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# **Identify a Candidate's Untapped Potential**

**Beyond Qualifications:  
How to Identify Future High Performers**

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## Beyond Qualifications: How to Identify Future High Performers



Hiring the right person has never been straightforward. You can run a solid process, see a CV that ticks every box, and still end up picking the wrong person. It is frustrating, and it is common.

A lot of that comes from how we filter people at the start. We rely on the obvious markers, such as job titles, degrees, and years in the field. They help narrow the list, but they also shut the door on candidates who could have been the best long-term fit.

Now that two thirds of organisations are facing severe skill shortages, it's becoming increasingly obvious that the way we assess talent needs to change. Looking at past roles, certifications, and experience isn't enough.

*We need to examine potential.*

This guide is about noticing the hidden signals of potential. Looking past the surface, so you don't miss the people who could make the biggest difference to your team.

### Key Takeaways: What You'll Learn

- **Why traditional hiring fails:** Two-thirds of organizations face severe skill shortages, yet most still filter candidates using outdated markers like degrees and job titles that exclude high-potential talent
- **The hidden cost of surface-level hiring:** Poor hiring decisions cost up to 200% of an employee's annual salary when factoring in turnover, lost productivity, and training expenses
- **Five critical indicators of untapped potential:** Learn to assess adaptability, problem-solving under pressure, cultural intelligence, curiosity, and resilience through behavioural interviews and practical scenarios
- **Skills-based assessment strategies:** Discover why 90% of companies see better results when hiring for demonstrated skills over formal qualifications, and how to implement practical testing methods
- **Advanced interview techniques:** Master behavioural questioning using the STAR method, panel interview strategies, and future-focused questions that reveal how candidates learn and adapt.

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## The Hidden Cost of Surface-Level Hiring

While churn issues aren't exclusively an issue of poor hiring, it's clear that companies are struggling to make informed decisions.

For instance, consider that around 53% of employees leave new jobs due to unmet expectations, and approximately 30% abandon a business within the first 90 days.

The wrong hire costs more than most teams expect. It is not just the recruiter's fee or the time spent on interviews. It is the months of slow progress, the extra strain on colleagues, and the work that needs to be redone.

**Recruitment industry and HR experts suggest that the total cost of replacing someone can be anywhere from 100% to 200% of their annual salary.**

Add the basic expenses of recruitment to the price of managers conducting interviews and reviewing applications, the cost of training and onboarding, and the expense of lost productivity, and it's easy to see how things start to get expensive quickly.

When you hire employees based only on what's easy to measure, like degrees, exact job history, or familiar systems experiences, your chances of hiring someone who won't last grow significantly.

## Beyond the CV: Key Indicators of Untapped Potential

CVs and cover letters are helpful, but they are dated. They're records of the past that show where someone has worked and what tools they've used. Very rarely do they provide a clear view of a person's actual skills, characteristics, and future potential.

So, what should leaders be looking at instead?

### Adaptability and Learning Agility

Roles change quickly these days. Skills have an average half-life of only about five years, and that's shrinking even further with the rise of AI, automation, and new tech. That makes adaptability more important than ever.

Ask candidates to describe a time they were asked to take on something unfamiliar, maybe a system they'd never used, or a project outside their usual scope.

Pay attention to how they approached it. Did they seek training? Ask questions? Learn by trial and error? The strongest answers show a clear process for getting up to speed and a willingness to step into discomfort.

### Problem-Solving Under Pressure

Today's employees will encounter challenges, many of which they have never faced before. What matters now is how equipped they are to handle them.

This is often easiest to see through behavioural questions. Please select a problem relevant to your industry and ask them to walk you through their thought process.

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- What did they notice first?
- How did they decide what to do next?
- Who did they involve?

Scenario-based tasks can also help. Give them a short brief overview and a time limit, then observe how they break it down. You're not just looking for the "right" solution; you're looking for how they think.

### **Cultural Intelligence and Soft Skills**

Soft skills are harder to measure, but they're often the difference between someone who strengthens a team and someone who disrupts it. People Management research shows that 67% of employers now consider them more important than formal qualifications.

You can usually test a candidate's soft skills well during group interviews or panel discussions. Observe how they listen, whether they interrupt, and how they adjust their tone to different individuals. Ask for examples of working with colleagues from different backgrounds or in other locations.

### **Curiosity and Initiative**

Curiosity can be easily overlooked if you rush through interviews. Allow the candidate to ask questions. Strong signs include questions about your challenges, success measures, or what the first few months will look like.

This matters because curiosity often predicts long-term adaptability. People who ask good questions now are more likely to keep learning after they join.

Another thing to watch for? Initiative. Look for clear examples that candidates are willing to act on their curiosity and explore new opportunities. For instance, did they decide to pursue an AI course just because they knew it might be helpful to a future employer?

### **Resilience**

Resilience and adaptability often go hand-in-hand. Although it's essential for employers to prioritise the well-being of their team members today, it's also worthwhile to determine whether a new employee can adapt to the challenges that arise.

In behavioural interviews, ask candidates about a time they faced a professional setback. Let them explain the situation, how they reacted, and what they did afterwards.

The best answers don't avoid the issues; they acknowledge them and show how they contributed to growth.

## **The Skills-Based Assessment Revolution**

For years, many job ads opened with the same line: "Degree required." In some cases, it's fair; the role genuinely needs the academic grounding. In many others, it's just a filter. Quick to apply, easy to defend, but it excludes a whole group of people who might be able to do the job just as well, or even better.

The shift toward skills-based hiring changes that. Instead of asking "Where did you study?" it starts with "Can you do the work?" Studies show that 90% of companies achieve better results when hiring for skills over degrees, and the logic is straightforward: a strong portfolio or practical demonstration conveys more about job readiness than a line on a CV.

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Practical testing doesn't need to involve full-day exams or assessments. If you're hiring in sales, you might ask a candidate to prepare a short pitch based on a mock client brief. For a technical role, it could be a small repair task or code challenge drawn from real work your team has handled. These give you more than a yes-or-no; they reveal how a person thinks, works under pressure, and explain their choices.

Transferable skills matter here, too. Someone from an adjacent industry may not be familiar with your exact systems, but if they've solved similar problems elsewhere, the learning curve can be relatively short. This is where "new-collar" workers, those with specialised skills gained through alternative pathways, often shine. They bring capability without the constraints of a narrow career path, and they're usually more adaptable as a result.

## Leveraging Professional Recruiters for Deeper Insights

Skill-based assessments can help you make stronger decisions, but few things are more valuable than having the right support through the hiring process.

**Specialist recruiters** see things most hiring managers miss. It's not because they have some secret checklist; it's because they spend every day talking to candidates, tracking industry shifts, and watching how careers unfold. Over time, they learn what potential looks like before it's obvious on paper.

- Find a recruitment company with genuine experience in your industry and ask about their processes.
- Do they use skills-based testing?
- How do they probe for adaptability, cultural fit, or leadership potential in non-managerial roles?

The answers will tell you whether they're looking deeper than the surface.

Remember, when working with recruiters, the best results come from long-term partnerships. When a recruiter understands your culture, team dynamics, and business goals, they can filter candidates accordingly.

## Interview Strategies That Reveal Hidden Potential

One final thing to master when assessing candidates for potential is the interview.

Most interviews stay on the safe path. They assess experience, verify skills, and touch on cultural fit. All useful, but it means the real signs of potential can slip by. A few small changes in approach can bring those qualities to the forefront.

We've already mentioned behavioural interview questions. These are great for diving into a person's true abilities and skills. Listen for responses using the "STAR" method, outlining the situation, task, action, and result. Once they've told their story, ask what they'd do differently if they faced it again. Or how the experience shaped the way they approach similar work now. For deeper insights, try some future-focused questions. "If you were leading this project in a year, what would you change?" forces them to think forward, not just back.

Panel interview strategies are also useful. Having more than one interviewer in the room changes what you see. A technical lead will notice different things than a team manager. HR might pick up on culture fit where others don't. The conversation afterwards, comparing notes, is often where the clearest picture forms.

## **Hiring for Long-Term Potential, Not Just Short-Term Fit**

Start small. Look at the last few people you hired. How did you find them? What made you say yes? Are they doing the job you hoped for, or something different? That quick review will tell you more than a dozen reports.

Pick one thing to change right away. Add a short skills test. Swap one interview question for something that digs into how they learn. Ask a recruiter to walk you through how they judge potential, not just experience.

Keep track of what happens. How long does it take to fill the role? How is the new hire doing six months in? Whether the team feels the fit is right. Simple measures, written down, make it easier to see what works.

Adjusting your hiring process now, with a focus on potential rather than short-term gap-filling, could give you the edge you need to stay ahead in the recruitment market in the future.

## A little about Sarah Bishop and Recruit Recruit Ltd



Whether you're a sole trader hiring your first team member, a VC-backed startup needing to scale fast, or a corporate looking for top-tier C-suite talent, one thing stays true:

Your business grows when your people grow.

**I help founders, CEOs and business leaders build brilliant teams through:**

- **Recruitment:** finding and placing the right people for the right roles or embedding a talent team into growing businesses
- **Sales & Leadership Training:** developing high-performing teams that sell, lead and deliver
- **Speaking & EmCeeing:** energising events and conferences with insight, humour and practical takeaways
- **Coaching:** supporting leaders to grow confidently, communicate better, and build culture that sticks

Over the years, I've supported businesses at every stage, from bedroom startups to scale-ups and established firms navigating change. What they all have in common? A vision to grow and the ambition to get the right people on board to make it happen.

**I bring no-nonsense advice, energy, empathy and results, whether I'm:**

- Hiring a game-changing leadership role
- Training a founder-led team to sell with confidence
- Speaking on stage about team-building, fearless follow-up, or people strategy
- Coaching a business owner through their first ever hire

**So, let's talk if:**

- You're ready to grow and want to hire with confidence
- You need training or coaching to get more from your team (or yourself!)
- You're planning an event and want a speaker or EmCee who brings both energy and value

Drop me a message or connect – let's build something brilliant together.

**Now – #1 Bestseller on Amazon –**

**Scale Up!: The Founders' Guide to Accelerating Growth by Building Dream Teams by Sarah Bishop**

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