Uncommon Sense
Departure from Best Practice

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This paper marks a departure from contemporary thinking to employee resourcing. It rethinks the approach used for selecting employees, questions common sense, and dares to offer an approach that goes against perceived best practice.

At the heart of it are four radical elements (see Table 1).

TABLE #1: Uncommon Sense Principles in Resourcing

	Common Sense	Uncommon Sense
Sifting Methodology	Reduce high volume of applicants to a manageable number	Keep as many candidates as possible in the system for as long as possible
Success Criterion	Use a competency framework. Mark candidates against an OVERALL score across all competencies	A variety of holistic profiles associated with either success or failure. Fit is assessed against each profile (not competencies)
Assessment Methodology	Candidates performance in a series of independent assessment activities is assessed by independent assessors against specific competencies	Use one assessor to observe a group of candidates performing an extensive, long, and highly diverse activity
Decision Making	Fill vacancies with successful candidates	Identify small number (about 3) of key skills profiles in teams and recompose existing teams to have a balance of these key profiles.

We believe that organisations can benefit greatly from a more creative and thoughtful approach to resourcing and want to encourage our clients to think differently about their resourcing strategies. Below we suggest just four ways that we believe a more creative approach, or what we call an Uncommon Sense approach may benefit you and your organisation when recruiting people.

Uncommon Sense #1 – Keep as many candidates in the system for as long as possible

Common sourcing processes follow three key stages. They first identify potential candidates (e.g., recruitment advertising, databases), then proceed through sifting, and end up with some form of assessment (e.g., interviews, assessment centres). This approach requires attracting twenty to thirty applicants to fill a single vacancy.

Consider a common scenario. A company seeks to fill a single vacancy of a senior manager. It advertises in a national broadsheet and receives about sixty applications. The recruitment sponsor goes through the CVs and uses criteria such as experience, declared skills, declared achievements, qualifications, personal style, and overall impressions to reduce the number from sixty to a more manageable number of six. The short-listed candidates are invited to attend an interview or an assessment centre. Assuming that several applicants, from the original pool of sixty applicants, are potentially good Senior Managers, then the success of the whole recruitment exercise is dependent on the initial sifting that led to the short list. From reading the CVs, it will become quite clear that with the exception of the few people who do not meet the basic selection criteria, the majority of applicants' declared skills, achievements, and level of experience are all rather similar. Typically, 10% are clearly not suitable, 20% have some of the required skills but are light on some of the other role requirements, and an additional 10% are what we call 'wild-cards' – They may be light in some areas, but compensate for it by unique and unmatchable experience in other areas. The remaining 60% are all looking good on paper. Thus, our recruitment sponsor has the task of short-listing six applicants out of a pool of about forty candidates. Their decision is likely to be biased by personal style, un-quantified overall impressions, and unjustifiable peripheral clues (e.g., "the CV is far too long", "the layout is not neat", "don't think much Open University degrees, etc.")

Let us stretch the proposed scenario a bit further. What if the advertising campaign was a success and generated 120 applications. The same short-listing process would be applied. The common sense principle of 'reducing applications to a manageable number' would mean a **relatively random** selection among candidates who look good on paper. It also means, rejecting quite early on candidates that are potentially good Senior Managers. There is no guarantee that those short-listed are the best candidates. All of a sudden, the obvious common sense seems flawed, and the

uncommon sense of 'keep as many in the system, for as long as possible' starts to make sense.

Let me take you through a slightly different scenario – A company wishes to start a new 350-people call centre. The industry standard ratio for Call centres is 30:1 (applicants to appointees). This ratio suggests therefore that to get 350 **quality** employees the organisation would need to attract over 10,000 applications. But where are we going to find 10,000 people in the over-saturated market like call centres? With despair, the organisation decides to appoint a headhunter (or a body shop more likely) who guarantees them 350 'bums on seats', plus a continuous influx of people to replace those who will leave. Body shops are about volume, the only way to get numbers in, is to put forward any person who meets the most basic criteria (e.g., no criminal record, willing to work shifts). No wonder that average turnover in UK call centres runs at up to 80% per year!

By applying the Uncommon Sense approach we discovered far more suitable candidates by looking harder and looking more broadly at each person. The result of this is that in order to recruit 340 call centre operators we actually only needed to attract 2,350 applicants not 10,000. In addition a year later, annual turnover was measured only at 8%.

TABLE #2: Recruitment Ratios

MILESTONES	N =	SUCCESS	RETAIN
Respond to campaign	2,346	100%	100%
PASS 1st telephone interview	1,760	**75%**	**75%**
Psychometrics & 2nd telephone interview	1,672	95%	71%
PASS 2nd telephone interview	1,115	**66%**	**48%**
Attend assessment event	1,059	95%	45%
PASS assessment event	352	**33%**	**16%**
Accept appointment offer	348	98%	15%

Uncommon Sense #2 – Don't use one agreed competency framework to recruit people

In the real world, different people with different attitudes, behaviours and values can all be successful at the same role. However, one of the most ingrained and widespread assumption about talent is a fundamental need to believe that a single list of generic qualities can be used to describe all high performing employees. After all, It is much more manageable to search for only one set of attributes than contend with the possibility that people with quite different set of attributes might be equally effective. This assumption is evident in the application of a competency framework. Organisations search for employees that meet all the competencies identified in their competency framework. This means that those appointed are relatively similar, as by definition they should score high on all the competencies identified in the competency framework.

Over the last two decades, most organisations have developed competency models with between about six to a dozen competencies. The key assumption is that candidates must be assessed as adequate against all these competencies. Consider the common scenario, a company specifies that an ideal candidate needs to be structured, methodical, detail-oriented, and logical, as well as flexible, adaptable, creative, strategic thinker, able to think on their feet, and respond well to ambiguity. However, in the real world it is very hard to find a person with these two extremes (apart from truly gifted individuals). Consequently, the company appoints someone who is a bit structured and organised and a bit flexible and adaptable. They justify it using the all-time winning statement 'This is a well-rounded candidate.'

I view it differently. The appointed candidate is neither structured, nor adaptable. I propose that success requires being either very structured OR very flexible – a bit of this and a bit of that is what I would call a 'B' Player – an OK performer, but nothing exceptional – A relatively 'bland' or unexceptional individual who can do the role but not excel in it.

The uncommon sense approach focuses on multiple combinations of qualities – Something I term as 'Success Profiles'. At its core is detailed profiling of what success looks like for a particular role in a particular organisation. The outcome is a <u>series</u> of distinct 'A Player' profiles that are linked to a multiplicity of success criteria (high performance, retention, organisational fit, and employee satisfaction). This approach seeks to identify individuals who match to a distinct success profile (out of several possible profiles). Such individuals do not typically fare well at traditional assessment methods because although they score extremely high on some competencies they typically have gaps in other areas – as they are less well rounded overall.

Naturally, the profiling activity also identifies an independent series of different profiles that are linked to failure(though these are not necessarily an opposite to the success profiles).

The following are examples of two Success profiles and two Failure profiles identified for an organisation within the air transport industry:

- <u>**HARRIER:**</u> *Does not need a long runway to lift itself of the ground. Takes a lot of energy to raise and get the perspective from above ground, but once airborne, it can move very fast and with great degree of agility – Strategic thinker, non-impulsive, yet decisive when enough information is gathered. Agile individual who can operate in all task and people-related environments*

- ***HERCULAS:*** *May appear slow and cumbersome, but has enormous capacity to absorb and carry everything thrown at him. Takes on enormous responsibility, support everyone, and step-in for help. When airborne, carries the whole team with him. A dedicated and reliable 'work-horse' that does everything required, and much more. May not be elegant, but compensate through sheer power of dedication and outstanding productivity. The backbone of the team. Practical, solid and dependable within set operational parameters*

- <u>**HOT-AIR BALLOON:**</u> *Does not have any controls or steering to allow direction determination. Highly dependent on external (weather) conditions. Moves slowly, but once airborne is colourful, a lot fun, and very impressive. Yet, if you look inside the colourful balloon, there is nothing but hot air. It really doesn't take much to pop the balloon and cause it to drop from the sky. A fun loving, entertaining, but light-weight individual. All front, no core or essence.*

- ***TORNEDO:*** *Fast, powerful, and decisive, but requires a lot of support from ground staff to keep in shape and be able to operate (high maintenance). Arrogantly powers ahead towards one identified solution, ignores others views and alternative approaches. Once a button is pressed to release a missile, there is no way back. Impulsive, does not reflect, and can be a liability when dealing with delicate issues.*

Uncommon Sense #3 – It is economical to use large-scale assessment centres

The Assessment Centre is a common methodology to select the successful candidates from a short-list. Typically, a small number of candidates (about 6 per centre) complete a variety of exercises. Each exercise is linked to small number of competencies, and each is observed by a different assessor. The final decision is based on consensus among the various assessors, and reflects the performance of the candidate across a whole raft of activities.

This all makes sense. Yet, this common sense approach is costly, as it requires on average a ratio of two assessors to three candidates. In our call centre example, where more than 1,000 candidates need to be assessed, the notion of an Assessment Centre appears exceptionally expensive, inefficient, and painfully slow. No wonder that many large recruitment campaigns opt for a body-shop solution – "Let the recruiters identify suitable people. We don't need to assess, simply hold a brief interview with each proposed person".

The Uncommon Sense approach is very different. It uses an engaging half-day single activity event for a large volume of candidates (this can cater for over fifty candidates at a time). Candidates work in small teams who collaborate and compete, subjected to cleverly tailored interventions that test the identified success and failure profiles. The well-established assessment centre ratio of 2:3, is slashed here to one assessor per six candidates. Now that makes financial sense – the uncommon sense becomes even more attractive, when considering that the same assessment team can run two groups per day, enabling the assessment of over hundred candidates per day, and a thousand candidates over ten working days. Common sense argues that the assessment centre should be based on a work stimulation as a close to the real environment as possible. However, such an approach has been shown (Justin Menkes: Executive Intelligence) to be a better test of previous job knowledge than of ability.

*An uncommon sense approach is the **Art Event**, a creative activity focused for a large candidates' group, who works in small teams. The large group has to create a drawing on a massive scale, while each of the small teams has a specific contribution to make towards this overall group outcome (see Picture #1 as an example of a 15-panel drawing – 3.3m x 2.8). The event is staged to include tailor-made realistic interventions that test the specific success profiles and failure profiles.*

PICTURE #1: *Commissioned Drawing*

Picture #2 is a visual of a team working on the picture; whereas Picture #3 displays the final outcome (a different picture) – note the importance of team collaborating in order to ensure that different panels connect well.

PICTURE #2: Teams @ Work

PICTURE #3: Final outcome

Uncommon Sense #4 – Don't appoint "A Team" players

Once assessed, it makes sense to appoint the strongest candidates. But this common sense has a built-in flaw. It demolishes diversity within the organisation, and diminishes the potential of the organisation to tackle future challenges. We end-up with a one-dimensional organisation, with a clearly defined, but rather narrow, set of skills, and limited capacity to develop complimentary skills to respond to changing demands.

Football teams provide a good analogy. In a football team there are three key roles – Defender, Midfield, and Forward. Any team must have a good balance of players in each of the roles. A team of only Forward players, regardless the fact that they are all world-class ('A' players), is imbalanced and ineffective.

The same applies to work. The team cannot have only one type of success profile to be effective. The number of success and failure profiles will vary, but for the purpose of team configurations, it is useful to identify a small number of core success profiles, and ensure that each team has a relatively balanced spread of the different profiles.

Uncommon sense advocates the assessment of all team members and classification of each member into one of the key success profiles. Then, examining the configuration of the team, and ensuring that teams have a good balance of the different profiles, or at minimum a representation of all the profiles within it. Hence, when recruiting new members, the team they fit into should be considered. Table #3 offers a hypothetical example of three 9-member groups with varied

distribution of three success profiles (X, Y, & Z) and the actions required to balance these with minimal disruption.

An uncommon sense approach, we believe, can lead to faster, cheaper and more robust results for all resourcing strategies. An uncommon approach can therefore lead to uncommonly good results.

TABLE #3: Teams' reconfiguration

	Before	ACTION	After
Team A	X X X X X X X X X	Transfer 3 'X' profiles to Team C. Get 1 'Z' profile and 2 'Y' profiles in return	X X X X X X Z Y Y
Team B	X X X Z Z X Y Y Y	No Change	X X X Z Z X Y Y Y
Team C	X Y Y Y Y Y Z Z Z	Exchange with Team A 2 'Y' profiles and 1 'Z' profile for 3 'X' profiles	X X X Y Y Y X Z Z

Validation Study

The data for this study was drawn from a series of over 20 recruitment campaigns using the Uncommon Sense approach. About 45% of the candidates short-listed for the various campaigns were rated 'A Player' on the Uncommon Sense process. About a third were rated 'B-Players' and just about 22 who were rated 'C-Players'. Candidates success was measured on a 6-point scale based on Board Interview (client) and assessment centre findings: 5= Excellent; 4= Strong; 3= Above the line; 2= Below the line; 1= Poor; 0= Disaster. Table # 4 contrasts initial stages of the campaign with the final stage of an Assessment Centre.

- **Previous campaigns – One candidate in 6 short-listed was appointable (17%)**

- **This campaign – about 75% of the short-listed candidates were deemed appointable**

- **When counting only recommended candidates ('A' players) the figure of appointable candidates reaches a staggering 93%.**

TABLE #4: Validation Findings

Candidates' Scores

	5	4	3	2	1	0	
A Player	25%	58%	17%				100%
B Player		12%	44%	44%			100%
C Player				50%	33%	17%	100%