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HOW TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF YOUR INTERVIEW PROCESS

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Interviews continue to be an integral part of any selection system despite complaints and potential flaws. We are hard pressed to find any hiring manager who doesn't want the opportunity to sit in a room with a candidate, ask questions, and make a judgment as to the candidate's worthiness to join the organization. Given the proper tools and training, interviewers can make informed selection decisions. Based on personal experience and feedback from training participants, this guide focuses on ways to improve the interview process (not the content) to ensure quality hires and to create a reputation of professionalism for your organization.

Introduction Over the years, human resource professionals have tried to assist clients in making good selection decisions by increasing the structure of the interview, focusing on behavioral questions, and adding objective, numeric scoring procedures. If interviewers adhere to these structural guidelines and are trained for their roles, they will make better and more defensible hiring decisions.

Regardless of the format or structure of your interviews, an underlying process can be addressed. The interview process can be broken into 5 components:

1. Preparation
2. Opening
3. Interview
4. Closing
5. Scoring

By reviewing each of these components, you may find ways to improve your interviewing process. Whether it saves you time and money, minimizes the aggravation for interviewers, impresses the candidate, or promotes meaningful dialog between interview team members, your overall process will be more efficient and effective.

PREPARATION

Prepare the interview guide.

- Write interview questions and scoring criteria (anchors).
- Work with subject matter experts.
- Focus on job-related critical skills.
- Document a clear connection between questions and job description and responsibilities.
- Prepare one copy of the interview guide per applicant for each interviewer 2–3 days in advance.
- Contact your interview “partner(s)” in advance to decide which questions each of you will ask. It’s better to plan this ahead of time rather than taking time making the decision during the interview. Some teams rotate among members; others choose to have one person ask all the questions.

It is also important to agree on a statement that allows the other team members to know that you don’t have any additional questions and are ready to proceed to the next question. (Hand gestures and facial expressions can easily be misinterpreted by the candidate and make them nervous.)

- Discuss the bottom-line requirements of the job with the hiring manager. It works to the hiring manager’s advantage to have interviewers who have a clear picture of the skills that the candidates need to have in order to be successful. By creating a brief, bulleted statement, you can help keep interviewers on track. For example, the statement could be “to find a reliable, hard-working administrative assistant who will help the department with time keeping, filing, phones, and meeting schedules.”

Schedule the interview.

- Allow sufficient time to cover all areas and to make your final ratings (45 minutes to 1½ hours per applicant).
- Arrange a quiet, comfortable setting free from any interruptions. Avoid interviews in open cubicles or areas with high traffic (to minimize distractions).
- Do not schedule interviews back to back. Allow the interviewers enough time to digest their notes, make their ratings, reach consensus, and take a short break before the next candidate arrives. Allowing time between interviews increases their attention span and the quality of the ratings.

Review the application material.

- Identify the jobs/experiences most relevant to the position based on the application form or resume. Note any missing data or inconsistencies that require an explanation so that you can ask the appropriate questions.
- The resume or application may also provide some information that you can use during the rapport portion of the interview to get the candidates to relax and talk about themselves.

Review the interview materials.

- Review the dimension/competency definitions and rating anchors (1, 3, 5) so that you know what you are listening for when the candidate answers.
- Be familiar with the questions so that you can read them (verbatim, for consistency) without sounding like you are reading them. Practice reading them out loud prior to the interview. If you start to improvise, you may be changing words and, in some cases, the meaning of the questions.

OPENING

- *Establish the proper environment.* Ask that all team members turn off their cell phones, pagers, etc. Post a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. You want to minimize distractions for all parties so that full attention can be paid to the candidate during the interview.
- *Greet the applicant.* Introduce yourself and the other interviewers. Avoid giving too much detail about your position unless it is relevant to the candidates. Excessive details will overwhelm them and are unlikely to be remembered for more than a few minutes. Make sure that you are pronouncing their name correctly. There is nothing more annoying than having your name repeat-

edly butchered and being afraid to correct the person who potentially holds your next job in their hands.

- *Establish some rapport, put the applicant at ease.* Take a few minutes to let the candidates relax. While you should avoid personal topics such as family, age, religion, etc. (lest you be accused of using that information to discriminate against them), you can find some neutral issues that everyone can respond to. Examples include traffic, weather, directions to the company, or something from their resumes (e.g., awards, where they attended school).
- *Describe the interview plan/establish your agenda.* While each of you may have a different format, here are some key areas that should be addressed in your agenda. Explain that you will be:
 - Asking questions* to get specific information about their job/experience. By emphasizing the need for specific, step-by-step answers, you alert the candidate that vague, high-level answers will not suffice.
 - Taking notes* to remember the details of their answers. Explain that there will be times when you'll get behind or ask them to repeat an answer so that you can capture it.
 - Answering the applicant's questions about the organization/position at the end of the interview.* Since the primary purpose of the interview is to get information about the candidate, I postpone those questions until the end to avoid getting sidetracked or letting candidates take control of the process. When my questions are complete, I open the floor to them (and often learn some more about their potential fit based on the questions they ask and what issues energize them).
 - Postponing the candidate's questions until the end runs counter to the popular literature that encourages candidates to ask lots of questions and take control of the interview. As such, you may need to be persistent in enforcing your agenda and reassure them that their questions will be addressed.
 - An exception to this "rule" might apply to entry-level employees, interns, or trainees. It might be important to spend a little more time up front explaining the position and providing a realistic job preview (e.g., overtime expectations, vacation, pay, shifts available) so that the candidates can self-select out if they are not interested in or prepared to accept those conditions.

Many interviewers find it helpful to develop a script that addresses each of these areas and practice it out loud prior to the interview. It helps them be relaxed, which puts candidates more at ease. While you do not want to read a script verbatim, many clients have prepared a list of bullets to ensure they hit the main points they want to cover. The same applies to the closing portion of the interview.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

The comments in this section are based on a specific type of behavioral question. As such, there is a sample question with each of the components labeled: dimension/competency, definition, rating anchors, and question. By reviewing each component, you will be able to see where the comment is applicable and how it can improve the process and results from an interview.

Sample Interview Question

Competency/Dimension: Developing the Territory Definition:

The ability to analyze the market, identify potential clients, and develop business with those clients. The exemplary employee is able to analyze the market and develop and implement a marketing strategy.

Rating Anchors:

Used standard approaches to identifying markets. Looked at market information. Did not try to tailor product/service to a particular market.	Identified issues that markets would potentially care about. Understood market to understand its perspective. Clearly described features and advantages of product/service in a market-relevant way.	Identified markets' "hot buttons" and used them persuasively. Carefully analyzed market information to try to understand its perspective. Addressed markets' concerns directly. Clearly explained relevant details and advantages of product/service and how the markets could benefit from it.
1	3	5

Question: Tell me about a time when you were asked to develop a marketing strategy for a market that had never used your product/ service. How did you identify the market? What were the results?

Situation/Task ____ Action ____ Results ____

Techniques to make the interview more effective

- Do not read all of the parts of the question at once. The questions have multiple parts designed to get a thorough example from the candidate (situation/task, action, result). However, ask the first part (i.e., "give me an example ... ," "tell me about a time ...") and maybe the second part at most, and then stop. Allow the candidate to respond. Ask any additional parts, if necessary. In many cases, those additional questions will be

answered during the candidate's response. This process will reduce the candidate's anxiety and tendency to worry about the end of the question before getting started.

- Continue to discreetly review the rating anchors during the candidate's responses. This will help you identify areas where you need to ask additional follow-up questions to get clarification or more detail.
- Keep your follow-up questions as open-ended as you can to avoid leading your candidate. For example: "Why did you ... ?" "What happened next ... ?" "When did you make that decision ... ?" "How did you respond ... ?"
- Keep asking questions until you are satisfied that you can make a fair judgment about the candidate's ability (1–5). Candidates cannot read your mind. If there is something in the anchor that they have not addressed, use an open-ended question to point them in that direction, without leading them. For example: "Did you do anything else?" "What, if anything, would you do differently?"
- Take detailed notes so that you can re-create the candidate's answer in sufficient detail if challenged. Use keywords, phrases, and quotes when appropriate. Don't worry that candidates will be offended if you are not making eye contact while you are taking notes (they probably appreciate not being in the spotlight for a few seconds). Documentation of the interview process is critical. Remember, if a lawsuit is filed, it could be years before it goes to court and you will have to rely on your notes to justify your selection decision. The more details you have, the easier it will be.
- Wait to score the candidate on each dimension/competency until the interview is completed. Information may be revealed during another question that will impact your ratings. You will have an idea of where the candidate scored because you (or someone on the panel) were asking follow-up questions based on the rating anchors, but there is no need to make a final determination until after the interview is concluded.

CLOSING

- *Ask additional questions or get clarification.* You may want to revisit some answers. In some cases, candidates make off-the-cuff remarks that you accept at the time and then they begin to create questions in your mind. For example, a candidate may mention that he or she is enrolled in a master's degree program and will be in class for another 12 months. If you know that the job they are applying for requires considerable travel or

overtime, you may want to broach that subject to ensure that the candidate understands that some classes might be missed. In another instance, you may feel you have received contradictory information on two different questions. This is your chance to clear up any confusion and allow the candidate to explain.

- *Provide information about the position and describe the working conditions.* Examples include terms of employment, benefits, salary, or overtime. This is a chance for you to point out any nuances of the job or responsibilities that may not have been reflected in the job description or posting. There may be specific projects that you want to highlight. This may also be a good time to describe your expectations for a new employee or your management philosophy (if you are the hiring manager).
- *Explain the next steps in the process.* It is important that you let the candidate know what to expect next. Be realistic when you state when they can expect to hear results. If you know it will take you another month to get through the candidates, be honest. If there are additional tests or interviews, describe them briefly.

If contacting candidates is not your responsibility, provide them with the name of the appropriate contact person if they have questions. Because your reputation is tied to the process, stay on top of the notification process. Work closely with your recruiter or human resources contact to make sure candidates are notified in a timely manner, even if that means calling them at the designated time to say there has been a delay in the final decision.

- *Allow time for the applicant to ask questions.* Be as candid as you can. Remember, the interview process goes both ways. You are trying to determine whether the candidate has the necessary skills and can fit into your organization. At the same time, the candidates are trying to determine whether they want to work in your organization. A poor fit is detrimental to both parties, so it is critical to get all concerns on the table so that everyone is making an informed decision.
- *Thank the applicant for participating in the interview process.* Regardless of their performance in the interview, applicants have earned your respect for trying. Interviews are stressful for even the most accomplished candidate, and it takes a tremendous amount of gumption to put themselves on the line. Even if the candidate stands zero chances of getting the job, they deserve a thank-you for participating. Candidates will remember how they were treated whether they are hired or not. They will share the story with their friends, who will recount the story to others. Do you want your company to have a positive or a negative reputation? As an interviewer, you can influence that reputation based on the way you treat each and every candidate you see.

SCORING

While the examples and suggestions are specific to the type of behavioral question shown in the previous section, the principles remain the same regardless of the actual scoring scheme used.

- *Use the rating scale.* When evaluating the candidate's answers against the rating anchors, you are free to assign any score 1–5. If a candidate's response clearly exceeds a 3, but does not qualify for a 5, you should give a 4. The same rules apply for assigning a 2. In some cases, the candidate will have no example of dealing with a particular situation. At that point, assign a 0 or Not Applicable rating.
- *Use the anchors.* The anchors provide an objective standard against which candidate's answers are compared. Follow-up questions should be used to help you make distinctions between rating anchors. If you start adding new criteria along the way, you will not have consistent, reliable selection decisions. It is important that you compare the candidate's responses to the anchors only (not other candidates, not your personal standards).
- *Avoid rater errors.* For a variety of reasons, interviewers who are untrained or unfamiliar with the interviewing process can commit 5 common rater errors:
 - Leniency.* Candidates get an undeserved high score just for trying or being nice. This inflates everyone's scores and makes it hard to identify the truly qualified candidate. It increases the chances that an unqualified candidate will be selected based on the scores.
 - Strictness.* Candidates get an undeserved low score because the interviewer has unrealistically high expectations (often unrelated to, and above and beyond, the rating anchors). Again, such a scoring strategy makes it difficult to find the most qualified candidate. It may create a situation in which no one passes the cutoff or minimum passing score.
 - Central tendency.* Candidates receive a middle score on all competencies. In some cases, candidates really do belong in the middle range (3 on a 5-point scale). But it is unlikely that they don't have any strengths or weaknesses that would warrant higher or lower scores. Monitor yourself and others to ensure they are using the full scale and not hiding behind the "average" score rather than searching for additional evidence in the candidate's response.
 - Halo effect.* Candidates are branded with consistently high or low scores based on one quality rather than looking at each competency separately. For a dramatic example, the interviewer gives all high or low scores because of the school that

the candidate attended. This type of bias interferes with the interview's purpose of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate and hinders the decision-making process.

—*Order effect or contrast effect.* Candidates are judged against the prior person and/or the next one, instead of against the established rating anchors. Scores are artificially inflated or deflated because of another candidate's perceived performance rather than an "objective" measure of how the candidate compares to the standard/anchor.

- *Rate one competency at a time.* For example, do not let a candidate's score on Developing the Territory influence your rating on the Adaptability question. You can, however, use information about the candidate's adaptability (ability to respond to new information or get along with others) that is acquired during the Developing the Territory question and use it as part of the Adaptability score. Familiarity with the interview guide and anchors will help you identify potential cross-over information. Be sure to include that additional information in your notes or reference your notes on the Developing the Territory page.
- *Reaching consensus.* Always have at least two interviewers. Having a second interviewer gives you a different perspective, allows you to share the questioning duties with someone else, and can help you stay honest when rater errors start creeping into your scoring process. Here are some do's and don'ts for using the consensus process to make good selection decisions:
 - Complete your scores for each candidate before you begin the discussion with your interview partner(s).
 - Refer to the anchors and your notes to justify your score (not a gut feeling).
 - Consensus does not mean taking the average or splitting the difference. Consensus is not negotiating. It's coming to an agreement that you could defend to an outside observer somewhere down the road. You are treading on thin ice if you hear something like this: "I'll give him a 3 on this one, if you'll raise your score on the last one to a 4."
 - If you agree to a score that is 2 or more points higher or lower than you originally gave the candidate, make a note as to your rationale. For example, "I didn't include the exact figures in my notes, but when Cindy read her notes, I remembered them. I had not taken that into account in my original score."
- *Making your final recommendation.* Once all the scores have been tabulated and you are ready to make your final recommendation or selection, picture this scenario in your mind: For the first two years of the new hire's career, he or she will be walking around with a bright yellow name tag that says, "I was hired by

Jim Alexander and Alice Rayburn.” As you make your final decision, pretend that you are Jim or Alice and ask yourself how you feel about being associated with that new hire. Good hiring decisions benefit you and the company. Poor decisions have a way of haunting you over and over again.

- *Seek feedback.* The hiring manager gets continuous feedback on the selection decision based on the new hire’s performance. However, when outside resources are called in to assist in the interviews, they seldom have as much contact. To improve your interviewing skills, check in with the hiring manager 3–6 months down the road and see how the new hire is doing. It’s a good opportunity to validate your ratings and/or concerns and help you prepare for future interviews.

SUMMARY

Key points to remember when reviewing your interviewing process:

- Take time to develop a good interview (or at least be a wise consumer if you do not develop your own interviews).
- Do your preparation (materials, partners).
- Practice and use your opening and closing “scripts.”
- Maintain a professional demeanor throughout the entire hiring process.
- Create the proper environment.
- Put the candidates at ease, build rapport.
- Take accurate, thorough notes.
- Treat the candidates with respect.
- Thank them for participating.
- Explain the next steps and notify them as promised.
- Make sure they leave with a good impression of the company.
- Use the rating anchors to minimize rater error.
- Use the consensus process correctly.
- Choose wisely—consider the long-term effects.
- Seek feedback.

CONCLUSION

Interviews will continue to be a critical piece of any selection system. By reviewing the five components of your current interviewing process, you may find areas for improvement. Time and time again

we see that preparation increases the likelihood of selecting the right person for the job. The time spent to review materials and prepare the scripts is a small price to pay to demonstrate to the community that you are a professional organization that knows how to treat people right. When the candidates speak of you—and they will—make sure that you have created a positive reputation for yourself and your company.