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Route to:

Fine-tune those interviewing skills

IMPROVEMENT TODAY CAN HELP AVOID PAIN LATER

IF PROCRASTINATION IS ANY GUIDE, two tasks that most managers would rather do next week are hiring and firing. They are the *yin* and *yang* of the employment process – the bookends of too many people’s careers – and the worse the hiring decision, the more likely it will lead to eventual termination of the person hired.

Central to a sound hiring process is the interview, which bears more than passing similarity to the performance reviews to follow. Both require analysis and introspection, some degree of planning, and an intense period of personal interaction leading to an outcome that will either delight or disappoint the other person. Moreover, interviews and performance reviews require skills that many people fear they lack and compete for time with the day-to-day demands of running a business. Last but not least, they require us to make a decision about someone’s life. That’s a heady combination.

Job candidates have a unique perspective on the interview, since it is *their* lives that are at stake. All too often, the feedback they provide to their recruiters is that the interviewing process stunk. For example, interviewees expressed no urgency in filling the position, showed little interest in the candidate and basically had him/her confirm résumé information. That was not to mention starting an hour late or demanding to know the minimum salary the candidate would accept.

Because good interviews help ensure successful hires, they should be conducted with the same foresight and finesse that one would bring to a major sales meeting, union negotiation, security analyst conference or board of directors presentation.

To paraphrase a well-known saying, an ounce of preparation is worth a pound of cure.

How to build better interviews from the ground up

MORE THAN ONCE, veteran search consultants have heard their clients say, “I’ll know what I’m looking for when I find it.” What a prescription for frustration, delay and disappointment.

In truth, the key to successful interviewing is knowing exactly what one is looking for. The Sanford Rose Associates *Dimensional Search*® process, for instance, pinpoints skills required to perform the job, experience needed to hit the ground running and management/operational style best suited to the organization’s culture and long-term goals.

Of those factors, the issue of style may be most important – especially at senior management levels. To use an analogy, it’s a well-known anthropological fact that civilizations developed when farming communities began to replace wandering tribes of hunter-gatherers, leading to the development of computation and written language as crop production was counted and recorded. In today’s corporation, hiring managers need to determine the optimum mix of hunter-gatherers to bring home today’s kill versus cultivators to plan for the success of next year’s crops.

With the assistance of your professional search consultant, write down those key factors that will determine success or failure on the job at hand and

insist that candidates to be interviewed have demonstrated the ability to meet them.

If a search has been long and arduous, there can be the temptation to fall in love with the first warm body – despite obvious shortcomings (such as lack of experience, missing skills, poor cultural fit, etc.). Avoid that temptation.

Conversely, if a search firm strikes pay dirt on the first one or two candidates presented, there can be the temptation to assume that even stronger candidates must be lurking in the underbrush. Avoid that temptation as well; a bird in hand is worth two in the underbrush.

In short, remain objective. A well-defined set of expectations can help eliminate the guesswork.

Plan the actual interviewing process carefully; it is astonishing how many participants in how many organizations have no clue as to why they have been included or what they are supposed to ask. Decide whether there will be one or several rounds of interviews, what role each participant will play and how the process will be structured – *e.g.*, a sequence of one-on-one interviews versus a single panel interview, or perhaps some combination of the two. In order for candidates to be compared on an apples-to-apples basis, Sanford Rose Associates recommends that a consistent “core” panel of interviewers see all finalists. Panelists should have a full understanding of the position opening and how it interacts with their areas of responsibility.

Time being precious, the interview is not the place to be confirming details covered on a résumé; if there is need for verification or clarification, Human Resources or the outside search firm can do that in advance. Amplifying information on the résumé, however, is fair game. Most contain lists of accomplishments – such as increased sales, reduced costs, new product introductions and the like. Did the candidate do that all by herself, or was she part of a team? What role did her boss play? Etc.

Decide ahead of time the questions to be asked, and who will ask them. (A list of really good questions can be found at the end of this newsletter.)

One of the most common problems with corporate and broadcast interviews alike is the failure to listen: the interviewer is too busy instead formulating the next question he wants to ask. If one does listen, then one can pick up on red flags, inconsisten-

cies and other areas to probe. (In one recent interview, a candidate responded to a typical shortcomings question by citing a tendency to make sure that subordinates’ work was perfect. The astute interviewer responded in turn, “So others would call you a micro-manager?” The rattled candidate confessed that this was so.)

Provide candidates the opportunity to ask questions as well, since those will often reveal the candidate’s amount of research, degree of insight and true level of interest in the job. Likewise, your responses provide a wonderful opportunity to extol the virtues of your organization and sell the candidate on the position.

At the end, clarify next steps. Unless you are ready to make an offer on the spot, don’t try to negotiate salary, title and other factors. It’s fair to ask about the candidate’s current compensation – but not what he or she expects in the new job. Once the interviewing process is complete, make an up or down decision on the individual. Down means out the door. Up means the candidate remains in the running with, at most, two or three other top contenders.

– George Snider

A few great questions

1. What would you like us to know about you?
2. Why are you interested in changing jobs at this time, and what is the perfect next job for you?
3. Why is this opportunity a good fit?
4. In your current job, who do you report to? Tell me about their responsibilities – and yours.
5. What are your three greatest achievements – and exactly how did you accomplish each?
6. How would your current employees describe you, and how would your boss?
7. Describe both a shortcoming and a disappointment – and how you dealt with each.
8. What risks have you taken in your current job, and what happened as a result?
9. What would make your current employer (even) more successful?
10. What changes in your current job would make you want to stay?

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