

# Conducting Panel Employment Interviews

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 10/11/2007

Panel interviewing allows multiple people to interview a job candidate at the same time. A panel has two or more participants, which may include the direct manager for the role, human resources staff, department managers, and/or the candidate's potential colleagues. Peer participants commonly participate when recruiting a new senior staff member, but they can also be included in panels for recruits at other levels.

As with all job interviews, panel interviews serve two primary purposes: first, they allow the interviewers to determine if candidates are suitable for the position; second, they give candidates an opportunity to learn about the business and the job. Since the structure of a panel interview may be more intimidating to a candidate than a one-on-one interview, this can be a useful way of determining how candidates fare under pressure. The session should not turn into an aggressive or hostile grilling, however. There are a number of tips and tricks to conducting a panel interview that helps ensure it proceeds according to plan and assists in identifying the best person for the role.

## What You Need to Know

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### Why should I use a panel interview when filling a position?

Panel interviews have some advantages over the more traditional one-on-one style of interviewing. For example:

- Each member of the panel has a different set of skills and experience and thus, focuses on different aspects of each candidate's expertise.
- Panel interviews can be an effective means of gauging candidates' communication skills and their ability to cope under pressure.
- Each panel member provides his or her own assessment of the candidates, often resulting in a more objective interviewing format.

### How much time should be allowed for panel interviews?

It is important to set aside plenty of time for any interview. Panel interviews will require at least an hour. Time requirements can be greater as the number of participants increases; higher-level positions may also require more time. Allow at least 20 minutes between appointments to summarize the previous session with the panel and to review the résumé of the next candidate. If several

successive sessions are planned, allow a 10– to 15-minute break for panel members between each session.

## What to Do

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### Determine the Proper Structure

Some job interviews follow a formal structure of prepared questions, which are posed to each candidate. Others take a more informal approach, where interviewers simply talk with each candidate about their relevant skills and experience.

Because a panel interview involves a group of people, it is best to structure the interview formally, so that each member of the panel understands their role and knows what type of questions to ask the candidate. This will help the interview process run smoothly and will minimize confusion for the candidate.

Panel interviews can be approached in various ways; the best choice will depend on the circumstances of the company, position, and participants. Consider these common approaches:

- The *behavioral interview* is a traditional technique that assesses a candidate's suitability for the position by reviewing past experience, personal attributes, and skills in relation to the job specification.
- The *competency-based interview* focuses specifically on the skills needed for the position, which comprise the criteria against which the candidate is measured. The candidate's skills are discussed and reviewed against the core competencies required for the position.
- The *situational interview* examines how candidates would react in a specified job situation. This approach is sometimes based around multiple-choice answers to set questions. This interview style has been criticized, as candidates may simply attempt to identify the "right" answer rather than supplying an honest appraisal of their personal opinions and experiences.

Whichever interview approach is chosen, preparation is the key. Meet with panel participants and develop a list of standard questions—this will provide a structure for the interviews and help to ensure that they flow smoothly.

### Prepare the Panel

Thorough preparation is important before any interview. Things you will need to prepare ahead of time include a *job description* and an *ideal candidate profile* listing the core qualifications, experience and aptitudes that the successful applicant will need. Request input from other panel members when you draft these documents, so that everyone is clear about what your business is trying to achieve by recruiting for this role.

One of the most important aspects of preparing for a panel interview is to clarify the role of each panel participant. Appoint a “chairperson” to lead the panel interview. This person will be responsible for:

- welcoming the candidate to the room and making introductions;
- explaining the format the interview will take, and the role of each person on the panel;
- providing an introductory summary of the business background and the reasons for recruiting for this role;
- inviting the candidate to ask questions;
- closing the interview and explaining when the candidate can expect a decision.

Appoint individual panel members to ask specific questions. Try to match colleagues with their areas of expertise. For example, a representative from the technical team might ask questions about the candidates’ technical skills. If the person who will ultimately supervise the new employee is part of the panel, encourage them to ask “operational” questions about the candidate’s practical experience and skills.

To get an even wider perspective on candidates, consider appointing some panel members as “silent observers.” The observers can concentrate on taking formal notes to assist discussion after the interview ends.

It is critical that each panel member be able to attend all of the interview sessions, so that the process is fair and equal. Each panel member should be provided copies of the relevant documentation, including:

- each candidate’s résumé or application form;
- job description;
- ideal candidate profile (describing the type of candidate sought, in terms of their qualifications, experience, skills, and knowledge).

Circulate these materials well in advance of the interviews.

## **Ensure a Smooth Process**

Before the first interviewee arrives, confirm that each panel member is absolutely clear about the expectations of them and the questions he or she is to ask. Confusion can result during the interview if questions are repeated or if it is not clear to whom the candidate should direct a response.

Panel members tasked with asking questions should employ active listening techniques. This involves listening to the response given by the candidate and then verbally summarizing the key points. This helps to ensure that everyone present understands what the candidates are trying to convey, and also provides candidates an opportunity to make their responses clearer.

At the end of the interview, the chairperson should give the candidate an opportunity to ask questions about the job or the business. Decide ahead of time if one person will be designated to answer these

questions, or if they will be fielded to panel members with appropriate knowledge or experience. To avoid interruption and confusion, the chairperson should take responsibility for directing questions to individual panel members. It may help to practice this process with another colleague before the interview to become comfortable with it.

After answering the candidate's questions, it is good practice for the chairperson to explain what will happen next and when the candidate can expect to learn the outcome of the interview.

## **De-brief After the Interview**

After all the interviews have been completed, schedule a de-briefing meeting with all the panel members to discuss and compare each candidate's performance. Alternatively, if the interviews are spread out over time, schedule these discussions intermittently while the impressions are still current.

Stick to the job description and ideal candidate profile when assessing core skills and experience. Do not be afraid, however, to encourage panel members to share perceptions about a candidate's general attitude. The advantage of holding a panel interview is the benefit of multiple opinions. Each panel member brings different expectations and experiences to the interview, and this can facilitate in-depth discussion about the merits of each candidate and the potential match with the position and/or business.

Appoint a single panel member to compile notes on the discussion and to provide feedback to candidates.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Aren't Clear About Roles within the Panel**

Do not allow the group dynamic of a panel interview to result in confusion. Each member of the interview panel must be clear about his or her role. A chairperson should be designated to lead the proceedings, and a note-taker should be appointed. These techniques will help prevent the candidates from becoming confused, will ensure that things run smoothly, and result in one set of comprehensive notes. All of this will help you to make a fair and objective decision.

### **You Ask Discriminatory Questions**

It is essential that every member of the panel understands the law regarding discrimination, and has a clear understanding of the type of questions to be avoided at all costs. If necessary, consider planning a training or review session prior to starting the interview process, to ensure that everyone

is knowledgeable about this vital legal requirement. The Department of Labor's Web site (address below) is an excellent source of information.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Web Site:**

Department of Labor Compliance Assistance Law Guide: [www.dol.gov/compliance/guide/index.htm](http://www.dol.gov/compliance/guide/index.htm)

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