

Here's How to Make Sure You Don't Hire a Toxic Worker

(<https://www.tlnt.com/heres-how-to-make-sure-you-dont-hire-a-toxic-worker/>)

Nobody intends to hire the whiner, the troublemaker, or the sharp-tongued twit that ticks off customers and drives coworkers crazy. But somehow a few seem to work their way through the system and get hired, managing to lower the morale of the entire team.

According to research from two studies (one done at Harvard Business School (<https://www.tlnt.com/success-comes-from-strong-cultures-and-it-starts-at-the-top/>) and the other by CareerBuilder (<http://press.careerbuilder.com/2012-12-13-Nearly-Seven-in-Ten-Businesses-Affected-by-a-Bad-Hire-in-the-Past-Year-According-to-CareerBuilder-Survey>)), the turnover cost to the organization of these bad hires ranges from \$12,500 to more than \$50,000. The real cost, however, can be much higher when you factor in litigation, fines, loss of customers, or exit of other employees because of the toxic employee.

So what character or personality traits, habits, and attitudes give you big clues that you have a toxic person on the scene? Narcissism, arrogance, over-sensitivity, self-protection, bullying, abusive language, passive-aggressive behavior, sexual harassment, violence — these certainly make the list.

The bigger question: How do you spot them before you hire them, promote them, or move them onto your project?

1. Pay attention to their entrance

If you're considering hiring someone away from your competitor or from a supplier, chances are you have had a chance to observe them in other interactions and settings: Are they prompt to meetings, or do they keep others waiting? Did they arrive to the interview on time? How do they treat "little people" — staff that they consider lower in the ranks? Have you ever seen them *serve* anyone else or show compassion?

If you're considering anyone internally for a promotion or lateral move into your department, during any casual conversation, pay attention to how coworkers behave around them. Do they seem to have a warm relationship with their current team?

2. Ask revealing interview questions

If you're doing a formal hiring interview, structure your questions and either record the interview or take good notes. And remember: As behavioral psychologist and interviewing guru Paul Green (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/paulcgreen/>) has suggested for the past 40 years, "Past performance is the best predictor of future performance." So ask questions about what they have DONE, not what they WOULD DO in some future situation. Here are a few suggestions:

- What are three of the nicest things your former bosses have said about you?
- What kind of negative feedback have you received from former bosses and coworkers? (If they say they haven't received any negative feedback, you know that they're either lying or refuse to listen to feedback.)
- If we later decide to work together and I call your boss for a reference, what will he/she tell me is your greatest strength in working with other people? What will he/she tell me is your greatest area for improvement in working with other people?
- When I call your staff/coworkers and ask what they like about working with you, what will they say? How about when I ask them for any negatives in working with you? What will they say you could improve?
- Tell about four times that you've been under great stress. (Follow-ups to each: How did you handle that? Did your coworkers know? How were they able to help you through this difficulty?)
- Can you tell me about two failures you've had and what you did to correct things? (You're looking to see if they own up to any failures or if they blame others.)
- What kind of people do you think are most difficult to work with? What techniques do you use to work with these types?

- Who have been your mentors through the years? (Their answer tells you about their values, as well as communicates about their attitude toward learning from others.)

3. Listen to their language

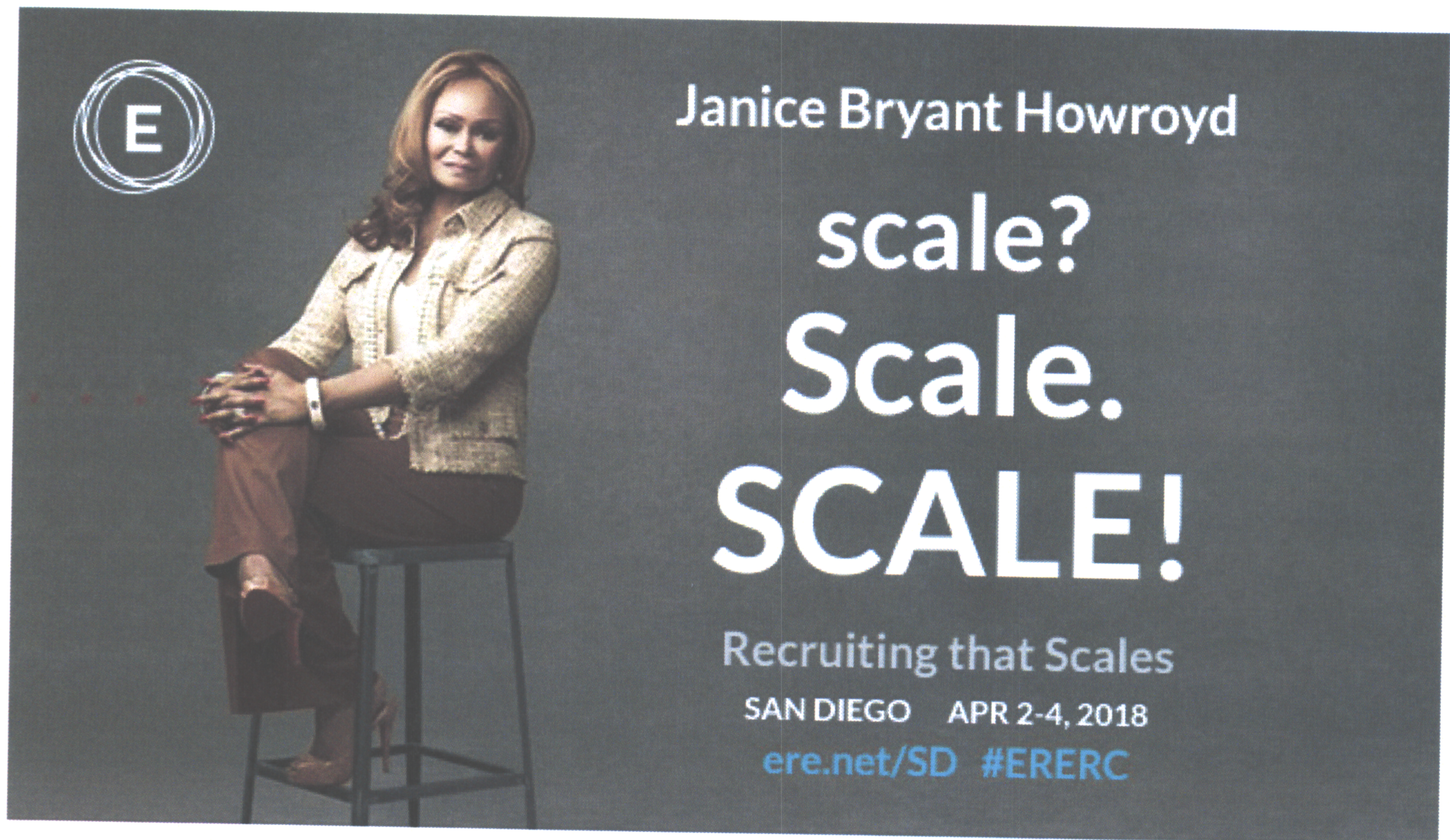
Do you hear sarcasm and cynicism in their comments? Are even their lighthearted comments thinly veiled barbs at someone else's expense? Do they seem like the kind of person who could laugh at themselves and their own foibles on occasion? If you're talking with a potential hire from within the organization, have you ever heard them tell a funny story on themselves? Do they ever give credit to anyone else or compliment anyone else during the interview process?

4. Relay the challenge to their references

From the very beginning of any interview, make it clear that you'll be checking with previous employers or you'll not be moving forward. That helps get answers that are closer to reality. After that statement, I've often had applicants offer "corrections" and "amplifications" on what their résumé actually says regarding job titles, job responsibilities, and accomplishments.

When you check their references, (<https://www.tlnt.com/5-ways-to-check-references-to-avoid-toxic-employees/>) ask about the person's track record for teamwork:

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- Would others at the office describe her as a team player or does she work better alone?
- Would the team members ever use the word “kind” to describe him?
- Was she well liked, aside from how she performed her job?
- Did he seem to have lots of friends at work?
- How would team members describe her communication style? Upbeat? Factual? Neutral? Negative or typically give the “downside”? Resentful? Straightforward? Direct? Blunt? Compassionate?

Notice that you’re asking the reference to tell you how they think OTHERS would answer the question. That phrasing frees them to give their own opinion anonymously as if speaking for the team. If you talk with several references, you should have a well-rounded picture of the candidate.

Better to spend a good deal of time to investigate and NOT hire, than to hire a productive but toxic performer too quickly and watch as he drives customers and coworkers out the door.

This was originally published on Dianna Booher’s Booher Research blog (<http://www.booherresearch.com/blog/>).

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