

On the Merits of Values

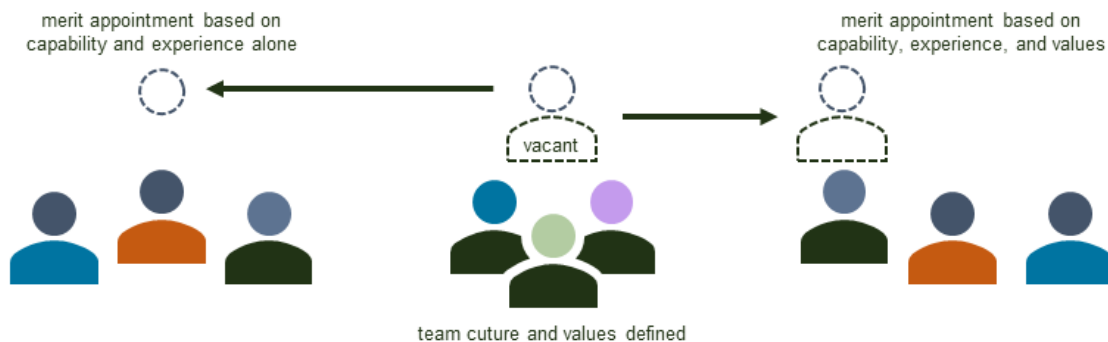
Publicly funded organisations rely on the efforts of workers to deliver public value, often in difficult circumstances. Merit-based recruitment, based on principles of fairness and impartiality, is a core part of how many publicly funded organisations hire their workers. Merit—hiring candidates based on what they know or can do—sounds appealing, but casts human resources as bundles of capabilities, rather than real humans motivated by values.

Most publicly funded organisations strive to hire based on merit, privileging more 'objective' considerations such as work history and qualifications and minimising more 'subjective' considerations such as cultural fit. Organisations may also use psychometric tests and other techniques designed to reduce the risk of bias in hiring decisions by eliminating all factors other than core capabilities or performance of specific tasks.

Publicly funded organisations are highly attuned to the need to be, and appear to be, scrupulously fair. Accusations of bias, nepotism, or favouritism can be devastating, and publicly funded organisations are subject to higher than usual levels of public oversight. This kind of pressure can encourage already cautious organisations to take merit-based hiring to extremes.

People are more than algorithms. Organisational culture reflects the values, history, understanding, habits, and preferences of people. Capabilities contribute to culture, but do not define it. An organisation with values of service and consensus-building may not be a good fit for a person who values competition and recognition of individual achievement.

Diversity of background, outlook, and thinking style offers many benefits to organisations, but significant cultural misalignment can be discouraging for individuals and disruptive to teams. Deliberately refusing to acknowledge the values that workers bring to work every day, and that bring them to work every day, discounts the role of culture in productivity and the humanity in human resources.



Organisations can adopt more holistic hiring practices without surrendering to bias and subjectivity by first clearly defining their values and then assessing alignment with those values as a component of merit. Understanding the culture and deep values of an organisation in practice, not just what is written in formal mission statements and codes of conduct, is not easy. It takes time, effort, and honesty to build a complete picture of merit for a given role, including capabilities, experience, and values.

That effort can be repaid many times over by reducing the costs of hiring people who have great skills but incompatible values. Clarifying what motivates current workers means organisations can clearly signal their organisational values to potential employees, and design processes to objectively test for those values.

Merit-based recruitment has its heart in the right place, but not enough heart to recognise that people bring their whole selves to work, not just their skills. Reducing unconscious bias and promoting diversity are worthy goals, but people who have very different backgrounds and thinking styles can be motivated by goals and values they share with colleagues. Valuing values does not repudiate the concept of merit-based recruitment, but expands it. Defining and assessing alignment with organisational values does not weaken the rigour of recruitment processes, but strengthens it.

Publicly funded organisations do good work. People who work in publicly funded organisations generally want not only to do a good job, but also to have a good job. Whether a job is good for a person, or they for it, is about both their resources and their humanity.