Finding the right combination of hard skills and intangibles — like grit and personality — are key to smart hiring, said retired baseball player Rob Bell. (Paul Buck/Getty Images)

When Rob Bell was a high school senior in Marlboro, New York, he got a visit from legendary Atlanta Braves baseball scout Paul Snyder. Bell was one of the top major league baseball prospects in the United States and he expected Snyder to talk up the Braves and how much Bell should be pitching in Atlanta someday.

Instead, Snyder pulled out a board with a pie chart. On it, 75% was coloured blue, 25% was red. Snyder explained that the 25% represented the measurable things about a young player — mostly easily calculated statistics.

“The 75%, that was the intangibles,” Bell recalled. “It’s intestinal fortitude. It measures how well you can bounce back from a bad day, or especially whether you can bounce back after many bad days.”

Bell was one of the rare ones to have that fortitude. Drafted by the Braves, Bell had a 14–year career, playing for four major–league teams including the Cincinnati Reds and the Texas Rangers. But most recruits lack the guts, Bell said, a key component of that all–important 75% of Snyder’s pie chart.

It’s like that in hiring, too. Managers responsible for bringing in new personnel can’t rely on a recruit’s resume and past history. Instead, it comes down to an often–difficult–to–gauge combination of motivation, skill set and personality.

For many companies nowadays, hiring is seen more as a science than an art, relying heavily on personality tests and day–in–the–life tryouts. But any manager who’s recruited regularly knows that, even with those tricks, hiring remains perhaps the business world’s biggest gamble. Successful hiring relies on both science and intangible qualities.

To avoid pitfalls, hiring managers should rely on three factors, said Jeff Keener, president of Black Bear Consultants, which assists companies with human resources needs.
The most important factor is passion. It’s not just that the candidate is excited about the job but she has shown demonstrable evidence of this passion. Perhaps the candidate revamped her previous role or restructured her department. How she describes those changes – passionately or workmanlike — is an indicator of whether the recruit will bring true excitement to her new role.

Qualifications come second, Keener said. Hiring managers ought to make a list of all the skill sets needed for the position and determine how many of them the candidate matches. This tally allows for a somewhat clinical way to compare two candidates and figure out which one ticks more boxes.

And finally comes whether the recruit’s motivation matches the company’s motivation. Maybe your company has cutbacks planned, and then you want someone who has experience cutting costs and increasing margins; a qualified candidate who hasn’t had experience downsizing or had difficulty with it before probably isn’t the right fit. During the interview, managers need to determine those three factors with questions that focus on behavioural interviewing. “You want questions that will get to the personality of the person,” Keener said from his office in Asheville, North Carolina. Ask the candidate about a time he was particularly stressed out. Or for sales jobs, inquire about a difficult customer and how the challenge was overcome. For managers, it’s best to ask about a difficult employee.

Because of employment rules in certain parts of Europe, such as the UK and Germany, these questions often have the feel of a standardized test, listed off lock–step by a hiring manager. Regardless of where you are, listen for the nuance and proof points in the responses. Answers to those questions aren’t necessarily wrong or right.

“It becomes an issue of culture,” Keener said. “You have to ask, ‘Will this person fit into the culture of this company?’”

Even with all of those steps, hiring is still something of a crap shoot, Keener said, so more companies have begun putting serious applicants through rigorous testing. Managers should expect tests on finance and math skills. Some companies may even put potential hires through lengthy psychological reviews meant to put them under emotional pressure.

Other companies have developed a series of steps to ensure they’re finding the right people. St. Louis–based financial services firm Edward Jones instituted a new system two years ago that puts recruits through a 16–step weed–out process before they can become one of the company’s 13,000 financial advisors.

John Rahal, principal overseeing financial advisor talent acquisition at Edward Jones, said the system is designed to be a “competency–based hiring process.” It begins with weeding out people simply based on their resume, progresses to phone and face–to–face interactions, and ends with putting them through challenges. Candidates will be sent out to the territory they would be assigned to if hired and expected to make new contacts. The “virtual day in the life assessment” lasts four–and–a–half hours and includes people pretending to be clients.

“When you’re talking about investing the general public’s money, it’s integral that we evaluate candidates well and protect our clients from hiring the wrong person,” Rahal said.

A lot is on the line for Edward Jones; one of North America’s fastest growing financial services firms, it plans to bring in 2,500 to 3,000 new hires each year.

“They say hiring is an art, not a science,” Rahal said. “As much as we can, we’re looking to boil it down to a science.”

And in a way they have made it a science, with quantifiable successes or failures along the 16 steps. But there’s still the human equation, namely how well the recruit does communicating with customers, which remains the most important step of any hiring process.

For Bell, he spent his baseball career thinking about that pie chart, using it to evaluate fellow players. He watched more talented ball players wash out because they couldn’t take the pressure of pro ball. Others fought their way to the majors, despite far fewer abilities.

Bell, now the senior vice president and general manager at the minor league baseball Hudson Valley Renegades, uses that same pie chart to evaluate recruits — on the field and off.

“There is always someone more talented out there,” Bell said. “The key is to find the person who has talent and has whatever it is that gives them the will to win.”