

When 'the right stuff' beats job experience

HOW many times have you heard people complaining that they could do that job if only they were given the chance? That many of them are right should disturb the sleep of anyone involved in recruitment. Yet as recruiters try to hire the best people, they continue to take refuge in the old virtues of experience and qualifications.

Their wake-up call lies in these simple examples: in just 12 weeks a former nurse became a customer-services star working in a call centre for Royal & Sun Alliance; an SAS officer switched to being the successful manager of a multi-million-pound superstore; and a milkman went to work for a building society.

"Their backgrounds are irrelevant. What they have in common is 'the right stuff'," says Robert Myatt, a consultant with Kaisen, an expert in personal profiling, performance management and organisational change.

Kaisen is a leading business psychol-

ogist whose clients include Sainsbury, Marks & Spencer and British Airways. He argues that many companies are shooting themselves in the foot by focusing recruitment only on people who have done the job or worked in the industry — not those who *could*.

"Their reasons seem sound enough," says Myatt. "We all know it's people that make the difference. But in their anxiety to limit the risk of hiring the wrong people, employers are potentially rejecting some of the brightest stars without giving them a chance. They're fishing in a very small pond, concentrating only on the 'right' experience and the 'right' CV. You must cast your net much wider to catch more able people."

Kaisen believes the answer lies in identifying the underlying psychological processes that reveal the people with the skills for the job at hand. Training them in the technicalities is relatively straightforward if they have the right basic psychological skills.

"It's a common mistake to assume, for example, that you have to have worked in insurance for a long time before you can become a successful financial-services adviser. The key is what lies beneath," says Myatt. "Most people wouldn't consider a self-effacing Somerset vicar for a job as a salesman on a second-hand car lot. Yet the recent Channel 4 series, *Faking It*, showed that it is possible to take the most unlikely candidates and turn them into something quite different quickly. The vicar had no previous experience but he performed better than three other salesmen who had been in the trade for years."

He would never have got an interview using conventional recruitment methods, says Myatt. Kaisen's approach is to apply pure psychology and look at the skills that underpin everything people do and how well they do it. One example it looks at is "motivational fit" or recruiting for the right attitude as some people call it.

There are classic examples of people being hired to work in prestigious shops because of their great social skills. Unfortunately, they think that selling is beneath them. They have the talent, but not the motivation.

"We examine perception — picking

up on whether customers are flustered or in a rush," says Myatt. "We look at how they are feeling. What type of people they are, their lifestyles, even something as straightforward as acknowledging that they are in the shop in the first place."

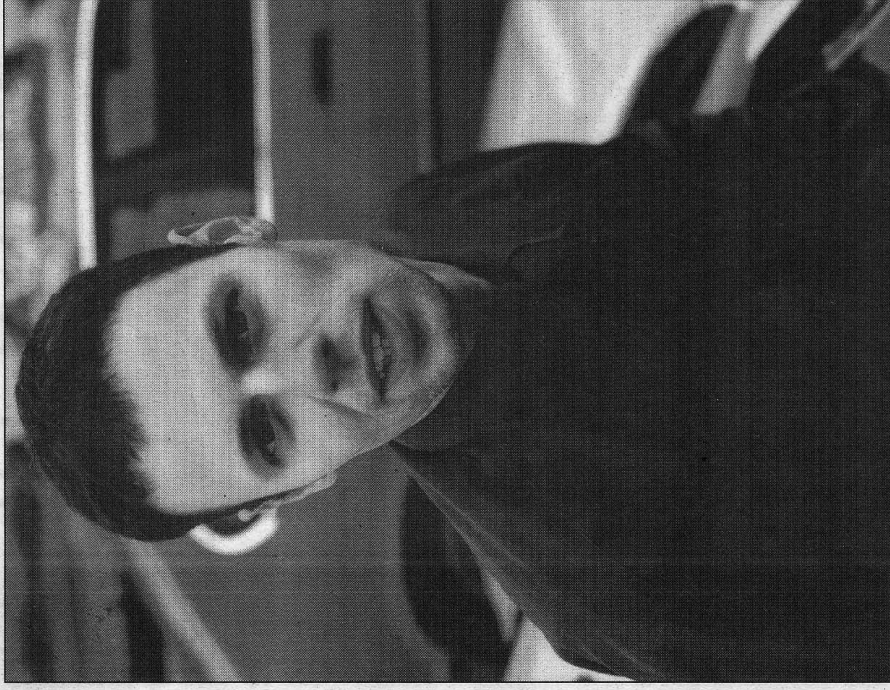
Kaisen's consultants are looking for people with communications skills who will not blind you with jargon. Often conventional recruitment will not reveal these psychological patterns. They will not show, for example, that the SAS officer had the right characteristics to be a superstore manager. The core skills programme has two key elements. The first is a series of specifications describing the underlying make-up of the kind of people

the employer wants and the second is rigorous assessment processes to test candidates in simulations.

"Translating assessment into performance makes errors in judgment less likely," says Myatt. "And the process tests underlying psychological skill — not technical knowledge. We often advise clients to open up the floodgates when they advertise vacancies. This means they won't miss out on people with the right stuff but who may not have the right qualifications or experience measured by conventional recruitment methods."

Breaking the mould, it seems, can unlock a new stream of good candidates.

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All revved up: vicar Nigel Done was a success as a used-car salesman