Chapter X

Extreme Interviewing to Find Team Oriented Programmers*

Clement James Goebel, III
Menlo Innovations LLC, USA

Richard Sheridan
Menlo Innovations LLC, USA

Thomas Meloche
Menlo Institute LLC, USA

Abstract

Many software development hires fail to add significantly to the team's overall productivity. The typical response is to increase the number of interviews and prepare an examination of sophisticated technical questions for the candidates. But what if your most important hiring goal was to find new technical employees with good teaming skills? One organization decided to create an immersion interview experience that provided candidates with the opportunity to demonstrate their teaming skills.

Introduction

Hiring new employees is a challenging task. Most managers recognize the importance of identifying the candidate's technical skills, but fail to effectively screen for the soft skills that will allow them to successfully function as an effective member of the team. Even talented individuals with the proper skills might not be a good fit if they have a difficult time fitting into the company culture. Worse, hiring a permanent employee for a specific technical skill alone is likely a mistake. If an employee is hired solely for his or her deep knowledge of C++, what happens if the company later decides to focus on Java? The employee is almost always retained, but was selected primarily for a skill set that is now irrelevant. How would you change your interview process if you felt that teamwork was as important, or more important, than any specific technical skill? This chapter describes how one company changed its interview process after deciding that soft skills such as collaboration and teamwork were even more important than expertise with a particular technology or development tool.

The Need

In 1999, the executive management team of Interface Systems Inc. decided to improve their software development capability. Specifically, they wanted to put in place a process that would provide a more predictive planning capability. This improved planning also needed to accommodate rapidly changing requirements, because Interface Systems was entering into emerging markets where the definition of a successful product was constantly evolving. Executive management also recognized that in order to succeed, they needed more than a new set of forms and reports, they needed to fundamentally change the way in which the technical team went about its business, and likewise they needed to change the team's culture. Improving project-planning skills while creating an improved corporate culture were both accomplished, in large part, by fully adopting the practices of *extreme programming*.

When Interface Systems later decided to add new developers to the team, great care was taken to devise an interviewing process that would communicate the corporate culture to the candidates while at the same time allowing the candidates to demonstrate their teamwork skills.

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