

Zappos – Hiring for Culture and the Bizarre Things They Do

Guest blogger

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[Source](#)

Editors Note: This is a guest post written by Keith Tatley – Founder of [Manager Foundation](#). His opinions are his own.

“Culture fit” is something we hear a lot about these days in HR strategy discussions. But what exactly does culture fit mean? [Organizational culture](#) refers to the beliefs, ideologies, principles and values that the individuals of an organization share. And In short – culture fit simply means hiring someone who fits within the organizational culture of company.

The Importance of Organizational Culture

While on the surface [cultural fit](#) may not seem like a critical factor in the hiring process it is arguably one of the most important selection criteria. Employees who do not fit in with your culture negatively affect those around them. They can stifle the enthusiasm, motivation and dynamics of your team. And poor employee motivation diminishes the productivity and profitability of your organization.

In contrast, hiring for culture fit increases [employee engagement](#). And an employee who embraces your company’s values, and finds purpose in the work that he or she does for your organization, is much more likely to add value as an individual team player. They’ll also energize those around them resulting in increased employee motivation and employee productivity.

That’s why culture fit has become ultra-important today for companies hiring new employees. For some businesses culture fit is even more important than skills.

While the right skills are always preferred, they can also be taught. But it’s very difficult to “teach” someone to fit into your corporate culture. That’s why companies like Zappos are going to great lengths to ensure that their new hires are a good culture fit.

The Zappos Hiring Philosophy

Zappos.com is a billion dollar, online shoe and clothing shop currently based in Las Vegas, Nevada. It's also one of Fortune's Top 100 Best Companies to Work For.

But if you want to get hired at Zappos you need more than just the right skills. For Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, maintaining their corporate culture is an important part of their hiring plan. If candidates are not a good fit with the [Zappos Family Core Values](#) then they just don't make the cut.

"We've actually passed on a lot of really smart, talented people that we know can make an immediate impact on our top or bottom line, but if they're not good for the company culture, we won't hire them for that reason alone," says Tony Hsieh.

The Value of Values

Why are company values important?

Tony Hsieh highlights a very important aspect of hiring for culture fit in his quote above. It all hinges on finding candidates who are a good fit with your company values.

Why? Because when you hire someone who is not right for the corporate culture they will not fit in with the team. They will not fit in with the way that people do things in the company. And worse case may end up negatively changing the culture or having to leave the company.

Even if your company already has a list of core company values, your team members may have different values. This is because the company values are aspirational but teams are made up of different individuals.

To understand their actual values, you can do a [values assessment](#) of your individual team members. To understand how a prospective hire would fit in with the team, compare their values assessment to the team.

That Zappos places such high value on culture fit is completely understandable. It's how they go about hiring for the perfect culture fit that has raised eyebrows.

Zappos Interview Technique #1: The Social Test

According to Rebecca Henry, the former Director of Human Resources for Zappos, the recruitment process at Zappos is more like a courtship than a traditional recruitment process.

While the social test may not be as demanding for every job, before making a hiring decision, candidates will meet with multiple Zappos employees. This usually involves attending some type of department or company event enabling the employees who are not interviewing to meet the prospective employee informally.

Social testing is a great interview technique and a good way for employees and team members to evaluate candidates. It's also a great test for culture fit. But it's also an interview technique that you can implement sensibly.

We definitely recommend that candidates be interviewed by a broader audience – especially those that they will have a close working relationship with. In lieu of a formal interview, consider arranging for candidates to meet with other employees over coffee.

What we like about this technique is that Zappos acknowledges that how a person fits in with the rest of the team and the organization is important. Being liked by the boss doesn't automatically mean the candidate will get on well with their peers and other important stakeholders. Too often bosses make autocratic hiring decisions that impact other people.

Zappos Interview Technique #2: The “Nice Guy” Test

Tony Hsieh recently revealed a clever technique the company uses to make sure their new hires aren't only a good culture fit but also good people. The deciding factor – even if you make an amazing impression in the interview, if you're rude to your ride from the airport, you aren't getting the job.

“A lot of our candidates are from out of town, and we'll pick them up from the airport in a Zappos shuttle, give them a tour, and then they'll spend the rest of the day interviewing,” Hsieh says. “At the end of the day of interviews, the recruiter will circle back to the shuttle driver and ask how he or she was treated. It doesn't matter how well the day of interviews went, if our shuttle driver wasn't treated well, then we won't hire that person.”

Such a clever yet simple interview technique and it gives you real-life insight to a candidate before you make any hiring decisions. Your candidates may not always arrive by company shuttle but they will always be greeted by a receptionist or personal assistant.

Zappos Interview Technique #3: The Service Test

A core value at Zappos is creating WOW customer service experiences. So if you are hired by Zappos, you can expect to spend the first 4 weeks in your new job manning phones in their call centre learning how to respond to customer needs.

“This process really immerses new hires into our culture, what our core values mean, how we live them, what our expectations are of each employee to help maintain and grow our culture”, says Christa Foley – Recruiting Manager at Zappos.

People make an organization but customers keep them afloat. What better way to get your new hires to buy into the philosophy of service excellence than by making them walk the talk. If customer service is key to your corporate culture then this is an excellent culture fit test. Four weeks may be a bit lengthy but a few days in customer service is a good way for new hires to learn about your products and services.

Zappos Interview Technique #4: The Ultimate Test

About one week into their call centre training, Zappos offers employees \$3,000.00 to leave the company. I kid you not. \$3,000.00 *to leave* – and this is around 4 weeks of pay for the employees.

If candidates haven’t become Zappos insiders, committed to the values and culture, then the company really prefers that they leave. There is however one stipulation – take the money and you can never come back.

While this may sound like a very attractive offer, according to Tony Hsieh only 2% to 3% of people take the offer. The other 97% say no deal. They choose the job over the instant cash. Ingenious to say the least.

If you’re willing to take the company up on The Offer, you obviously don’t have the sense of commitment they are looking for. That’s why this tactic ensures that Zappos ends up with new hires who are committed, engaged employees who are a good culture fit. It’s also clearly an indication of how Zappos have earned their spot on Fortune’s Top 100 Best Companies to Work For.

Not every organization is in a financial position to reward uncommitted new hires to leave. But considering the cost of a bad hire, this program makes a lot of financial sense.

Zappos is able to quickly identify bad hires by their willingness to accept the \$3,000 offer; Bad hires then voluntarily leave at a relatively low cost; and by removing an employee who doesn’t want to be a part of their organization, Zappos saves on future hassles, headaches and termination costs that far exceed the money paid to the employee.

Conclusion

What Zappos has shown us is how important hiring is for cultural fit. Zappos uses many “unconventional” interview techniques but you as an everyday manager can achieve the same objectives.

But Zappos isn’t the only company that going to extreme measures to hire the best employees.

[Steve Jobs](#) built his team of A+ players by personally interviewing applicants and only hiring the best. While [Google](#) has opted for behavioral interview questions over brainteasers.

What’s the take home value here for the everyday manager? Often employee performance problems stem from bad hires. But hiring is a skill that managers don’t get to practise very often. That’s why I’ve made the free [boss.camp](#) program. It shows you how to improve employee performance in just an hour a week, including how to hire the best employees for the job.

[Keith Tatley](#) founded the Manager Foundation to “Make Work Work”. Manager Foundation specialises in employee productivity. If you want to increase employee performance or are a manager with a staff performance problem, find a solution at [Manager Foundation](#).