

THE RECRUITER'S BOOKSHELF

Superforecasting - The Art and Science of Prediction

by Philip E. Tetlock & Dan Gardner

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During the keynote of the 2022 NALSC Symposium in Washington, DC, *Entrepreneur* Magazine editor-in-chief Jason Feifer presented on the subject of change and, specifically, adapting to change and seeing it as opportunity. In his presentation, Feifer discussed the importance of processing and working with the circumstances that are coming next; in doing so, he referenced a company called Good Judgment, Inc. and the "Superforecasters" who are tasked with helping their clients see the future sooner.

Superforecasting - The Art and Science of Prediction is the story of identifying these Superforecasters and the commonly held traits and practices that make them so (many of which, in my opinion, can be readily applied to a recruiter's practice).

A case study

One of the key flashpoints cited in *Superforecasting* is the 2003 Iraq War and the forecasts pertaining to stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) allegedly hidden in Iraq by the Saddam Hussein regime that prompted the invasion. While reports generated throughout the US government expressed the existence of such stockpiles as a virtual certainty, the stockpiles never were discovered and ultimately were deemed not to have existed. The US Intelligence Community (IC), particularly, was put under a microscope over this as it never seriously explored the notion that it could be wrong on this issue (with no one of note even proposing a view closer to the one we now believe true).

While the IC's decisions ultimately were deemed sincere and reasonable given the circumstances at the time, it also was revealed that performance of its analysts was assessed predominantly on their adherence to process as set forth by the IC. Accuracy of their forecasts, on the other hand, never was systemically assessed; had they been leading up to 2003, perhaps the resulting forecasts (even if they viewed the existence of WMD stockpiles as more likely than not) may not have been so extreme as to justify the decision to go to war.

A solution

In the years following this debacle, the IC's leadership looked inward and took major steps to ensure that its many agencies operated more effectively. In doing so, the IC adopted more of an evidence-based approach, similar to that used in modern medicine, in assessing its forecasting practices.

By 2011, the IC began holding annual forecasting tournaments with the end goal to "dramatically enhance the accuracy, precision, and timeliness of intelligence forecasts for a broad range of event types, through the development of advanced techniques that elicit, weigh, and combine the judgments of many intelligence analysts." The tournament teams included various control groups consisting of geopolitical subject matter experts (some of whom had access to classified information) as well as talented amateurs. The Good Judgment Project ("GJP") team – of which Good Judgment, Inc. is a spin-off – consisted exclusively of such amateurs.

In the first year that GJP took part in these tournaments, its group of forecasters (who were selected from a broad range of applicants and trained in enhancing their foresight) emerged victorious over the other groups of participants (including those consisting of professional intelligence analysts with access to classified data). In the subsequent four years that GJP took part in these tournaments, their margin of victory only grew as GJP increasingly invested its efforts on its Superforecasters who emerged as the top 2% of its participants.

The lessons

In observing and testing these Superforecasters, Tetlock and Gardner found three common traits that set them apart: pattern recognition, active open-mindedness (basically, the ability to identify and set aside personal biases), and cognitive reflection (in other words, not being overconfident). While the rest of us may be deficient in any or all three of these traits presently, the good news is that the authors believe these habits of thought can be learned and cultivated by any intelligent, thoughtful, and determined person. Furthermore, just as these traits and the processes borne from them (as described below) proved helpful for the IC's forecasting purposes, they easily can be applied to a legal recruiting practice for similar effect.

The first step to making an accurate prediction is breaking down the seemingly intractable question you're trying to answer with several related questions that are easier to address. (This technique is commonly referred to as Fermi-style thinking, named after the Italian physicist Enrico Fermi). For instance, if a political scientist is asked to predict a presidential election between an incumbent and a challenger eight months out, an easier question to tackle first is how often incumbents are successful at being reelected. This is known as taking the outside view and enables the person addressing the initial question to both avoid cognitive biases and identify the underlying likelihood of an event occurring (also referred to as a "base rate").

Application to recruiting

In my own corporate associate-focused recruiting practice, the ultimate question I attempt to answer is a consistent one: How likely am I to place this corporate associate prospect for a standard recruiting fee within their desired timeline? To arrive at a base rate, there are two simpler questions I attempt to answer:

1. Has the prospect engaged another recruiter or already vetted the job market on their own; and
2. How often has this sort of prospect been laterally hired by fee-paying firms in the targeted geographic market.

The inquiry about other recruiting efforts often proves decisive for me, as an affirmative response has the potential to render an otherwise ideal prospect untouchable, especially in the near term. The trait of pattern recognition comes in handy for the second question as modern recruiting resources provide intel about the previous employment and educational prestige and performance of a law firm's recent hires, thus providing insight into the hiring standards of specific practices within law

firms as well as a particular legal community at large.

While there are other pertinent questions worth addressing (such as general economic conditions, the current number of applicable job listings, the prospect's timeline for making a move and my own capacity to represent the prospect in accordance with that timeline, etc.), they generally are less impactful than the aforementioned two and are useful more for adjustment purposes than providing an initial baseline.

Refining the analysis

One of the key takeaways from the review of intelligence failures pertaining to WMD stockpiles in Iraq related to the vague verbiage used (and culturally accepted) at the time by the IC to express probability. This ultimately led key decisionmakers to interpret these findings to fit a desired narrative. While analysts within the IC had been reluctant to provide numeric probabilities for fear of being held accountable if wrong, the IC since embarked on a culture shift and enacted new policies centered around more specific forecasting.

As recruiters go about their processes, it would serve them well to use numerical probabilities over vague verbiage for the sake of precisely assessing a prospect's likelihood for placement. This can help in tempering and communicating about a prospect's expectations for success in the marketplace.

Once recruiters approach their estimations for success in this manner, a more honest and accurate assessment of their performance can be conducted in hindsight. Much like meteorologists apply a percentage to the likelihood of rain and can look back to see if their "70% chance of rain" forecasts indeed came to fruition 7 out of 10 times, recruiters can look back at their numeric probabilities over time to see if their collective forecasts align closely with their actual placement rates. If there is a sizable discrepancy between the two numbers, it may indicate the recruiters'

perceptions are not aligning closely with reality. Fortunately, such analysis can help flesh out where a recruiter's approach might be flawed & help them rectify the issue.

In addressing such flawed perception, the authors cite the work of philosopher Isaiah Berlin in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* in highlighting that a "hedgehog's mentality" (where perceptions are filtered through a singular philosophy that is stubbornly adhered to) was inferior to a "fox's mentality" (where uncertainty is welcome and new ideas are considered) for the purposes of developing into a successful forecaster. We all exist along the spectrum between these two extremes and can endeavor towards identifying more as a fox if we so choose.

In conclusion, *Superforecasting* articulates that there is uncertainty everywhere that can be quantified, and we can quantify more than we thought and with more precision than we knew. By viewing their practices with this understanding, legal recruiters (as well as recruiters across all industries) can make wiser decisions and more accurate estimations leading to greater placement success.

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