

INTERVIEWING TRAPS AND TIPS

Interviewing candidates for employment can be a process fraught with uncertainty and frustration. While interviewing may not make a manager's "top ten list" of favorite things to do, few decisions made in the workplace are more important than the decision of whom to hire.

There are many reasons that it makes sense to interview effectively. Asking the right questions, in the right manner, helps you find out what you need to know (not just what you want to hear) from a candidate. This, in turn, helps you hire the best candidate available for the position. Obviously, hiring mistakes are costly – in time, in money, and in their effects on supervisors and other employees. Finally, interviewing effectively helps protect an employer from legal challenges that might arise from its hiring decisions.

There are several interview traps that interviewers should take care to avoid. The most common mistake made is talking too much during the interview. Often in an effort to put the candidate at ease, interviewers spend too much time talking and consequently miss the opportunity to learn about the candidate. The general rule is that the interviewer should not spend more than 20% of the interview talking, with 80% of the interview reserved for candidates to talk. Another interview trap is providing an inaccurate view of the position. All jobs have both elements that most people enjoy as well as elements that most people find difficult or distasteful. The wise interviewer will discuss both with the candidate. By having an accurate understanding of the job, the candidate can determine whether he is interested in it. While we certainly don't want to talk people out of a job during the interview process, it is preferable for a candidate to tell you he is not interested in the job before you hire him as opposed to after his first week on the job. A couple of effective ways to allow candidates to get "the real story" about the job they're interviewing for is to have them talk with current job holders and to allow them to tour and observe the workplace. It's important to provide information about the job and company at the end of the interview, after you've asked the candidate your questions. Providing this information at the beginning of the interview gives the candidate insight into what the "right" answers are, which may affect the truthfulness of her answers.

Many interviewers mistakenly believe that a candidate's flaws displayed in the interview will improve. Keep in mind that candidates are putting their best foot forward and an interviewer's concerns about issues such as punctuality, grooming, and others will not improve if the candidate is hired. Finally, and most obviously, asking the wrong questions is an interview trap to be avoided. There are two ways that a question can be wrong. It can be potentially illegal, which is

when a question is asked that refers to a candidate's age, race, sex, religion, national origin, or disability. Generally speaking, it is appropriate to ask questions related to a candidate's work experience and education. It is generally not appropriate to ask about a candidate's personal life. When in doubt, don't ask the question. Another example of a "wrong" question is one that is less than optimal. In other words, a question that leads the candidate to the desired response, or doesn't reveal information about the candidate that would be relevant to his or her performance if hired.

Following are a few tips, that allow an interviewer to seize the opportunity to make the best hiring decision possible. Before the interview, you should define the job requirements, both by reviewing the job description as well as by considering the attributes of successful employees to determine 3 to 5 critical success factors for the candidate hired. Keeping these factors in mind, questions are then developed to identify whether, and to what degree, a candidate possesses these critical success factors. A candidate's past behavior in the workplace is the best predictor of her future performance. Thus, interview questions should be structured to get the candidate to share information about how she has handled situations in the past that might be similar to circumstances she would face if hired. Open questions, those that can't be answered with one or two words, form the basis of a list of interview questions. Phrases such as "tell me about a time", "how did you handle", and "describe for me" are good openers for effective interview questions. After the questions are developed, the interviewer should give thought to the desired responses. Consistency is important, so the same basic questions should be asked of each candidate; however, follow up questions to clarify information or probe for additional information are necessary and will vary from candidate to candidate.

During the interview, the first few minutes are dedicated to building rapport with the candidate in order to gain her confidence and cooperation. Take care to avoid getting personal with small talk during this time. The next step is to ask questions from the prepared list, following up as appropriate. It's important to take notes, to assist in comparing candidates and to refresh your memory following the interview. Finally, the close of the interview is the appropriate time to satisfy the candidate's need for information. General information about the employer, the position, and the next steps in the selection process are provided here. Following the interview, an objective evaluation of the candidate(s) is undertaken, keeping in mind the desired responses as well as additional information provided by each candidate.

Time spent preparing for the interview and with candidates is time well spent toward the best hiring decision possible.