

Expert Insights



Why Smart Employees Underperform: 7 Hazards to Avoid

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Introduction

We've all been there. After an extensive and thorough search for a line manager, one candidate stands out. This candidate has the right experience, solid qualifications, and a relevant work history, and she gave an impressive performance during the interview process. She said the right things, put forward some great ideas and generally presented very well. You hired her.

Three months later, you begin to question your decision. Your new hire's team appears disgruntled, morale is low, and output and productivity are well behind the figures from the previous quarter.

After investigating further and speaking with a few key team members, you realize there's a disconnect—a mismatch. While she looked impressive on paper and presented well during one-on-one interviews, your new hire's style, approach, and behavior on the job are simply inconsistent with the values and expectations of your organization. Her *modus operandi* is foreign to her colleagues. Your new hire is not a good cultural fit and one or more of the following hazards may be the cause.

1. Inadequate capability
2. Poor job fit
3. Fuzzy goals and accountabilities
4. Poor relationship with manager
5. Poor relationship with co-workers
6. Health and wellness issues
7. Physical and environmental factors

Why Smart Employees Underperform: 7 Hazards to Avoid

1. Inadequate capability



Don't judge a book by its cover, and don't believe what you read on a resume!

Capability refers to the skills, tools and experience that a person needs in order to successfully perform her job. When any of these factors are missing, there is an increased chance that the employee will underperform. It isn't uncommon for hiring professionals to overlook these basic factors, especially if a candidate has solid academic credentials and comes across as intelligent and confident in a job interview. Furthermore, it's no secret that most candidates exaggerate their abilities on their resumes and job applications.

Diagnostics that help you identify if an underperforming employee has adequate capability:

Skills—Do you know what skills are needed to perform the job and whether the employee possesses those skills? If she doesn't possess the necessary skills, how will you help her acquire them, and how long do you expect that process to take? Skills training takes time and money, and results are never guaranteed unless there is adequate commitment from both the manager and the employee. It's in everyone's best interest for the manager to set appropriate expectations for the employee from the beginning. This is especially true if the job requires special technical capabilities.

Tools—Even if an individual has the skills and experience to do the job, does he have the tools to deliver peak performance? For example, a highly skilled and experienced web designer can't build a website without adequate computer hardware and software. The tools don't have to be the most up-to-date, but a system that crashes can be incredibly frustrating and unproductive, even to the best performer.

Experience—Just because an employee has the skills to do a job doesn't mean that he has the experience to apply those skills in his specific position. This is especially true for recent graduates, outside hires from different industries and internal hires from different departments. While the required skills may be similar from one job to the next, differing applications and terminology may require that the new hire take time to learn the nuances of his new position.

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2. Poor job fit



“Fit” reflects the behaviors and interests needed to succeed in a job

Many people fall into the trap of choosing a profession or job that is a bad fit. We are who we are. Our “mental DNA” is influenced both by our genetics and our early life experiences, and it is almost completely formed by the time we are 20 years old. Rather than trying to understand ourselves so that we can choose a calling that builds on our strengths and aligns with our interests, we choose jobs because of peer pressure and societal influences.

You probably know a medical doctor that trained at a prestigious school and worked for several years at a modern hospital. Despite adequate skills, tools and experience, he is aloof, insensitive and has a terrible bedside manner, and you only see him if no one else is available. He might have been better suited as a lawyer so that he could cross-examine a witness on trial. In short, he really doesn’t possess the innate compassion that would make him a great doctor. He is a poor fit for his job.

Skills can be taught, but behaviors are much more difficult to change

A doctor can improve his bedside manner through training and mentoring, but it takes tremendous effort and motivation to change natural behavior. If an individual isn’t motivated to change, then he probably won’t.

It is important to understand a person’s innate behaviors and interests when trying to match him with the right job. Know the job, know what type of person is successful in that job, and then hire others who have the behavioral traits that fit that job. This is easier said than done because it is difficult to gauge behaviors in a job interview, but behavioral assessments can be extremely helpful.

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3. Fuzzy goals and accountabilities

Clear goals help focus and motivate employees to achieve the desired results

Employees need to be very clear about their responsibilities and about the results you expect them to achieve. Daily work and priorities are easily affected by the crisis of the day, new requests or changes in direction. Setting and tracking SMART goals helps your employees focus on what is most important to your business, and clear accountabilities help ensure that the work gets done with minimal conflict.

Use SMART goals to create clarity and improve the employee's performance

Specific – Your employee has a much better chance of accomplishing a specific goal than a general goal. To set a specific goal, the employee must answer, at a minimum: Who is involved? What needs to be accomplished? When is the deadline? Why is this goal important?

Measurable – Establish concrete criteria for measuring progress toward the attainment of each goal you set. When you measure your progress, you stay on track, reach your target dates, and experience the thrill of achievement that motivates you to keep working toward your goal.

Aligned – The individual's goals need to support the organization's priorities. Otherwise, the employee is not channeling his efforts in the most productive manner for the organization.

Realistic – To be realistic, a goal must represent an objective toward which you are both willing and able to work. But be sure that every goal represents substantial progress. Your goal is probably realistic if you truly believe that it can be accomplished, or if you have accomplished something similar in the past.

Timed – A goal should be grounded within a time frame, otherwise there is no sense of urgency.



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4. Poor relationship with manager

Do as I say and not as I do...clear as mud!

A poor relationship with one's boss is the number one reason for failure at work. There are two common flashpoints that adversely impact performance.

1. The employee is unclear about the manager's expectations

Goals should cascade down from a manager to his employees so that everyone understands how they contribute to the objectives of both the team and the organization. If an employee does not understand the goals she has been given, or if she hasn't been given goals at all, the onus is on her to seek clarity. Asking a simple question such as, "What are the top three priorities in my role that you would like me to focus on?" can help everyone on the team gain clarity. Employees should also ask "Why is this so important?" as the answer will give them a lot of good clues for developing the relationship with their manager.

2. Managers fail to adapt their styles to the employees' preferred styles.

Every employee/manager relationship is unique and requires a different management approach. For example, the approach taken by highly decisive boss working with a highly decisive employee should be significantly different from the approach taken by this same boss when working with a less-decisive employee. The decisive employee thrives on quick decisions, while the other employee will be more methodical in his or her decision-making approach. The less-decisive employee will potentially enter into conflict with the faster-paced manager. A "one-size fits all" management approach will likely result in frustration for everyone.

Managers and employees who understand each other's preferred styles will better understand how to communicate and work together effectively. We have identified seven factors that strongly predict the compatibility between a manager and her workers. These are: self-assurance, self-reliance, conformity, optimism, decisiveness, objectivity, and approach to learning. Assessing a manager and her employees allows her to use objective information about herself and her workers so that they can work more effectively toward a common goal.



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5. Poor relationship with co-workers

Can't we just all get along?

There are four primary factors that harm relationships among co-workers:

1. Insensitivity toward others – Insensitive co-workers damage any sort of team dynamic and potentially expose the employer to hostile work environment and employment discrimination law suits. Any remarks that might be interpreted as discriminatory with regard to gender, age, sexual orientation, race, or disability contribute to a hostile work environment. Managers who sense this hostility need to take quick and decisive action to prevent it from continuing.

2. Unclear accountability – Conflict between interdependent employees or groups emerges because they are unclear about business objectives, priorities, and deadlines, as well as processes and resources for delivery. Additionally, mixed messages create incongruence that actually encourages departments to pull against each other in the interest of achieving their own objectives—to the detriment of the greater organization. When accountabilities are unclear, balls get dropped, turf wars rage, confusion reigns, and productivity plummets. This leads to frustration and indifference, and ultimately underperformance.

3. Poor cultural fit - Cultural fit refers to the employee's compatibility with the organization's values and mode of operation. While the employee presents well on paper and performs well during one-on-one interviews, the employee's style, approach, and behavior on the job are simply inconsistent with the values and expectations of your organization. Their *modus operandi* is foreign to their colleagues.

4. Incompatible styles – Co-workers have communication styles and natural behaviors that simply don't mesh well with one another, and neither is willing to adapt his style. This creates conflict and hostility, which creates stress and distraction for the entire team.



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6. Health and wellness issues



An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Approximately \$260 billion in output is lost each year in the US because of health-related problems. Whether they are absent from work altogether, or present but working at a reduced capacity, employees suffering from physical or mental illness have difficulty performing at their peak.

Employees spend approximately 36% of their total waking hours at work. This makes the worksite an ideal place to provide workers with the knowledge and skills needed to help improve attitudes and behaviors concerning health.

A comprehensive worksite health promotion program typically contains six elements:

1. Education about—and encouragement of—healthy living, focusing on overarching lifestyle changes. Disseminate information and build awareness of healthy living issues, preferably tailored to employees' interests and needs.
2. Supportive social and physical environments. This includes implementing policies that promote healthy behaviors and reduce risk of disease.
3. Linkage to related programs that help employees balance work and family life.
4. Worksite screening programs, ideally linked to medical care that ensures follow-up and appropriate treatment as necessary.
5. Processes for supporting individual behavior change with follow-up interventions.
6. A continuous improvement process that enhances the program's effectiveness.

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7. Physical and environmental factors



Snug as a bug in a rug

Numerous behavioral studies have proven that a pleasant and comfortable work environment improves worker productivity and reduces turnover.

For example, indoor temperature affects several human responses, including thermal comfort, perceived air quality, sick building syndrome symptoms, and performance at work. Researchers in Finland showed that when the interior air temperature was 30°C, worker performance was 8.9% below worker performance at the optimal temperature of 22°C.

Physical Factors

1. Workplace layout encourages efficient communication flow but minimal disruption
2. Ergonomically correct workplace reduces fatigue and distractions to reduce errors and injury
3. Safety awareness and concerns that can cause stress and accidents

Environmental Factors

1. Temperature
2. Air Quality
3. Lighting Conditions
4. Excessive Noise
5. Traffic

Indeed, it has been found that a productive work environment requires that management be able to positively motivate its employees in an infrastructure that is amenable to employees' needs.

Summary:

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