

## **Interviewing Basics: There's More to Interviewing Than Asking Questions**

It's been interesting to follow the business press and journals over the past two years regarding talent. Just 24 months ago, it was very difficult to pick up any business publication that wasn't focused on reminding us about the talent shortages already existing or about to exist. These same publications also delighted in telling us that the high performing and well capitalized companies are increasing their efforts to attract the smartest, brightest, and most nimble of candidates.

Well, what a difference a recession makes. Those same business publications are now running stories on the glut of outstanding talent now available. And, many of them are exhorting management to do some selective talent shopping now, rather than later while the business rebirth is still in its infancy. It's a buyers' market and now is the time to get the right candidates on board to lead your business into the future.

If it's so important to get the right candidate (defined as some combination of talent and fit), why then are interviewers short changing the process with their avant garde approaches to interviewing? Is this to show senior management how "current/hip" they are or do they really believe that these oddball approaches will truly yield them the cream of the interviewing crop?

### **A Look at Some of the Approaches**

#### *Weird Interview Questions*

One trend that's been around since the early 90's is the one that delights in asking interviewees questions that can't be answered on the spot with rehearsed responses. For these people, it's not the question that's important, it's the answers. For example, how many people go into an interview with an answer for the question about the volume of potable water flowing through New Orleans (in non-flood times) or why do they make manhole covers round? I'm sure there is some cousin of Dogbert who is just sitting there delighting in watching self-conscious, nervous, job seekers squirm, hem and haw while trying to answer these ludicrous questions.

Proponents of these unanswerable questions quickly point out that the whole purpose is to get the job applicant to reveal his/her true self, to speak without being rehearsed, to get answers beyond the canned responses applicants memorized from various self-help books on interviewing, and to reveal the structured process candidates possess that will enable them to tackle those weighty, corporate imponderables. But do they?

In a Wall Street Journal article ("Job Seekers Could Face Odd Queries", October 30, 2008); Marcus Gamo of San Francisco recalls being asked by a hiring manager: "If your alma mater was a cereal, what would it be?" A recent graduate of the University of Georgia, he says he paused and then offered, "Fruit Loops," because it's "a little crazy, diverse and delicious."

Mr. Gamo didn't get the job. Now the director at a communications firm, he says he makes a point of asking only conventional questions when interviewing candidates. He commented that he doesn't want to put them in the same uncomfortable position he was in.

But really, how could someone be uncomfortable when asked such pithy questions as:

- Considering your perceptions of a fast-paced environment, which of these three situations would you think is the most related to your perceptual definition?
  - a) A baby turtle crawling from its nest to the ocean.
  - b) A bird building a nest.
  - c) A dog jumping up to catch a Frisbee.
- What did you do in high school that was against the rules?
- If you could be a superhero, what would you want your superpowers to be?
- If aliens landed in front of you and offered you any position on their planet, what would you want?

In response to these questions, who couldn't ...

- Relate the turtle's sense of urgency and determination to a fast-paced environment?
- Damn themselves by revealing what they did when breaking those inane high school rules?
- Avoid asking for x-ray vision before attending their next CEO meeting?
- Explain with glee why they wanted to own all of the toll bridges on this wonderful planet?

But, what's this got to do with the primary duties and responsibilities of the job? How do you evaluate the answers? How will you know if you are hearing words of wisdom from your next CEO? And, maybe none of this has anything to do with anything. This may simply be the work of a sadistic person.

### *Stress Interviews*

Well, if applicants weren't anxious about their next big interview, they will be when they confront the ultimate stress test – the group or panel interview.

Group grilling has been popular in academia and non-profits for many years and we all know how successful that has been. But surprisingly, the technique is also popular in Japan as a way of assessing new candidates for positions other than entry-level. It's a process that appeals to organizations that prefer decisions be made by a consensus of stakeholders. That's why the process is gaining in popularity with consulting firms, law firms, and high-tech businesses.

Employers, especially in this economic maelstrom, now have the luxury of being picky about prospective candidates. After all, one doesn't always get 100 applicants for a single, open position. Therefore, the group grill is enticing because interviewers can see people squirm as they are bombarded with questions by the group. Interviewers get a sample view of how a

candidate will function under fire. Thus, interviewers really think that they are truly selecting the best candidate for their organization.

In most cases, the pattern for a group interview seems to revolve around a series of rather standard interview questions which lead into a bona fide Harvard case study. Now interviewers have the added benefit of hearing a candidate discuss real business issues in business terms. Candidates are free to dredge up all of the management theory they studied in B-school. This approach allows interviewers to feel that the interview process is no longer based on hypothetical scenarios – it’s a real case study, albeit not for the company the candidate is interviewing with. But best of all, interviewers get to play “good cop – bad cop”, the ultimate CIA role play. Nevertheless, interviewers do gain a frame of reference when evaluating candidates through their own business experience and decision making prowess. By using the case study approach, interviewers can assess business acumen, decision making, and loquaciousness.

### *Speed Interviewing*

Back when talent shortages were being touted, interviewers decided to mimic the social dating scene and developed a process known as “speed interviewing.”

In most cases, the practice was started to accelerate the recruiting process. Rather than have a candidate return on three or four separate occasions to interview with successive levels of management or peers, it was reasoned that the process could be reduced to days rather than weeks if the organization truly focused on the process. In one fairly typical process, organizations arrange for a team of key interviewers to be available on a given day. A candidate is then shuffled from interviewer to interviewer every half-hour throughout the day. In this manner, more than one interviewee could be in the loop at the same time allowing interviewers the ability to evaluate several candidates in a short time span. Interviewers can submit their evaluations to a central processing point (HR) and hiring decisions can be made on the same day. This minimizes the possibility of having candidates shop job offers or get hired by some other organization. Interviewers also have fresh memories of the candidates allowing quick and simple comparisons.

Needless to say, there are drawbacks to the process, though. One of which reinforces the old axiom of “haste makes waste.” The risk of making poor hiring decisions certainly increases with the speed of the process and emphasis on making an offer quickly. Another is the issue of how much can you learn about a candidate in 30 minutes. Candidates also lose out on getting a sense of the culture of the organization and an understanding of the job. All of which could ultimately lead to an increase in employee turnover.

## What to Do

### *Getting To Know The Candidate*

Those venerable gurus, Jack and Suzy Welch, wrote a rather insightful response on interviewing to a reader of their Business Week column, The Welchway. In that April 2, 2008 column, Jack and Suzy commented on interviewing CEO candidates and what questions to use outside the usual routine. Most of their comments can easily be structured to fit most other positions in the organization.

They comment that “truly effective interviews are hard to orchestrate. Asking the right questions helps, but listening – really listening – pays dividends. Questions are only questions. You can start to feel quite full of yourself asking good ones, but the real power of an interview lies in how well you listen to the answers. Really listen, to the end, between the lines, through the pauses, and after the awkward silences. That discipline is so much harder than it sounds. And yet, when you let candidates talk, even seasoned veterans of the interview game, they often in time reveal what you need to know.”

### *Determining What You Need To Know*

First, make sure every candidate really matches the job needs – experience, education, past accomplishments. Second, ensure each candidate is who he or she says they are. Google them, check Facebook or one of the other social networking sites. Third, make sure every candidate has a reputation for honesty and fairness. This isn't so much a process to weed out candidates as it is a process to let your management team know that you are doing the due diligence required for a successful process.

Next, most organizations have created a very discreet set of competencies to guide the assessment of their internal talent. Therefore, the best place to start at question formulation is with your own organization's competencies.

Be careful, though, that you are assessing the competency at the level appropriate to the position in review. Managers at different levels of responsibility demonstrate the same competency in different ways. For example, while both the production supervisor and the president of the company lead people, a supervisor's leadership role is not the same as the company president's. Therefore, you will need to clarify what is expected of specific jobs and how that competency is demonstrated at that level.

In addition, the emphasis placed on each competency will vary from job to job. The manager of customer service, for example, may need to be more proficient at “building relationships with customers and suppliers” than the data processing manager. Before recruiting candidates for a position, a hiring manager needs to identify the most important competencies, skills, knowledge, and personal attributes for that job.

To make this determination, consider

- Results expected of the job
- Resources that must be managed in order to achieve those results
- Relationship of the job to others in the organization
- Your own knowledge of managers who have been successful in similar positions
- Role level of the position

Another big concern in the interview process is “How will you know good performance when a candidate describes it?” You might rely on gut reaction, but a more reliable method is to listen for *words* or descriptions of *behaviors* that indicate each competency or use of specific skills, knowledge factors, or personal attributes.

You can identify these indicators by carefully reviewing your competencies and noting where evaluative comments indicate the desired level of performance. Clearly, the results expected from the position will influence the behaviors required. Remind yourself of successful individuals you have known in similar jobs and think about what they did that made them successful.

Finally, fit; that is, will the candidate be able to play well with the incumbents. This one is hard to determine and may well have led some interviewers to create those obtuse questions being tossed around. Questions aimed at eliciting responses about “How do you handle integration of new employees?” or “What have you done to get other people on board with one of your ideas?” may help but how do you really judge the responses.

#### *Evaluating responses*

Evaluating verbal responses is not an easy task. And, if not done properly, can lead one into trouble with any number of government agencies – both federal and state. Fortunately, Congress has seen fit to publish standards in the Federal Register to assist in curtailing discrimination. Hopefully, organizations are beyond the discriminatory questions.

#### ***Example: Indicator Words or Behaviors for Production Supervisor***

- Review the examples of individual behaviors for each competency and look for those especially applicable to a production supervisor’s work. For instance, one of the behaviors under “supervising a department” is “balances multiple demands and potentially competing priorities (i.e., safety, quality, productivity, employee needs, customer satisfaction).”
- Review role-level descriptions for each competency to find other examples, e.g., “resolves operating problems.”
- Review the job description for other examples, e.g., “gives regular feedback to employees.”

The challenge in the evaluation process then is in determining which of the candidates interviewed best meets the job specs, can flourish within the culture, and can be productive beyond minimum expectations.

After seeing each candidate, the various interviewers should review their notes individually and enter ratings on an interviewer's form. Even though the interviewer may have focused on just a few specific areas with the candidate, the interviewer should rate the candidate on every competency and key SKA used to develop the initial interview questions unless he or she did not receive sufficient information to form a judgment.

Now, all interviewers should meet as a group to compare their ratings. Ideally, this meeting should be led by a trained facilitator. There will probably be a lot of areas of agreement, but there will probably also be competencies on which interviewers had widely different impressions of an individual. In these cases, it is very important for interviewers to fully describe the reasons for their ratings. The goal is for the group to agree on a rating for each competency and SKA. The group rating is a consensus rating, not an average.

- Quantify results expected, e.g., “produces X units/shift while maintaining a lost-time accident record of less than Y.”
- Review definitions of skills/knowledge/personal attributes for behavioral indicators, e.g., “problem solving: seeks out and recognizes problems, collects information needed . . .”

Think of instances when you witnessed someone demonstrating key skills, knowledge, or personal attributes. For example, if flexibility is a key personal attribute, describe when have you seen a production supervisor show flexibility on the job? (E.g., so-and-so adjusted shift schedules to accommodate employee training.) What does that suggest about flexible supervisors in general? (They adapt to changing demands.)

## **Put Value in Your Hiring Process**

It's easy to come up with off-beat questions and approaches that are, at best, questionable. What we really need to do is remind ourselves that we are here to come up with top-quality hires.

The more we can incorporate questions focused on essential duties of the job, the corporate competencies for success, and those knowledge, skills and attributes deemed essential, the better we are positioned to focus on the talent and ability of the candidate.



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We can also increase our success ratio if we utilize multiple interviewers (and, hence multiple assessors) into the process. This fulfills the old adage that two minds are better than one.