

Interviewing: Your Skills Tell About Your Company

By Kate Greene, SPHR

What do interviews and blind dates have in common? Often, they both start with two people meeting for the first time, both trying to look their best without saying anything embarrassing or impolite. Both are about getting to know one another. Poor blind dating skills may cost you a few meals and movie tickets, but poor interviewing skills could cost you, your business and your employees a whole lot more.

Every manager and company wants to hire skilled and motivated employees. Unfortunately, many managers do not know how to skillfully and legally conduct an employment interview. They believe that asking a few questions and having a good conversation is enough. It's not.

The decisions you make regarding who works at your company are among the most important that you will ever make. Bad decisions and illegal practices can haunt you for years. In the April issue of *The Business News* it was reported that the US Department of Labor 2001 estimates put the cost of turnover in the thousands of dollars for even entry-level positions. It seems every week another story breaks of an employee taking legal action over alleged discriminatory practices.

The good news is, following legal guidelines and using a behavioral approach in your interviewing technique will tremendously increase your success. The foundation of behavioral interviewing is this: The way people have behaved in the past is the best indicator of the way they will behave in the future.

Knowing and believing this, a successful hiring manager will do the following:

1. Identify knowledge, skills, and talents

A well-written job description will outline the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform in the position. Technical training, interpersonal skills and certifications with computer software or other equipment define one set of requirements. Often, these are things that can be acquired.

Talents, on the other hand, are those personal tendencies that are not easily acquired. For example, let's examine the talent of decision-making. Consider your top performers in a given position – Do they make decisions on their own and run with it? In some positions this would be a real asset, but not all. In, in non-supervisory roles, this may not be appropriate.

2. Use a good, legal application

Armed with defined (ideally benchmarked) knowledge and talents, a straightforward process to select employees is needed. A well-written application will gather a lot of this information. If the job requires a driver's license and working evenings, then ask for an

applicant's license number and when they are available to work up front. Save yourself and the applicant time.

Of course, there are many legal restrictions to what may be asked on an application and in an interview. Not all are obvious. For example, you may not ask for the name and addresses of a parent or spouse, but you may ask for emergency contact information. The wrong question in an interview it could be grounds for legal action.

3. Check References

Part of the application and process should include past employers and references. Take the time to check these. Twenty minutes of telephone work will save you weeks of time later. More thorough background checks are a good investment if the employees in the position handle significant company assets with limited supervision. In some positions, to not do a background check could be considered negligent hiring and put your company at risk should an accident or ethical indiscretion result.

4. Prepare and ask the right questions - then listen.

Being prepared with a job description and good questions says a lot about your company and level of professionalism as well. Our tight labor market will continue to get tighter over time as supported by recent census data. Your interview skill will impact who says yes when you are ready to make an offer. A 1998 survey by Integrity Search, Inc. found that 70 % of applicants felt "the interview is a strong indicator to a candidate of how an organization operates." Remember, you are also selling your company. The interview is an opportunity for your company to make an impression with each candidate.

Good questions are efficient. A few well-crafted words will reveal a lot of information about both applicant knowledge and talent. As an interviewer, you spend most of your time listening. It seems obvious, but think jobs you have interviewed for where the interviewer did most of the talking. It's a common mistake.

An effective question begins with: Could you tell me about . . .? For example, if you are hiring an accountant, you might ask the question "Could you tell me about when you had to explain payroll taxes to an employee?" This is much more effective than "Can you do payroll taxes?" In the "Tell me about . . ." example the interviewee will reveal their knowledge of taxes, communication skills, experience, and personal style. All of that information from a well crafted question.

The last key is to take notes on the different candidates. If you are interviewing more than two candidates, this is helpful when making your decision. Notes also give you an opportunity to jot down additional questions you may have, and will provide documentation should you ever need to explain a hiring decision.

A solid interviewing and selection process does not have to be complicated. It does have to be well planned, job-related, and consistent to yield the best employees to support your company's success.

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