

January / February 2008

What's new in interviewing?

THE ANSWER, IT SEEMS, IS EVERYTHING – AS EMPLOYERS VIE FOR TOP TALENT IN A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE MARKETPLACE

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, job interviews were remarkably alike. After completing a preliminary “phone screen,” candidates were asked to spend a day on-site, interviewing a series of people somehow connected with the job. The show-and-tell typically began with an HR professional, proceeded through various line and staff managers, and culminated with Mr. or Ms. Big (the highest-level person to be involved in the hiring decision). Shrewd candidates viewed the day as actors view rehearsals for a play – each interview providing a new opportunity to sharpen one’s lines, smooth their delivery and grow into the role.

Variations, of course, occurred. Sometimes the first day of interviews led to second and third days as well. Sometimes interviewers worked in pairs – one to ask questions and the other to observe. Sometimes higher-level candidates were put through stress interviews involving a group of people impersonating the Board of Directors or Management Committee.

In recent years, however, growing problems with traditional methods have caused many employers to re-think the interviewing process from A to Z. The outcome: New solutions are addressing a range of needs that vary from workplace to workplace, and from job to job.

Defining Problems Leads to Better Solutions

IF YOUR INTERVIEWING PROCESS works, for heaven’s sake don’t fix it. But perhaps it doesn’t work as well as you might like. Warning signs include the following:

- Good candidates are accepting other jobs, often before you can extend an offer.
- Too many good hires resign months later.
- The new hire wasn’t as good as she seemed to be in the interviews.
- The current interview process works well for senior-level jobs, but less well deeper in the organization.
- You’re not getting the right people for your culture.
- The interview panel loved him, but fellow workers don’t.

None of those laments are hypothetical. All can be costly in terms of wasted effort. Organizations that experience them can shrug their corporate shoulders or admit the interview process isn’t working – and, in that case, fix it.

Time: Public Enemy Number One

ONE OF THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES to effective hiring is the ever-increasing pressure that time places on all of us. It’s difficult to find a day when all the members of an interview panel will be in town, so what once was “the” interview is now only a “first” interview, with more to follow. If three or more candidates are to be interviewed for a position, the problem increases geometrically. Days turn into weeks, and weeks into months. Then there are the complications of reaching a decision, formulating an offer and securing all necessary corporate approvals. Meanwhile, the preferred candidate’s interest has peaked, and he or she has accepted another job. For hot kinds of positions in hot employment markets, time certainly does kill deals.

Meet “speed interviewing” – an increasingly popular way to acquire top performers before they land elsewhere. Like the job fair of old or speed-dating and networking events of current vintage, speed interviewing allows a coterie of corporate interviewers to see a large number of candidates in a concentrated period of time – ranging from one to several days. It works especially well for entry and mid-level positions – for example, in sales or information technology – where the organization may be interested in hiring as many qualified candidates as possible.

As in more traditional interviews, candidates can be screened in advance for education, work history, technical skills, sales aptitude, etc. The goal for those involved in the speed interviewing process is to evaluate a large number of candidates back-to-back, permitting comparisons to be made before memory fades – and offers to be extended before candidates’ enthusiasm pales.

Fair warning: Speed interviewing is not a panacea for “bet the ranch” positions, where more subtle and extended inquiry is required. Also, employer participants must be willing to commit to a concentrated period when they will be available from dawn to dusk – no ifs or buts about it.

The Chameleon Candidate: Public Enemy Number Two

AS NOTED EARLIER, practiced interviewees are like actors in a play – getting better and better with each performance. With their well-rehearsed responses and growing poise, they impress the interview panel and, at the end of the day, absolutely dazzle the boss. Having been asked the same questions over and over, they have honed and polished each response. Only after they have been hired do they show their true colors, which might not be the ones you were looking for.

A good alternative, especially in team-oriented environments, is to have the candidate spend eight or ten hours with the team that he or she may join. As the president of a San Antonio high-tech firm told the Associated Press, he has yet to meet a human being “with the stamina to mislead us all day.” Candidates participate in team decisions and argue for their point of view. By day’s end, it is pretty obvious whether the person turned team members on or off.

Teams, of course, will gravitate toward people they like – but that’s a hazard of virtually all forms of interviewing. Similarly, while a *Harvard Business Review* article, “Fool vs. Jerk: Whom Would You Hire?” answers its own question – the choices need not be that sharply drawn. There are plenty of candidates who are neither fools nor jerks.

The Job That’s Not as Advertised: Public Enemy Number Three

INTerviewers ALWAYS LIKE to put an open position in the best possible light – sometimes stretching its responsibilities, importance and potential for advancement. When it proves not to be as described, the frustrated new employee may well decide to quit.

Some jobs, in fact, may have downright unpleasant aspects to them. Consider cruise lines, whose positions do enable their occupants to see exotic parts of the world – but often over and over again on the same weekly route. And which do enable many employees to work in glamorous surroundings – but upwards of 14 hours a day, untouched by U.S. or other countries’ labor regulations. And which mostly appeal to young, unmarried and often foreign workers who want to practice English or escape their economic status at home. Needing to rely on stewards, maids, cooks and servers who literally will not jump ship at first opportunity, cruise lines cannot afford to whitewash such positions.

Your workplace may not be as grueling as a cruise ship, but be honest about how opportunities are presented. If hours are long and new proposals are rigorously debated, make sure the job candidate understands that he or she will be working in a demanding, challenging environment.

Goodyear CEO Robert Keegan, commenting recently on plans for a new headquarters complex in Akron, said that his company needs to work in the 21st century, not the early 20th. The same imperative applies to the interviewing process as well.

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