

## Finding the Right Fit

### *A Step-by-Step Guide to Effective Interviewing*

Employee turnover is one of the high costs of doing business for any organization. According to the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics information, employees who voluntarily terminate from their positions account for nearly half of all separations. One of the most effective ways to control your organization's turnover costs is to hire the right person for the right job in the first place.

Although we can never guarantee the perfect hire, there are ways to increase the chance that the candidate selected is the right person for the job. Once you're past the initial screening of the mountain of résumés, following are some components of the hiring process you should consider.

#### **The Interview Process**

Arguably the most critical part of the selection process is the job interview. Whether you have one interview, or a series of different types of interviews, this is the first opportunity you have to see the "live" version of the person who grabbed your attention with an outstanding résumé. Most organizations utilize a couple of interviews along the process to narrow the field of applicants down to one candidate.

If done effectively, the interview enables you to determine if the applicant's knowledge, skills, abilities, experience and personality will match with the job's requirements.

Before you set hiring managers free to interview their applicants, it is best practice to review the types of questions that can and cannot be asked as part of the process. Anyone who will have contact with the applicant should be familiar with guidelines to minimize the organization's risk of discrimination or bias in hiring claims.

Many organizations start by conducting an interview over the phone with several applicants. In some companies, these interviews are conducted by a member of the HR staff, and in others these interviews are conducted by the individual who will make the hiring decision. The phone interview serves as a way to further narrow down the candidate pool of those who will be invited in for an in-person interview. A phone screening interview should:

- Clarify any items that are not clear from his or her résumé.
- Determine the reason for any gaps in employment or frequent job changes.
- Provide an assessment of the candidate's basic communication skills.
- Candidly discuss salary requirements of the position.

The first round has been completed. The list of candidates is down to a manageable number and you are ready to invite several for an in-person interview. Now what?

#### **Should the interview be structured or unstructured?**

The choice of a structured or unstructured format for the interview itself can depend on several considerations, including the type of job, the organization's industry or culture, and the desired outcome of the interview.

The structured interview allows hiring managers to more easily pinpoint the requirements of the position. In a structured interview process, the hiring manager asks every applicant a specific set of questions. They

may choose to ask the questions in the same order, or switch them around from applicant to applicant. The process of asking the same set of questions to each applicant can give the hiring manager a basis of comparison among the candidates as well as minimize the risk of discrimination claims.

In an unstructured interview, the hiring manager does not adhere to a strict agenda and set of questions. Rather, they tend to focus on open-ended questions that can be tailored dependent on the specific applicant's skills and experience. This more fluid interview can seem more like a conversation, and allow the applicant the opportunity to share other valuable experience that might not have otherwise come up if the questions were set ahead of time. The absence of structure can make it much more difficult to compare applicants.

### **The face-to-face interview: different approaches**

In any interview, relying on "gut instincts" and only asking open-ended questions will likely not get every piece of information you need to make an effective hiring decision. Instead, consider the behavioral or competency-based approaches to interviewing. The behavior-based interview follows the premise that a person's past behavior can effectively predict their future behavior. The competency-based approach to an interview focuses solely on the job skills that are required for the position. Instead of asking the applicant how he or she *would* handle a hypothetical situation, you can find out how they handled a real-life scenario in a previous job.

The first key to behavioral and competency-based interviewing is to prepare ahead of time. Look at the position requisition and determine what qualities are essential to effectively perform the duties. For example, you might decide that an administrative assistant must have excellent oral and written communication skills, adaptability, and a positive attitude. Other job requisitions might require the ability to effectively set goals, sales ability, attention to detail, or problem solving.

Once you have determined the necessary skills for the job, you can create questions that are designed to show how the applicant measures against these criteria. For the administrative assistant, you might ask them to describe a time when they had difficulty communicating with a co-worker or client and then follow-up with a question asking them how they overcame the challenge.

### **Before the Interview**

The candidate pool has been narrowed down to a group that will be invited for an in-person interview. You have selected appropriate questions based on competencies related to the job. Now, it's time to prepare yourself and the physical interview environment for your candidates' arrival.

- Prepare your list of questions and plan which questions you may ask as a follow-up.
- Look over the job description and the candidate's résumé immediately before.
- Gather information regarding the company's benefits to provide to the candidates.
- If you will show the candidate the work area, discuss this ahead of time with the department manager. Arrange for one or two current employees to meet the candidate and summarize what they do for the company.
- If you do not have a designated room in your HR department, select a quiet and comfortable area in which to conduct the interviews. Make sure the temperature is comfortable and seating is adequate.

- Provide the candidate with information about where they should park and who they should ask for upon arrival. Let them know of any other material that they will need to bring to the interview and approximately how long the interview will take.

### **During the Interview**

When the candidate arrives, take a few moments to make him or her feel comfortable. Offer the candidate water or another beverage, and engage in a little small talk. Watch your nonverbal communication and be aware of how it portrays to the candidate.

Once you have begun with your questions, keep these tips in mind:

- Be mindful of listening to the candidate's full response. The saying goes that most people are not listening; they are just waiting for their chance to talk. Are you fully engaged?
- Keep up a happy face. While it's not necessary to plaster a smile on your face throughout the encounter, make sure you are not giving any negative reactions to the candidate's responses. Negative feedback can show a candidate what you don't want to hear, and they may adjust their answers accordingly, omitting important information.
- Take notes. Remember, interview notes are subject to record retention requirements. Be sure you are not writing anything other than relevant information. Be especially mindful to avoid writing anything that could be construed as discriminatory, such as notes about physical characteristics.

Many candidates spend time before the interview researching your company in preparation. It is also common for candidates to prepare their answers to your questions by searching websites and books with sample questions and recommended answers. Of course, these answers will not give you a realistic portrayal of their abilities. If the answer to your question seems rehearsed, try sitting quietly for a few moments after they stop talking. Try asking a vague follow-up question, like: "Can you tell me more about that?" Or, ask a few specific questions based on their answer.

When you have made it down the list of your questions, show the candidate the job description. Take the candidates to the work area and introduce them to a few of the employees and the department manager. The objective is to give them a somewhat realistic preview of the job to assist in their decision making as well.

### **Ending the Interview**

Take a few moments to wrap up the interview by asking the candidate if he or she has any questions for you regarding the job or anything you have discussed. Give them an opportunity to highlight any information about their qualifications that may have been unclear or not discussed during the interview. Provide the information you prepared about the company and benefits. Ask the candidate if he or she is still interested in the position.

Inform the candidates of the next steps in the process. Let him or her know when to expect further contact from you. If you expect to conduct second or third interviews, let the candidate know if those will be with you, or with a panel of other managers. Finally, thank the candidates for their time.

## Emotional Intelligence

There has been a great deal of buzz surrounding emotional intelligence and its role in the hiring decision. Emotional intelligence (EI) is a concept that dates back to Darwin, but became well known with writer Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* in 1995. EI measures a person's self-awareness, their understanding of social awareness, and their ability to manage themselves and their relationships.

Studies have shown that people who score higher on EI tests are better performers. EI can predict sales performance and supervisory ratings of job performance. People who score high on EI measurements may be the ideal type of person you want in your organization. Here's a word of caution: keep EI results as part of a bigger picture in the hiring decision. High emotional intelligence is not critical for every position.

- How does EI relate to the job? You aren't choosing a new friend; you're hiring someone to perform a set of tasks. A highly emotionally intelligent person may not be best suited to work in a back office.
- The dark side of EI: some people may use their EI to satisfy their personal objectives – at the expense of others and their organization. Use assessment tools that can help identify individuals who value caring and being helpful.
- Beware of cultural differences. Cultures have varying standards as to effectively handling emotions. Some EI measurements may fail to account for differences in cultural norms.

Weigh EI results against the other criteria for the position, and keep those results in perspective.

The interview process is lengthy and labor intensive. With effective interviewing techniques, you can reduce voluntary turnover and ensure a long-lasting working relationship.

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