

## > How to Conduct a Great Interview

*Interviews are the foundation of the hiring process, yet many managers don't do them well. The result is an epidemic of bad hires.*

Why have so many managers failed to master this fundamental skill? It's simple: they're never taught how to do it. Most companies don't realize their employees need help. On the surface, interviewing looks like a simple skill that doesn't require training. In truth, interviewing is complex, and the consequences of doing it poorly are expensive.

When a hiring manager can't conduct a good interview he makes decisions in the dark. He'll get lucky and recruit some good people, but he'll also hire many bad ones. The impact on business results, not to mention the manager's career, can be devastating.

After seventeen years in the executive search business, I've developed an interviewing method that works. It is highly structured, but also leaves room for intuition. This White Paper outlines my approach.

### **Learning the Candidate's Story**

Human beings understand one another through stories. Whether you're conscious of it or not, during an interview you're building a story about the candidate and the trajectory of her career.

Before meeting, you've seen the candidate's version of her story — it's set out in her resume. Naturally, her version puts her skills, experience and accomplishments in the best possible light. The objective of the interview is to get past the candidate's self-serving telling of her career. If you do a good job, the story you learn in the interview will be far more complete and objective.

You'll get answers to critically important questions. What did she accomplish, and why did it matter for her employer? What mistakes did she make along the way? What drove the major decisions in her work life? Why was she drawn to the companies where she worked and the jobs she held? Why did she change jobs? Answers to these questions and others will get you closer to an objective evaluation of her career.

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## The cost of a bad hire can be devastating.

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### **Essential Preparation**

Some interviews are doomed to failure before they even start. Why? Because the hiring manager doesn't know what he's seeking.

The foundation of a good interview is a clear definition of the job and the ideal candidate. Without it there is no yardstick against which to measure candidates. How else can you determine who is a good match and who isn't?

The need for a specification is self-evident, and almost all companies commit one to writing. However, producing a specification document isn't enough — it must also be good. Problems arise when the specification is not well thought out, or when key players disagree. Either scenario can cause a search to drag on for months, or to end in failure to hire anyone at all.

Here is an extreme example to illustrate the point. A candidate met with a company that wanted to hire a new CFO. In the course of the meeting he learned the CEO had interviewed more than fifty people for the position. That number is so ridiculously high it qualifies as recruiting malpractice. What on earth was going on?

I suspect there were two problems. First, the CEO did not have a clear picture of the ideal candidate. Second, there were hints that board members didn't agree on the type of person they should hire. The result was a recruiting disaster that consumed many hours of the CEO's and the board's time, and left the company without the CFO it needed.

Don't make those mistakes. When drafting a specification, identify who will be involved in the hire, include them in review of the document, and iron out disagreements before you start talking to candidates. If you don't agree before you start a search, you'll never find a candidate who pleases everyone. You'll also have an ambiguous specification that makes it impossible to conduct an effective interview.

## The Interview

My approach to interviewing is simple — I lead the candidate through a highly structured discussion of every job in her career. This method takes considerably more time than less rigorous approaches. The results are worth it, and the effort is modest in comparison to the time and cost required to undo a poor hire.

I divide the interview into two sections, the candidate's questions and mine. These sections are not equal. My questions take 80% of the interview, and the candidate's take about 20%. Keep your eye on the clock.

Set the stage by making the candidate as comfortable as possible. Don't make the interview feel like an interrogation. A candidate who's uncomfortable will be on the defensive, and her measured answers to your questions won't be very revealing. If you put her at ease she will be more forthcoming, and you'll learn more from the discussion.

## Candidate Questions

In my opinion there is no better sign of a good candidate than insightful questions. I ask the candidate to pose his questions first, for three reasons.

First, answering questions provides another chance to sell the job and the company. If you are a human resources executive or an outside recruiter make sure you've done your homework. You should aspire to sell the company and the job as well as the hiring manager. If you cannot you'll miss a golden opportunity and risk making yourself look stupid.

Second, I want to deal with objections before they color the rest of our discussion. Often the candidate has one or more nagging doubts, and putting them to rest early

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# Don't make the interview feel like an interrogation.

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makes the rest of the conversation far more positive.

Third, and most important, are the insights questions provide into the candidate. A candidate's questions show what she cares about, how smart she is, and how interested she is in the job. That's valuable information I can use later, when I pose my questions.

It will immediately become clear if a candidate has done his homework. In all likelihood there is a wealth of information on the web about your company, and serious candidates will have studied it prior to the interview. If not, it may indicate the candidate isn't that interested. Probe further to find out.

Questions also give insight into the candidate's values and working style. For example, a candidate for a position at a startup once asked me, "What kind of administrative support does this position have?" The question demonstrated he didn't understand the resource constraints of startups. My answer was, "None. Everyone from the CEO down does his or her own administrative work. If you don't like the sound of that, this might not be the right fit."

## Interviewer Questions

After the candidate's questions, it's my turn. My approach to questioning is chronological. Since I care more about the candidate's recent experience — roughly the last ten years — I usually start with the current job and work backwards. That way I can dig deep into recent history and compress the discussion of older jobs if time runs short.

Cover the following topics for each job:

- *Basics.* Many candidates don't list months of employment, only years. Usually they do so to mask a gap in employment. Ask for these details if they haven't been provided.
- *What's the business?* I ask the candidate to describe the business she works for (or worked for). If I'm not familiar with the company, it provides essential context. If I know the company, I almost always learn something new about its current situation.
- *Why did you join the company?* I want to understand why the candidate thought joining each employer was a good career move. It usually provides insight into her goals, values and business savvy. When the candidate is fudging, usually it's easy to tell because the answer doesn't quite add up.
- *Organization.* I ask the candidate to verbally sketch the company organization and how he fits into it. To what position do you report? What reports to you? What positions are peers? This gives me a clear picture of his responsibilities and how they relate to the rest of the company.

- *Situation.* What was the situation when you came on board? Was the company or your group in good shape, or were there problems? What were the top short and long term objectives?
- *Team.* Was the team sound? Did you make changes? Why? What was the outcome?
- *What were your accomplishments?* Why did they matter to the business?
- *Performance.* How'd the business perform versus plan? Versus the past? What impact — good or bad — did you have?
- *Why did you leave?* Make sure the explanation adds up. Euphemisms like "it was mutual" almost always mean the candidate was fired. Dig deeper and find out what happened.

Remember, the interview should feel like a conversation, not an interrogation. The questions aren't a script, and at many points you will interject, ask for further explanation, ask follow on questions and so on. If you're doing a good job, you will learn new information that suggests new lines of questioning.

## Listening

Listen carefully to what the candidate is telling you. More often than not, items of great importance will be communicated in subtle ways. Much of the critical communication will be nonverbal. If the candidate seems uncomfortable, or if you get a vague or incomplete answer, probe further.

Be aware of your own biases, because they can prevent you from picking up on important information. This is a particular risk if you're talking with a candidate you like. If you make up your mind too early it's easy to miss red flags. Don't give anyone a free pass.

## Interrupting

An interview is not polite conversation. By definition, it's imbalanced — you're asking questions, and the candidate is answering them.

Ask questions, and then stop talking and listen. Interject when you want more detail. Don't allow yourself to behave like Charlie Rose, the television journalist who has become famous for talking more than his guests. You won't learn anything if you're doing all the talking.

What if the candidate is rambling? Should you interrupt to get her back on track? I tend to give the candidate free rein because I want to see what happens. If she can't stay focused on answering the question, or if she talks endlessly, that's all I need to know. Perhaps the candidate lacks poise, doesn't listen, or is a poor communicator. All are fatal flaws.

### ***Don't Shy Away From Tough Questions***

Many interviewers are uncomfortable asking tough questions because they don't want to be impolite. After all, in normal social conversation we wouldn't ask, "Why did you get fired?" or "Why is your business performing so poorly?"

Get over it. As the interviewer, you have a job to do, and it includes asking difficult and challenging questions. Further, the candidate expects you to ask them. Not doing so reflects poorly on you, and the candidate will wonder why you don't have your act together.

### ***Listen to Your Colleagues***

You've probably had others in the organization interview the candidate (and if you haven't, you should). Listen to them and take their feedback seriously. No matter how good you are as an interviewer, you will miss things. Your colleagues will add valuable perspectives that will help you make better decisions.

## Judging "Fit"

Figuring out if a candidate has the required experience is straightforward. But there's an equally important piece of the puzzle, and that's the candidate's compatibility with your company culture.

How can you tell if the candidate can work effectively with others in the organization? That's what is often called by the vague term *fit*. It can be difficult to determine *fit* because it requires us to assess personality traits that can't be directly measured.

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## Judging *fit* is an art.

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Let's define what *fit* means in the context of hiring. *Fit* refers to four things:

- ***Shared motivations.*** At a nonprofit, the motivation might be devotion to a cause. At a hedge fund, it might be making money. In a wealth management firm, it might be devotion to helping people retire.
- ***Shared work ethic.*** Some companies encourage work/life balance. At others 80-hour weeks are the norm. A person who wants to leave at 5 every day won't do well at a company where working evenings and weekends is expected.
- ***Shared business ethics.*** Companies must obey the law, but beyond that there are widely varying opinions on what constitutes good business ethics. One man's hard-nosed decision could be another's unethical one. For example, an executive who's proud he's never laid anyone off would not feel good about working for "Chainsaw" Al Dunlap, who gained renown as a ruthless job cutter.
- ***Compatible personality traits.*** Companies have a personality that can be usually be boiled down to a set of must-have traits. For example, I have a client company where the most important traits are high intelligence, commitment to working as part of a team, and highly evolved social skills. People who lack intellectual horsepower, have big egos or are introverts simply don't make it there.

This is an area where you have to use your intuition. While you're talking, you'll get a feel for the person and whether he fits the organization.

Judging *fit* is an art. Sometimes it's obvious, but more often it's a tough call. If you're an HR executive or outside recruiter, you have to know your client


exceptionally well to make a contribution. If you can accurately gauge *fit*, you'll be incredibly valuable.

## Taking Action

Are you committed to making talent your top priority? If so, the interviewing process outlined above will help you get there.

Plan the interview strategy with your team. Only one person needs to conduct the in-depth interview I've described. That leaves others free to focus on narrow areas of interest.

The concepts are easy, but implementation is hard. This approach is rigorous and takes more time than a more superficial interview. It's worth it.

Keep at it — it's all about improving your batting average. If talent is your highest priority it deserves to be at the top of your to do list every day. Don't let short-term minutiae knock you off track. 

## About the Author

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