



Interviewing the Candidate: More Than A Feeling

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Recently, I wrote an article on selling the candidate. From the first interaction to the final offer, I addressed the steps that a company needs to take to get the ideal candidate to join the team. Among those selling steps was the interviewing process, which deserves a closer look. In *Interviewing the Candidate*, we will address how you can get clear on your objective, plan the interview, listen to the candidate, and evaluate the interview to make the optimal hiring decisions, as well as discuss what certain interview questions can reveal about a candidate.

More Than A Feeling

It may be hard to believe, but many hiring decisions are made based on how the hiring party happened to "feel" about a candidate. Given this, the U.S. Labor Department's report that 50% of newly hired employees last less than 6 months on the job shouldn't be terribly surprising. Certainly, gut feelings have their place and shouldn't be completely discounted; however, they should not be the primary deciding factor in a hiring decision.

If you know what you're doing, interviewing can be the most useful tool in the entire hiring process. Each interview should be approached with a genuine sense of purpose rather than as just a "getting to know each other" conversation. Rather, effective interviewing requires an organized and systematic approach.

Getting Clear On Your Objective

Before reviewing a resume, before speaking to a candidate, you need to get clear on your hiring objective. Pour yourself a hot cup of coffee, clear your head, close your door, ignore your email, grab a note pad and pencil (yes, they still exist) and jot down the following:

- What *exactly* are we hiring for?
- What *specifically* do we need?
- What characteristics will have the most bearing on the candidate's ability to handle the job effectively?
- What specific tasks need to be performed?
- What values and personality characteristics will work best in our organization?

When you are swamped with work, it's easy to lose focus on exactly what you need to optimize your operation. Taking a moment to ask yourself these questions will help you get clear on your hiring objective.

Planning The Interview

After you've clarified your hiring objective, you can now review each resume and prepare for each interview with a greater sense of purpose. You will save both yourself and the candidate's time if you know what you are looking for.



Eliciting information. As you plan for the interview, consciously consider what judgments you are making based on the candidate's resume. Again, an interview is about eliciting information, not affirming judgments. What aspects of the candidate's background do you want to address? What qualities seem to jump out at you? Keep in mind that these qualities are your assumptions based on the resume. Think about what questions you can ask to independently confirm these qualities.

Easing tension and clarifying purpose. Interviews are stressful, so start the interview by helping the candidate to relax. A welcoming approach and brief small talk will help establish rapport and ease tension. You will elicit information from a candidate more effectively if you make him feel comfortable. Outline for the candidate what the interview is meant to accomplish. However, do not describe the job in detail. State why the candidate is interviewing and what kind of information you want from the candidate. For example, "We are interviewing for an Executive Producer. And what we want to learn today is how you believe your experience and personal strengths will make you effective in this position."

Staying organized, professional, and natural. At this point, let's take a step back and discuss the importance of staying natural. Yes, effective interviewing requires an organized and systematic approach. However, you are not an automaton and you should not act like one. If you have planned for an interview, it should flow very naturally because you know what you want. Remember to be yourself when stating the purpose of the interview and when asking the questions. This is not Mrs. Brooks' second grade class and you're not reciting the Declaration of Independence or reading an essay on how you spent your summer vacation. For example, in a recent interview for an animator position, the interviewer, in an uninspired and monotonous tone, read a list of stereotypical questions. At the end of the interview, he asked the animator to send in some samples. Later, when this animator spoke with his recruiter, he said he felt it was pretty clear the guy interviewing him was not interested. The candidate felt like it would just be a waste of his time to send in any samples. The recruiter had received this same feedback about this particular interviewer from other candidates. The fact was, despite the uninspired questioning, the company was very interested in this animator. In short, be organized, professional, and natural.

Avoiding position details early on. Next, be aware that it is a tactical mistake to reveal details about the position early in the interview because a shrewd candidate will interview in a way that is calculated to give the impression that they match your criteria for the job. Moreover, the more you talk, the less time you have to elicit information from the candidate.

Listening To The Candidate

You must let the candidate do the talking. Everything you say should be designed to get the candidate to talk. Experienced job seekers will get you to do the talking so they can assess how to answer your questions, or shift the focus of the conversation toward their strengths. Do not let the candidate control the interview. Rather, jot down their questions and tell them that you will answer them at the end of the interview. Stay focused on your objective - that is, to elicit information from the candidate.

You will probably interview several candidates for one position. Odds are that you'll forget the details of each interview, and at evaluation time you're just left with a "gut" feeling.

Evaluating The Interview

At the end of the interview, write a brief evaluation of the candidate. In particular, note what struck you as the candidate's strengths and weaknesses relative to the requirements of the position. Did



you get sufficient coverage in terms of the candidate's technical skills? What about the candidate's work ethic and values? And what did you think about the candidate's personality?

Next, turn the pencil on your performance during the interview. Did you obtain the information you needed? Did you listen enough? Did you stay in control? How might you adjust your technique for the next interview? This exercise will improve your interviewing skills exponentially. And as your interviewing skills improve, most likely your hires will improve.

Getting The Good Stuff - Suggested Interview Questions To Elicit The Information You Need

The following are merely suggested questions to elicit certain information. As will be discussed, below, it's also important to tailor questions that reflect the personality of your specific company.

What is your supervisor's function? This question gets to the heart of what the candidate's current job actually entails.

Describe your typical workday. This question gives you an idea of how the candidate's duties relate to the job for which you're hiring.

Tell me about the people you hired in your last job. (How many did you hire? How long did they stay? How did they work out?) This series of questions gives you idea of the candidate's ability to assemble and keep a strong staff.

Describe what it takes for a person to be a successful as a [fill in position title here]. This question is an indirect way of having a candidate reveal his own strengths and weaknesses.

What strengths did you bring to your last job that made you effective? This question is another indirect way of revealing strengths or weaknesses.

How do you go about making important decisions? This question gives a sense of how the candidate is likely to operate on the job.

What are some things your company might have done to be more successful? This question lets you know if the candidate gets the "big picture". If he can't answer, this may show a lack of depth. This particular question can also elicit negative feelings the candidate may have for his current employer, which could be indicative of personality problems.

Why are you interested in this job? This question separates the candidate who just wants any job from the candidate whose career ambitions are consistent with the job opportunity.

Why have you decided to leave your present job? This question can reveal what motivates a candidate: career growth, money, personal challenge, etc,

What are your most significant professional accomplishments? This question substantiates strength.

What have been your biggest professional failures? This question can reflect self-knowledge, and how comfortable a candidate is in revealing weaknesses.



What risks did you take in your last job, and what was the result? This question separates the average applicants from the superstars. Studies show that highly successful people take calculated risks. This question also gives insight into a candidate's judgment.

When you have trouble solving a problem, what are you likely to do? This question indicates how dependent or independent the candidate is likely to be.

Describe the best boss you ever had. This question indicates what kind of supervision the candidate likes.

What differentiates you from other applicants? This question indicates how well the candidate understands the position.

Finally, as discussed earlier, it's important to stay natural during an interview. Review these questions before you meet with a candidate so you're not reading directly from a sheet like the unfortunate animator interviewer. Also, ask your own questions. This is in no way intended as a complete list. In fact, questions that indicate a little personalized thought can make a big impact on a candidate. One of my favorite interviewing stories illustrates this piece of interviewing advice particularly well: An exceptional animator recently interviewed with a new game company. Before the interview, he was unsure as to whether he wanted to make the switch. After the interview he called his recruiter and told her that he had been particularly impressed with the questions that had been asked. Rather than asking those same, tired, overly general questions like "where do you see yourself in ten years," his interviewers had asked him the following questions:

- **What kinds of animation do you like?**
- **What kinds of games do you see yourself playing in five years?**
- **What kinds of animation do you like to do?**

This series of questions gave the animator the chance to really talk about the games he liked to make versus the games he liked to play and where he thought games would be in the next decade. Not only was the animator impressed with the company's thoughtful questioning, the company succeeded in eliciting even more information from the candidate. With carefully considered interviewing, both the candidate and the company can come away with more than a feeling.