

From the corner office NY Times 12/15/2012

[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/business/wolff-olins-chief-asks-applicants-whats-your-story.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/16/business/wolff-olins-chief-asks-applicants-whats-your-story.html?_r=0)

*Q. How do you hire? What qualities are you looking for?*

**A.** Let's assume the skills are there. The **most important thing is whether I want to hang out and talk with the person.** It's not a likability contest as much as it's about chemistry. The first thing I always ask is, "What's your story?" The way somebody answers that is a pretty good indication of what they're all about. If they're just talking about the job, I find that really unattractive. If I feel like they're being sincere and honest about what it is that they want to do with their life, even if it doesn't line up exactly with what we want in our position, I find that far more attractive.

When you ask people, "What's your story?" they can answer that a million ways, and where somebody goes with the answer is a pretty good indication of who they are. Again, it's such an obvious thing, but you want to hire someone who you feel like you want to spend time with.

*Q. What else is part of the hiring process?*

**A.** One of the things we've been doing more recently that's been helpful is **giving somebody an assignment**, and have them come back and present to a larger group. That way, you can see how they really think, as opposed to how well they interview. And they don't have to have the right answer for the assignment. It's not about the answer; **it's about how they approach the assignment.** Somebody can be smart enough to have the job, with the right skills, but they might not be charismatic enough, meaning teams and clients won't follow this person. It's hard to teach that. Do you want to listen to the person? Do you want to follow the person? This is pretty basic stuff.

*Q. Any people who were big influences on you?*

**A.** There's a woman named [Sara Little Turnbull](#) who's one of the first women industrial designers — just an incredible woman. She was a

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visiting professor when I went to the [Rhode Island School of Design](#). One of the things that she asked us to do was, “Write a day in your life five years from now: where you live, where you work, do you have kids, and just describe your day.” That had a profound effect on me.

In school, you always think of your career in terms of: “Do I want to be an architect? Do I want to be a graphic designer? Do I want to be a filmmaker?” But nobody helps you think through whether you could be an architect who’s designing hospitals, or residential architecture in California. She was probably the one voice during my school years who wasn’t saying what’s wrong with our work all the time, but **was saying what’s possible and what you can do**. I found that hugely empowering.