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**THE ART OF
INTERVIEWING:
MASTERING
THE CANDIDATE
SELECTION PROCESS**

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By Joyce Dunn, Vice President and Engagement Director

WE READ THEM ALL THE TIME—INTERVIEW HORROR STORIES. FROM THE OVERLY SCRIPTED CONVERSATION TO THE IMPROMPTU GROUP SESSION, THE EXAMPLES OF INTERVIEWS GONE WRONG ARE PLENTIFUL. IT OFTEN SEEMS AS IF INTERVIEWING HAS BECOME A LOST ART IN TODAY'S BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT.

According to a study from Michigan State University, today's business interviews are often ineffective, only increasing the likelihood of choosing the best candidate by less than two percent.¹ A lack of time spent preparing and the inability to provide adequate attention to the hiring process is resulting in poor decisions and increased turnover within organizations.

With 69 percent of hiring managers and HR professionals reporting bad hiring decisions—according to a Harris Interactive study—it is clear that something must be done.² Bad hires are a drain on your organization's time, resources and energy; the Harvard Business Review reports that nearly 80 percent of all employee turnover—which often comes with a hefty cost—is the result of poor hiring decisions.³

Not all interviews are created equal and not every interview type is effective for a particular role. Nevertheless, many best-practice techniques for interviewing can be applied across the board to create a successful and effective interview style for your organization.

DON'T OVERLOOK INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Preparation is key to interview success. Planning to “wing it” is an ineffective and damaging strategy that often results in

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¹ Validity and Utility of Alternate Predictors of Job Performance (1984). Michigan State University. https://www.uam.es/personal_pdi/psicologia/pei/diferencias/Hunter1984JobPerformance.pdf.

² Avoiding a Misfire with Your Next Hire (2013). The Rough Notes Company, Inc. http://www.roughnotes.com/rmagazine/2013/march/2013_03p010.htm.

³ Maximizing Your Return on People (2007). Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2007/03/maximizing-your-return-on-people/ar/1>.

unsuccessful hires and high employee turnover. Interviewing, as with most business activities, is a process. Taking short cuts in any part of the process will increase the risk of failure.

There is an abundance of important “prep” work that should be completed prior to any interview. However, many hiring managers and interviewers find themselves swamped with day-to-day responsibilities and deadlines and are unable to complete many of these necessary tasks. As a result, the interview often lacks a solid foundation.

Preparation can mean the difference between a poor experience and a thought-out, effective candidate review. At a minimum, find time to thoughtfully review resumes, gather your standard questions and jot down some notes on areas of interest or specific questions for each candidate. However, a more effective process is outlined below.

CLARIFY AND SOLIDIFY EXPECTATIONS

Having a clearly defined job description and a set of candidate requirements is important to ensuring the selected candidate is a fit with exactly what your organization is seeking. The hiring manager, together with human resources, should make sure to clearly define the scope of the role and create a detailed job description. If the opening is for an already existing position, the current job description should be reviewed to ensure that it is still accurate and does not need to be updated with additional functions or expectations.

Once the scope of role has been established, a list of experience and background requirements should be compiled for the position. Ideally, this list should include no more than five items. This list can range from qualifications such as “10 years of experience managing litigated claims files” to required educational achievements. In addition to providing a baseline for skills, these specifications will enable your organization to quickly determine which candidates possess the background and experience required for success, with much of this information found on candidate resumes. Since background and experience requirements serve as eliminators, strive to make them as broad as possible.

Many interviewers have a tendency to hone in on background and experience and overlook skills and abilities. While a candidate’s background is certainly important and provides a base level of knowledge, a candidate’s skills and abilities will often play a more significant part in determining whether they are a fit for

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the position. A separate list of necessary skills and characteristics required to be successful should also be developed. Knowledge can be acquired; not having the core skills and abilities needed to be effective is limiting and difficult to remedy.

Focus on compiling no more than five or six of the “most important skills/characteristics” essential for the position. Examples may include items such as “the ability to work within a collaborative team culture,” “effective management skills,” “the ability to communicate across all organizational levels,” or “analytical and problem-solving skills.” Highlighting fundamental characteristics will allow you to focus your search and target candidates that possess these key traits.

CRAFT MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

With your background requirements and key skills defined, you now have the foundation to prepare your interview template. As with all interviews, your goal is to assess a candidate based on the qualifications he or she brings and ascertain his or her fit for the open job role. Appraising more than 10 requirements within a single interview is challenging, so it is recommended that you focus solely on your five selected experience and education qualifications and the five essential skills you established earlier.

With these requirements in hand, the next step is to create two questions for each of the 10 qualifications. Focus on open-ended questions that are designed to solicit examples or descriptions. Popular choices include “how do you determine your priorities,” “describe how you solve difficult problems,” and “how well do you work under pressure.” These well-thought-out questions can be utilized for multiple candidates. In fact, standardizing your inquiries often provides better feedback for comparison than using different questions for each candidate.

Depending on the length of time allotted for the interview, you may need to reduce the number of questions down to one per qualification or limit the criteria you are interviewing against. If there is a team interview or a slate of interviewers, you may elect to have each individual cover only certain qualifications and questions.

Remember, interviews are not one-sided. Make sure to provide time for the candidates to ask their questions. Candidates’ questions provide insight into what is important to them and gives you an idea of how much time they spent preparing for the interview.

ACE THE INTERVIEW

First impressions are a significant part of interviewing. When meeting a candidate for the first time, it is important that you create a level of interest in the candidate as a person. Building rapport will help to break any tension and encourage more open and candid responses. Ask general questions or try to find a topic that may be of mutual interest. This small talk can go a long way in setting the stage and easing the candidate into the interview; just make sure to limit it to no more than three to five minutes.

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Pay attention to the candidate’s responses and formulate supplementary questions to garner additional information and insights. Make sure to ask follow-ups to gain a better understanding of how a candidate handled a certain situation or if the answers are too vague or lack consistency. You want a clear picture of what the interviewee is trying to communicate. Questions such as “what were the difficulties with that initiative” or “what would you do differently if you could do that over” are great options to gain a better understanding of how the candidate responds to various workplace situations and challenges.

Assessing culture fit is also an important part of selecting the right candidate. Unlike assessing background, skills and ability, culture fit requires more intuition. This is where candidates’ answers to questions on how they approach situations come into play. These responses provide insights into who the candidate is as both an individual and an employee, as well as shed light on workplace motivations. Trust your instincts as you connect with the candidate.

Implementing a productive and effective interview can be a challenge. However, with successful practices and a plan in place, your organization can more effectively separate the good from the great. Remember that interviewing is a process—from clearly defining the scope of the role and determining the necessary background, skills and abilities necessary for success to crafting thoughtful interview questions and following your instinct to ascertain a solid culture fit. There are no shortcuts to interview success. Only by incorporating a strategy of preparation and planning can your organization’s interviews consistently produce valuable hires. ▲

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