

Inside Leadership



Sometimes the question is more complex, than the answer.



Sarah Good of HRM's Sales and Marketing Selection Practice talks about the impact of poor interview practice, on the interview performance of candidates and lost talent opportunities.

Quoting careers and companies website Glassdoor.com, Forbes magazine suggests that search engine giant Google appears to have some pretty unique questions to ask at interview. Why are manhole covers round? How do you measure 4 gallons of water using only a 3 and 5 gallon jug? How many gas stations/dogs/windowpanes are there in the United States?

This maybe accurate or apocryphal. Some companies ask what might appear unusual questions of a candidate at interview to evaluate their ability to handle curve balls, be creative, be thoughtful, be comfortable with conceptual thinking, have a sense of humour or even to evaluate how

they think under pressure. These are not new concepts. You can be sure Google knows precisely what it is doing in how it conducts its assessment of potential employees. However, for many organisations the interview process and questions asked fail to give any real insight into the likely future performance or behaviour of a candidate if hired.

The first challenge of effective interviewing is to base your decision making on actual evidence and not instinct or tradition. An interviewer's performance not only impacts the validity of the assessment process, but often, also the candidate's decision as to whether to return for further evaluation, if requested to do so.

It seems for some reason, that the more urgent and important it is to get the role filled, the greater the likelihood that the candidate has at least 50% of the power in determining the overall outcome of their application.

It may seem bewildering in this age of corporate and political correctness, that such basic errors are made. But according to candidates with whom we meet, the following are still, all-too-regular behaviours by interviewers, despite the competitive climate we are in for top talent:

- Interviewers who turn up late, simply give the message that they do not see the meeting as valuable, thus effecting interview performance potential.

- Hiring managers who leave their mobile phones on, even on vibrate, never mind those who text, just send the message that they are too busy to be at the interview.
- Employers or their representatives who either do not know, or make a mistake about which job the candidate has arrived at interview for, turn potential candidates immediately and permanently off the organisation.
- Interviewing at a work desk with one eye on incoming emails, lets the manager and the organisation down.

The discerning, passive candidate that most organisations currently seek, simply switches off in the face of such behaviour. Conducting an effective interview is a difficult process that requires a clear and appropriate structure which points to whether or not a candidate provides evidence from their past, that they will perform acceptably in the future.

To achieve this, it is firstly important for an interviewer to have as much information on the candidate before their first meeting. Naturally they need to have studied the CV in detail, but any questions left unanswered by gaps or lack of detail in the document should be filled in through the recruiter or directly by telephone before the meeting. Questions asked at interview, must be linked to tasks to be performed or the competencies required to perform them. Questions which seem clever rarely are and simply put the candidate off. Look for specific examples of past behaviours or experiences that give a candidate an opportunity to illustrate they can perform as needed.

Behavioural questions are designed to elicit specific evidence of past ability, experience or behaviour. These include TED questions, which begin with the constructs...

- Tell me about a time when you...
- Explain to me how you have...
- Describe an experience whereby...
...and encourage a candidate to be open and fluid in their response, to provide evaluation evidence for the interviewer.

Not all questions can be answered on the basis of specific previous experience. Indeed, it is argued that behavioural questions are only really suited to evaluate likely behaviour on day-to-day tasks and responsibilities.

Situational questions that create hypothetical scenarios, are often used to evaluate a candidate's capacity for longer term thinking and performance or "stretch potential" ...

- What would you do if...
- Imagine the following situation...
- How would you deal with the follow...

Gathering information necessary to make an informed and accurate hiring decision is only part of the selection process. Getting the desired candidate to buy into the role and organisation is often of equal challenge. The interviewer, their performance and their attitude are determining factors in this outcome. It seems without a structured interview process, that the more desirable the candidate appears, the more likely objectivity will slip.

A candidate expects an interviewer to be knowledgeable about the job and the organisation. We know from our

own ongoing Actions and Attitudes Research Programme, that they expect to be treated with respect and dignity at all points in the process. They want to be met with warmth and enthusiasm. They are entitled to fair and timely treatment in every part of the selection process. Anything less than this shaves off the likelihood that if they were the chosen candidate, they would accept your job offer. Where a candidate has had a less than satisfactory experience in a selection process, it is not uncommon for them to seek higher compensation to accept a position that they want. In fact the real obstacle to their acceptance is being put off the company by their experience at the interview stages.

Following a clear, fair and consistent structure is best practice in interviewing for several reasons. It firstly means you can ask precisely the same questions, in the same format of all candidates, giving them equal opportunity to perform and giving a hiring manager a genuine basis for comparison. It secondly ensures that candidates are given the best opportunity they can to present their capabilities and ensure that the organisation does not lose out on or have to pay extra for potential talent due to an incompetent interviewer.

Finally, in the litigious world in which we live, it is the ultimate safeguard to ensuring the organisation can stand over its behaviour and decision making at interview if ever questioned.

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