

Effective Interviewing

Making the most of your company's evaluation process

It doesn't take a specialist to conduct a successful interview, but, like most things, it does take useful guidelines and some practice. We believe this information will help you evaluate the candidates we send to you and to select one that will become a long-term, highly productive employee.



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1. Know who you are.

Before you try to judge the compatibility of a candidate, you should articulate who you are as a company and what is required by the position you want to fill. This is an important task, yet many companies don't take the time to define their values and expectations. If you don't have a clearly articulated corporate culture, your recruiter can help you develop a profile that best describes the character of your organization. This profile will play an important part in your interviews. Once you've articulated the values that are important to your company, you can fashion interview questions that will uncover the qualities and characteristics that are consistent with those values.

2. Know what you're looking for.

It is also important to define the position and the role the candidate is expected to play in your company and to be aware of whether and how the job requirements vary from your company's overall value system. For example, a company that thrives on an aggressive style may be looking for a manager who is expected to mediate conflict; this role will require conciliatory skills and a more soothing style than might be expected of other people in the company. Your recruiter can assist you in developing an accurate, detailed job description and an appropriate compensation package.

3. Prepare for the interview.

The biggest weakness in most interviews is the lack of clear interviewing goals. As the interviewer, what is your assignment? Is it solely to judge the professional qualifications of the candidate? Is it to find out whether or not you'll get along with this person or whether or not the people in your department will like him? Clearly define the purpose of the interview ahead of time. Know exactly where you want the interview to go, then gently lead the candidate there. Before going into any interview familiarize yourself with the candidate's background and prepare an outline or a list of questions. Without doing both of these things, your interview can easily turn into an aimless, unproductive conversation.

4. Keep interviews consistent.

When you're interviewing a number of people for the same position, you should create a level playing field for the candidates and a standard for comparison for your final hiring decision. Ask the same kinds of questions and cover the same ground with each person. That way, when it's time to sit down and evaluate your field of candidates, you'll be comparing apples to apples. Don't write a script and recite it word-for-word in each interview, because it's important to allow for exploratory follow-up questions. Make a checklist that includes all the areas you want to cover with each candidate, review it before you go into the interview, then refer to it during your meeting, if necessary.

5. Put the candidate at ease.

You get the best results when you break through the persona a candidate feels he/she has to project in an interview. Many candidates are nervous, many are trying to meet what they assume are your expectations, and all are trying to be in top form. To get as real a portrait of the candidate as you can, make him feel comfortable. Open the interview by trying to find some common ground -- a shared alma mater, a city you've both lived in or visited, a mutual home state, or professional affiliations. Use this as an icebreaker, but don't let the interview veer off into tales of your old fraternity. Try to create a connection, then lead the discussion to the issues at hand. Simply being friendly is an effective technique for making the candidate feel at ease. Being confrontational may show you how he responds in confrontational situations, but it won't get you much farther than that. An interview shouldn't be designed to test a candidate's mettle.



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6. Show respect for the candidate.

An interview is a mutual evaluation; the impression you give the candidate will affect his opinion of the company as a whole and play an important role in his decision should you decide to make him an offer. So, show respect for the candidate by giving him your full attention. Don't keep him waiting, and don't take phone calls or allow interruptions during the interview. Treat him as a fellow professional.

7. Listen closely and make mental notes.

You can jot down some notes during an interview to help you remember important information, but keep note taking to a minimum. It is difficult to listen and write at the same time, and you want to absorb and respond to what the candidate is saying. Also, by looking at the candidate rather than at your notepad, you give the impression that you're really listening. As soon as the interview is over, make detailed notes about your impressions and the candidate's responses. Your checklist will help you recall and organize the information. Don't trust your memory: after three or four interviews, it could be impossible to remember distinguishing information about individual candidates without accurate notes.

8. Beware the first impression.

One of the most common - and most unreliable - factors in hiring decisions is the first impression. Choosing people on the basis of how much they look like us, how attractive they are, or how they strike us during the first few minutes or seconds of a conversation is not a good method of selection. (If you were meeting with a potential client, would you let a poor first impression disqualify him as a potential long-term customer?) Just because you click with a candidate personally or find you have a lot in common, that's not an indication of his suitability for the job. Although there's no way to avoid your personal feelings in response to an individual, there is a way to deal with them: When you meet a candidate, quickly and privately acknowledge your initial reaction, then set it aside and get on with the interview.

9. Be clear and give accurate information.

Remember that an interview is a two-way, information-gathering event. It's a meeting where both parties expect to learn something. Articulate your expectations clearly, and represent your company and the position as accurately as you can without revealing confidential or sensitive information. Leave room for questions, and be honest in answering them. Be upbeat and positive, even when giving what might seem like a tough answer. Don't use the interview to vent your own dissatisfactions or discuss personal conflicts.

10. Start with the resume, then move on.

The early part of the interview should be geared toward determining the candidate's professional qualifications, but you shouldn't waste a lot of time having him reiterate facts he's/she's already listed on paper. Use the resume as a guide to verify and qualify his experience. Here are a couple of good questions to use early in the interview:

Please give me a brief overview of your job history beginning with your first noteworthy employment.

Which technical aspects of this industry are you best equipped to handle?

11. Ask open-ended questions.

With the characteristics you're looking for in mind, use open-ended questions to identify the traits of the candidate. "How" and "why" questions reveal a lot about the candidate's experience, thought processes, and motivation. Open-ended questions can also be extremely useful in determining how well a candidate matches your company's value system. Be sure to avoid unfocused questions that allow for broad, abstract answers. Here are some examples of good, probing questions:

How do you handle conflict

How do you handle an angry client?

What do you do in your spare time?

What have you done to reduce costs or generate sales in past jobs?

What achievement in the area of _____ are you proudest of?

What kind of relationship do you want to have with your co-workers?

You're working under a manager who has great ideas, but is very poor with detail planning. How could you best work with this type of person?

What kind of boss do you work most effectively with?

If you had only three adjectives to describe yourself, which would you choose?

12. Be prepared to sell your company.

If, after asking your key-qualifying question, you determine that the applicant is a viable candidate, you should be ready to start selling the position and your company. Typically, the person you are interviewing already has a satisfactory job; it is up to you and your company to make working for you more attractive. When you reach this point in an interview, try saying something like this: One of your first projects here will be to... Or, You will be working in our most promising new product area. Your enthusiasm at this time will create excitement and encourage positive feelings that will be important if you decide to make an offer. Really good people are hard to find. Make sure good candidates leave the interview with the feeling that you and your company are truly interested in them as potential employees.

QUICK-REVIEW CHECKLIST

Here is a checklist that reviews some of the points discussed in this brochure. You can use it to prepare for an interview or as a starting point for creating your own interview checklist. By following these guidelines, you can improve your interviewing techniques, evaluate candidates more effectively, and make better hiring decisions.

Before the interview

- Decide on the specific skills and qualities required by the position.
- Define your company's value system.
- Define the goals of the interview.
- Prepare an outline or a list of questions for the interview.
- Review the candidate's resume and credentials.

During the interview

- Don't rely on first impressions.
- Be flexible, but use your outline to make sure you cover every point.
- Make the candidate feel comfortable; be friendly but be professional.
- Verify the information on the resume.
- Communicate clearly and accurately. Keep questions and answers specific.
- Use open-ended questions to explore the candidate's character traits and thought processes
- Be consistent; ask candidates for the same position the same kinds of questions.

After the interview

- Make detailed notes as soon as the interview is over.



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