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Daniel J. Simons is a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois. He studies human attention, perception and memory. In most every study he has ever conducted, he has discovered that most all of our skills regarding attention, perception and memory are nowhere as good as we think. His most famous study was conducted in 1999. He asked subjects to view a video of six people passing two basketballs back and forth. The subjects were asked to count how many times three players wearing white shirts passed the basketball while ignoring the players wearing black shirts who passed their own ball. After a few passes, a person wearing a gorilla suit unexpectedly walks through the scene. 50% of subjects failed to notice the person in the gorilla suit. (You can find this video on YouTube.)

Simons proves the theory that there is a big mismatch between what we see and what we think we see. This condition is called “inattentional blindness.” He has even tested the effects of this in real world conditions. Subjects were asked to follow an experimenter on the back of a truck while they were jogging. While jogging, they were to monitor how many times the experimenter touched his hat. As they were jogging along a predefined route, they ran past a simulated fight scene in which two other experimenters were “beating” a victim. They found that even in broad daylight, only 56% of the subjects noticed the fight.

We find the same kind of thing in many interview situations with candidates and our clients. It is not uncommon at all for an interviewer or hiring authority to totally miss a candidate’s quality and ability to do a job because they are focused on issues that are relatively minor, albeit important to them.



Just last week we had candidates eliminated from contention for such reasons as, “He didn’t ask the CEO very many compelling questions . . . his personality isn’t very inspiring . . . I just didn’t get a good gut feel about her . . . I don’t think the hiring manager would like her and I want to be sure of who I refer to him . . . he was a bit overweight . . . she just wouldn’t fit into our culture.” We hear this kind of thing often when the hiring authority is so concerned about avoiding the often frivolous attributes of the last employee *who* did not work out. (“Don’t send us anyone living in Irving, we are here in Plano and the last guy was late all the time because he was coming from Irving.” {People who are late all the time, are late . . . whether they live down the street or across town}).

We are well aware that no company wants to make hiring mistakes. This is especially true in today’s market where we are all cautious about the economy and the future. But we can often get so fixated on “counting the passes of the players dressed in white” that we miss some of the qualities we should be looking for. The candidate who was eliminated because he didn’t ask the CEO enough compelling questions had an absolutely stellar track record with a major competitor of our client. He’d been interviewed by three levels of management to reach the interview with the CEO. To make matters even more interesting, the CEO is in Europe and is hardly ever here in the United States. It isn’t likely the candidate would have ever seen the CEO even if he had gotten the job, because the CEO never comes to the states. It’s really rather sad. After two months of interviewing, we are starting all over. I know we get paid to do that but we are absolutely convinced that we will not find a better candidate than this one.



So the lesson might be to ask really good questions of a candidate. Take good notes. As we have suggested in other Hiring Line articles, use a structured interview. Ask all of the candidates exactly the same questions and record their answers. Don't get so focused on any one issue in qualifying a candidate that you miss some important parts of their experience or background.