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With the 2012 Olympics now over, attention turns to reflection on the achievements – or not – of the past 16 days. Olympic performances and the stories behind the athletes are frequently inspiring. But this Olympics what particularly impressed me wasn't so much the big name athletes accumulating ever greater medal tallies, but rather the occasional medal winner who was previously unknown, not just on the world stage but within their sporting world too. Several sports saw medal winners who had only taken up the sport seriously within the past few years; some hadn't even competed at a major competition prior to their Olympic trials.

These individuals were able to prove they have what it takes during their trials, and therefore get themselves selected for the team. The bottom line wasn't how many years they had been training or what type of kit or technique they used; it was how well they actually performed.

When we hire for a position, our ultimate goal is the same: select the future gold medalist for our team! Of course we don't have the benefit of observing every applicant perform the job, so we rely on more indirect measures to make our selection. But with time and resource pressures, it's easy to end up using selection criteria that are easy to 'measure' from an application but ineffective in predicting on the job performance.

The next time you are designing or reviewing screening criteria for the early stages of your selection process, consider the following suggestions to ensure your organization the best chance of finding the high performers:

- Ensure your job description clearly states the position requirements as competencies rather than general statements. Well written job descriptions not only make it easier to design an effective selection process, but also communicate clearly to potential applicants what is required to be effective in the position.
- Consider for each of your criteria whether it will have the effect of screening IN applicants with the required competencies, rather than screening OUT applicants who don't meet your paper based (rather than performance based) measures.
- Give yourself the best opportunity to gather relevant information as early as possible in the process. Supplemental application questions can be a powerful way to obtain information about your applicants, not otherwise accessible until the interview stages.
- Re-evaluate what you mean by experience. For example, application based screening often ends up being heavily weighted towards time in the field i.e. more experience = better. Is an applicant with 14 years experience likely to be the best candidate, or could they be stagnant and stale? How many athletes would have missed out on the opportunity to represent their country if the selection was based on how many years they had been training for their sport? A minimum level of experience in a related field is a typical criterion when screening applicants, but experience above and beyond the minimum requirement could be measured in ways other than additional years experience. For example, could credit be given for specific types or levels of experience rather than time in position? The previously mentioned supplemental questions can be a great way to access this type of information so you can differentiate between types of experience in the early stages of selection.

- Specific vs transferable skills: Could someone with an aptitude for handling, analyzing and interpreting data offer just as much as someone who has experience with your specific data software? For example, could someone who uses different accounting software to you transfer their skills to your software if it performs the same type of functions? Most likely they can, especially if they can demonstrate (perhaps through a supplemental question) that they have an understanding of how the software is used and the underlying function of the data.
- Review your selection criteria while asking the question ‘Can that K/S/A be easily learned or trained for’? A candidate with strong supervisory skills but limited knowledge of a particular technical aspect of the job (which can be quickly learned on the job or through a training program) may prove to be a better long term hire than someone who has a very strong technical background but no people skills.

It can be hard to break out of the comfort zone and begin to look at things differently, but shifting your focus away from your usual screening criteria might just give you the edge over the competition in the search for the best talent and your next ‘gold medalist’.