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Interviewing Job Applicants? It's More Than Just Asking Good Questions!

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In this job market with so many applicants to choose from, businesses need to be sure that their selection process is as top notch as the candidates they seek. Asking the right interview questions is only part of the process. Many interviewers don't give sufficient thought to what sort of answers they ought to be listening for. In addition, they fail to understand what certain answers might be revealing about a candidate.

Choose core competencies

Before choosing what questions to include in an interview, you have to determine what competencies are needed to succeed in the job. For the job in question, think about what characteristics (innate and learned) best distinguish a star employee from a mediocre one. Try to identify 6-8 qualities that truly characterize an outstanding performer. There's an old saying, "you can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it's easier to hire a squirrel." For that job, climbing ability and agility would be core competencies. For jobs on the ground, candidates might need to demonstrate good teamwork and collaboration, an ability to adapt to change, or perhaps a focus on delivering results.

Choose appropriate questions

Once you've determined the core competencies needed for the job, you can craft questions that target those competencies. Psychologists know that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, so inquire about how the candidate has demonstrated those competencies previously. For example, if one of the core competencies is decisive judgment, a good interviewer might say "tell me about a time when you had to make a tough decision without a lot of information." If the job requires excellent planning and organization ability, a good question might be "What's your strategy for completing projects accurately and quickly?" or "How do you manage multiple projects, demands and competing deadlines?" Try to develop at least two questions for each competency.

Choose suitable answers

Asking good questions is essential, but knowing what to listen for (and what a particular response might tell you about the candidate) is critical. This is an area that is overlooked by many interviewers, despite the fact that they ought to be spending most of their time *listening*. There's an awful lot going on when a job candidate is speaking. It's easy to be distracted by the applicant's verbal fluency, their level of anxiety, their efforts to change the topic, etc. It is important to decide in advance the key features of a desirable response so that you can listen for them. For example, an interviewer might say "Tell me about a project you were responsible for that didn't go well. What happened, and how did you deal with it?" The interviewer should listen carefully to make sure that the candidate:

- Accepted personal responsibility for the problem (vs. blaming others or blaming circumstances).
- Recognized in a timely fashion that he/she needed help.
- Learned something from the experience.

Choose candidates objectively

Even experienced interviewers can be influenced by bias. Subconscious processes have been shown to have a significant impact on interviewer evaluations. For example, social psychology experiments demonstrate that people use facial appearance as a basis for interpersonal judgments after as little as 100 microseconds of exposure. Candidates naturally try to sell themselves and this can indeed influence an interviewer's perception, profoundly affecting hiring decisions. Research has shown that presentation tactics have a significant impact on interviewers' ratings of candidates. Appearance (e.g. physical attractiveness, professional attire) has the strongest influence on hiring decisions, followed by impression management (e.g. self-promotion, ingratiation), and verbal/non verbal behavior (e.g. fluent speech, smiling). The best way to choose candidates objectively is to first conduct a screening interview by telephone, make sure that you ask the interview questions in the same order with all candidates, and use a scoring system to rate each candidate's qualities.

Too many people rely on their gut when making hiring decisions, only to suffer from ongoing indigestion when they're saddled with a poor performer. A carefully thought out interview process will help you hire by design, not by chemistry.

About the author:

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