are relatively easy and inexpensive ways to decrease the risk of hiring the cognitively skilled but socially inept.

Social skills reflect a person's ability to work with others in a way that accomplishes near-term business objectives while strengthening longer-term working relationships. The concept of social skills has been around a long time, although it is periodically repackaged under titles such as "emotional intelligence," "tacit knowledge" and "interpersonal savvy." Social skills depend primarily on four fundamental characteristics:

- Self-awareness: how our actions affect the behavior of those around us.
- Sensitivity: our concern toward the needs and feelings of others.
- Social intelligence: our means for influencing others' behaviors and perceptions.
- Self-control: our ability to control actions and emotions, when under stress.

One need not be highly adept at all of these to be socially skilled. However, a serious deficit in any one area can result in major interpersonal performance problems in the workplace.

There are several methods for assessing job candidates' social skills, and an interview is the least complex. A candidate's lack of social intelligence may show up during the interview process as social errors. Carefully observe how the candidate interacts informally with others. Create social settings such as group discussions or luncheons that require candidates to display social skills. Moderately low levels of social intelligence won't be a problem unless the job requires the ability to quickly develop rapport with others.

Sensitivity to others can also be assessed during an interview, but it is a bit more difficult. During the interview, ask candidates to describe influences on their careers or interpersonal conflicts they have experienced at work.

Pay attention to how they describe others in their answers. Answers that are highly judgmental or give little credit to the contributions and interests of others could be associated with low sensitivity to others. References can also be a good source of information. Ask people to describe what the person was like to work with. If they say things like "highly independent" or "difficult to manage," you may want to probe a bit more.

Self-control and self-awareness are perhaps the most difficult social skills to assess. One of the best ways to assess these social skills is to use a role-play exercise. This involves having candidates interact with trained assessors in a simulated work scenario (e.g., having the candidate give feedback to a fictional underperforming employee). If properly structured and conducted, role-playing can be one of the most valid predictors of social skill.

Social skills can also be assessed using standardized questionnaires such as personality tests and social style measures. These tests measure underlying beliefs, preferences and attitudes that affect interpersonal behavior. Many of these measures are relatively straightforward to use, fairly inexpensive and can be highly valid. There are a wide variety of well-designed measures to choose from, but it's often difficult to tell the difference between a good measure and one that looks good but does little. Consequently, it's a good idea to consult with an independent assessment expert when choosing this sort of measure.

Once you rate a candidate's social skills, it's important to decide how much weight to give that information, depending on the position you're filling. The right decision will help ensure a smooth ride inside your organization.

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Article by [Dr. Steven Hunt](#). This article originally appeared on Monster.com., 2005, <http://www.monster.com>.



## Trends

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### How Generation Xers Differ From Boomers

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[Generation X is a term for a cohort of people born following the peak of the post-World War II baby boom, especially in Canada and the United States. While all sources agree the group includes at least some people born in the 1960s, the exact demographic boundaries vary. In general, Generation X comprises those born between 1965 – 1980, or whoever happens to be twentysomething at the time.<sup>[1]</sup> A **boomer** is someone who was born during the period of increased birth rates when economic prosperity rose in many countries following World War II. In the United States, the term is more properly capitalized as **Baby Boomers** and commonly applied to people with birth years from the span 1946 to 1964.]

No, they're not from Mars, but Generation Xers are dramatically different from Boomers. In order to manage Generation Xers effectively, here are the top 7 differences you're likely to see between Boomers and Xers in the workplace.

1. **Their approach to authority is casual.** It's not that Xers don't respect authority; it's that they are unimpressed by authority. Xers grew up watching many "authority" figures fall from grace. Think Nixon, Jim Baker, and Jimmy Swaggart. Many also saw their own parents (their first authority figures) divorce. What they witnessed has a definite impact on their views on authority. In *Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, the authors explain that Xers are likely to treat the company president just the way they would the front-desk receptionist.
2. **They thrive in a casual, fun work environment.** You'd be hard pressed to find a stuffed shirt Xer. Generation X wants an informal and casual workplace. And we're talking more than Jeans Day once a week. In *Generations At Work*, the authors report that "Many (Xers) assert that casual days aren't just a perk: they actually make us work harder and get more done." Further, the authors of *Generations At Work* report that "Anything that makes work less "corporate" resonates well with generation X".
3. **Xers are pessimistic when it comes to their future.** A survey of Generation X revealed that more Xers believe General Hospital will be around longer than Social Security. Xers have seen massive layoffs and slashes in company benefit plans. They are skeptical about their future and almost no Xer expects to work at one company until retirement.
4. **They have a nontraditional approach to time.** Surprise, surprise! The attitude of many Xers is "As long as I get my work done and do my fair share, what does it matter what time I show up or leave?" Don't mistake this attitude with "slacking?" Xers grew up in flexible times and they approach everything – even work schedules – with a flexible attitude.
5. **Family and work-life balance is extremely important to Xers.** Many Xers grew up in two-income families. And, as a result, there was no one waiting at home to serve them milk and cookies. Their

parents made many sacrifices, including missing out on school plays and sporting events. Xers are determined to make work serve their lives and not the other way around.

6. **Generation Xers tend to be technologically savvy.** You're probably not surprised to learn that Xers will prefer to hold discussions and make decisions electronically over traditional staff meetings and memos. Xers grew up with GameBoys, microwaves, and VCRs. Technology is second nature to them.
7. **Workaholism is not a trait you'll find in many Gen Xers.** While it may be common to find a Boomer who is a workaholic, this is not the case with Xers. Their motto is "Get a life!"

Article from Top 7 Business, <http://www.top7business.com>, by Myra Golden. Ms. Golden is an award-winning professional speaker and principal of Myra Golden Seminars, LLC, a customer service training firm.



## Productivity

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### Taming the Savage Genius

*The delicate art of managing employees who are way, way smarter than you.*

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In many ways, Atiq Raza was the kind of employee managers dream about. He held degrees in physics, philosophy, electrical engineering, and material sciences. His passion for his work--creating cutting-edge semiconductor technology for a Silicon Valley start-up--bordered on the obsessive, and he regularly worked in the lab 18 hours a day. At the age of 30, Raza was dauntless, creative, and productive, a real star.

Yet, that same star power also made Raza a manager's nightmare. His ego was colossal, his behavior temperamental. He had little patience for co-workers and fought constantly with higher-ups, scorning their lack of technical knowledge and adherence to procedure. "I was aghast at their inability to convey to me how exactly my work related to their financial objectives," he says. "I thought managers were stupid."

That was in 1979. These days, Raza is a bit more sympathetic. After all, as CEO of Raza Foundries, a San Jose-based incubator of high-tech businesses, the 53-year-old entrepreneur is responsible for managing a staff of 100--and many of them are every bit as brilliant, arrogant, and difficult as he himself once was. "Managing these people isn't for everybody," Raza says. "But they're powerful engines. If you harness their energy and creativity, you have a Ferrari on your hands."

Managers may talk about teamwork and collaboration, but most, like Raza, will admit that the contribution of a single, exceptional individual often makes all the difference. That's especially the case in a knowledge-based economy, where a company's fortunes rise and fall with its collective brainpower. Yet, while nearly all business owners say they're forever on the hunt for the best and the brightest, few know what to do when confronted with an actual, bona fide, off-the-charts genius.

"Organizations were created to deal with the lowest common denominator," says Tom Duening, a professor of management at the University of Houston and co-author of *Managing Einsteins: Leading High-Tech Workers in the Digital Age*. Super high performers, Duening says, "have been fast-tracked through school, lauded as indispensable, and are constantly in demand. But a company's management structure doesn't account for that."

A survey by the Center for Creative Leadership, a Greensboro, NC, think tank, found that one-third of high-performing employees lack certain "emotional competencies"-- such as the ability to build a team or control their emotions in high-stress situations. The result: Their careers plateau or derail. And much of the blame, says Kerry A. Bunker, a senior associate at the center, rests squarely with star struck bosses, who have little idea how to tame the savage genius.

Raza has spent an entire career trying to overcome that challenge. By the late 1990s, he was chief operating officer of the semiconductor giant Advanced Micro Devices, where he was responsible for some 10,000 employees, though he devoted most of his attention to an elite group of about 100. Those were the scientists and

engineers working on the company's famous K6 microprocessor chips, which were nearly as fast as those produced by rival Intel--which then held a virtual monopoly in the market--but cost 25% less to manufacture.

For three years, Raza's group worked nearly nonstop. When the K6 finally was released, Intel didn't know what hit it. Not only did the technology make the sub-\$1,000 personal computer possible, it made AMD the only major competitor Intel has known. How did Raza do it? By getting his engineering team as fired up as he was to beat Intel, relaying urgent business objectives to a group of employees generally kept out of the loop. "These types of employees need to believe in the cause, and in the integrity of the person leading the charge," Raza says. "They need to understand in their own language how what they do figures into the larger context of the company."

Raza has since developed a reputation for inspiring a kind of maniacal loyalty in even the most difficult employees. When he left AMD in 1999 to launch Raza Foundries, more than 40 top staffers asked either to join him or be placed at one of the companies where he was on the board. And why not? Raza involves his technical talent in nearly every aspect of the company's decision-making process. At Raza Foundries, top performers from every department sit in on at least 80% of high-level business meetings. Human resources is even instructed to use engineering lingo so procedures and policies seem more nerd-friendly.

Once you create that environment, Raza says, all you need to do is get out of the way. And it's vital to keep your own ego in check. "Sometimes even I only understand 50% of what they say," Raza says. "The important thing is that you listen."

Still, even the most patient bosses can be put to the test by a genius employee. Take Ira Whitman, president of the Whitman Companies, an environmental engineering firm in East Brunswick, NJ. After six years of struggling to manage a brilliant but difficult geologist, his 40-person shop had turned into a nursery school built around the quirks of one supercapable narcissist. Whitman finally decided the employee wasn't worth the trouble and he's sworn off geniuses ever since. "You need to make sure that you absolutely need their talents and skills," Whitman says. "If you're not sure, don't hire them."

That's a choice most companies can't afford to make. The problem is that most companies reward top performers by giving them more managing responsibility which makes it difficult to take advantage of someone who isn't suited for managerial chores but still needs to contribute in a significant way. One answer is to create career pathways designed specifically for your superstar talent. The Center for Creative Leadership's Bunker advises owners to "interrupt the ascent" of superstars until they've adapted to a company's culture and figured out how to collaborate with others. "Find a way to move them laterally to teach those lessons earlier in their career," he says.

Another option is to treat them as in-house consultants, who participate in the decision-making process but have little responsibility for overseeing others. Yet with some employees, the opposite approach might work. Todd Duncan, CEO of the Duncan Group, a sales-training consultancy in Duluth, Ga., advises managers to give their rainmakers a staff of their own--creating an "internal franchise." Give your star a staff and a budget, and let him loose. The sense of ownership, Duncan says, can be a powerful motivator, pushing people to modify their behavior and tap their abilities.

You should also keep in mind that money and advancement, while necessary, are not sufficient motivators. The key to managing geniuses, management guru Peter Drucker has advised, is to treat them as "de facto volunteers"--people who need a mission above and beyond profit and expedience, who need to be challenged and given responsibility for accomplishing meaningful tasks. Or, you can simply do as Raza does: "Treat them as friends and take a genuine interest in what they do." It shouldn't take a genius to figure that one out.

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Article by Tahl Raz, Inc. Magazine, May 2003, <http://www.inc.com>



- **Do I know how to properly praise and recognize?**

It's a manager's job to let people know when they're doing a good job. Minimize the emotion and maximize the use of powerful language -- say "Thank you for getting the report in on time" versus "I love how you completed the report."

- **Can I infuse fun into the workplace?**

Don't underestimate the benefit of a "fun" workplace. Celebrate the completion of a project with an impromptu pizza party. Announce an early closing when people least expect it. Bring in a cake (and candles, too) to celebrate employee birthdays.

- **Do I have the necessary skills to hire and fire?**

Hiring and firing people are a big responsibility. Telling someone things aren't working out may be as appealing as getting a root canal, but ignoring a human resource issue won't make it go away. A manager must be able to address the tough issues.

- **Can I withstand the ups and downs of being a manager?**

Some days are better than others. Coping skills like patience, resilience, flexibility, and a clear notion of your objectives will help you handle the myriad of challenges that typically occur in the workplace.

- **Can I embrace the concept of "career self-management"?**

Lifelong employment anywhere as a manager is unlikely, which is why you must take responsibility for your own career. Are you willing to do that? Do you have the energy it takes and the creativity to identify your skills and abilities and channel them into current and future opportunities?

- **Am I committed to continuing my education?**

Your company can support your development as a manager, but you should take the lead. In addition to finding resources, you must obviously make the commitment to spend time learning. Do you have the time? Are you willing to make the investment if your company does not pay for continuing professional development?

- **Can I set and achieve goals?**

A career in management involves a plan, a road map for setting and achieving goals. If you're not accustomed to creating opportunities for yourself, then management could be the wrong choice. In addition to managing others, you must work with your superiors on your own career. Without goals you can't change and if you can't change, you won't grow. And without growth a successful career in management is practically impossible.

- **Can I handle being unpopular?**

Being a manager sometimes means taking positions that are unpopular with your staff. You may not personally agree with them yourself. However, you must keep overall company goals and objectives your number one priority, despite any potential impact on members of your team.

- **Can I deal with a variety of personalities?**

Many managers will tell you that the hardest part of their jobs is handling different personalities. In addition to making sure various jobs get done, a manager must juggle traits and quirks that must be dealt with. Encouraging people to be themselves is one thing; creating a work environment that can accommodate conflicting personalities is another. What's most important is whether or not you can successfully assume responsibility for the work of different personalities and manage them to achieve objectives.

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