

Interviewing Candidates and Making Job Offers

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 11/28/2007

A job interview has two primary objectives: First, to find out if the candidate is qualified for the job; and second, to provide the candidate with information about the position and the company. To ensure the right person is hired, it's essential that all candidates have the same opportunities to demonstrate their qualifications and ask questions. If interviewers hope to find their "ideal candidate," they need to have a strong idea of what they're looking for, and they must also have useful questions prepared to help identify the right person.

This article gives advice on interview preparation and techniques, and also outlines the necessary "next steps" to take once all interviews are completed.

What You Need to Know

What does the candidate need to know before the interview?

Along with date, time and location, give interviewees clear instructions on how to get to your company offices and whom to ask for upon arriving. If any candidates need special assistance to accommodate a disability, now's the time to learn this. Also tell candidates what to bring with them (such as pen, paper, calculator or résumé, if not already submitted). Candidates should also know how long the interview is likely to last, the number of individual conversations they are likely to have, and whether or not they will be reimbursed for any travel expenses. If they will be tested (for example, a relevant skill test such as typing speed), it's polite to let candidates know that in advance, too.

Who should conduct the interview?

If you are a small business owner, you may be the only manager and thus the sole interviewer. If you do work with others, though, you might ask a colleague to join you so that you get another opinion about each candidate—or have an appropriate colleague interview candidates separately. If the person hired will be working for someone other than you, the candidates' prospective manager or supervisor is a logical choice. If possible, you might also involve someone in the company who has special technical knowledge about the job in question and who will be able to offer useful assessments about each candidate.

How long is a typical interview?

There are no hard and fast rules. Obviously, how long you talk to someone depends on the job in question, his or her qualifications and experience, and the rapport you develop with them. Generally speaking, interviews last between 30 and 60 minutes, including the time a candidate is given ask questions. Schedule breaks of about 20 minutes between interviews; you will need time to make notes about the last interview and briefly prepare for the next one. Interviewing is a tiring process, so don't schedule more than four or five interviews in a day, and always avoid conducting them "back-to-back" if you can.

What to Do

Prepare Questions Carefully

Decide what questions you will ask, based on the requirements of the position you're filling. Include general questions about the candidate's experience and skills, as well as questions that probe more deeply into how well a candidate "fits" the job at hand. You should also prepare questions specific to each candidate: queries about any gaps in a résumé, for instance, or ones prompted by what a given candidate wrote on an application form. Take the time to read each application thoroughly and structure questions to avoid getting only "Yes" and "No" answers.

Pick the Right Location

Along with preparing questions, you also need to give some thought to where you will be asking them. Find a somewhere you won't be interrupted, and make sure that you've made any adjustments needed to accommodate an interviewee who has indicated a disability. If you don't, you're leaving yourself open to a possible discrimination charge.

Ask Questions and Observe Body Language

The first thing to do is welcome the candidate and introduce yourself and any other colleagues who may be present. Next, briefly outline how the interview will be structured, then offer some background information about the organization and the job.

Start the interview with easy "getting-to-know-you" questions. They will help put the candidate at ease, initiate a rapport, and also can help gently shift the interview to more probing, in-depth questions. Ask about the candidate's skills and experience first. Once those basics are covered,

move on to ask why the candidate thinks he or she is qualified for the job, and what his or her expectations and long-term career ambitions are.

As you conduct the interview, observe the candidate's behavior as well as what she or he says. Body language is often a good indication of one's general level of confidence.

Towards the end of the interview, ask the candidate if he or she has any questions for you. It is a good way to find out how much homework the interviewee has done about the business, which often will reflect the level of interest in the job. Also ask each candidate to briefly summarize for you what *his* or *her* understanding of the job is. This will help you to determine how well a candidate has grasped the outline you've provided and how clearly you have explained it. Finally, remember to thank the candidate for coming to meet with you, and to explain what the likely next steps are (if there are to be second interviews, for example) and when the candidate should expect to hear from you.

Pay Attention to Your Technique

Make it a point to ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a "yes" or a "no." When you want more information, probe for specific answers and details—gently, but don't be afraid to be persistent. If a candidate seems to be avoiding a topic, use follow-up queries to try to fill in the blanks. Often, a short "Such as...?" or a simple "Tell me more" does the trick.

Encourage candidates to describe their skills in detail and to offer anecdotes that illustrate how they match the job's requirements. Pose questions that will encourage the candidate to sell him or herself to you. For example, you could ask, "Why should I hire you?" or, "Why do you want to work here?" or, "What are we buying if we do hire you?" But also be prepared to answer the candidate who asks, "Why should I join your company instead of your competitor's?"

Savvy interviewers also ask situational or hypothetical questions that describe a typical situation the business will face; the interviewee then has to propose a solution to handle it. This is a useful way to discern problem-solving and reasoning abilities. For example, you might ask, "Your boss assigns you a certain task. Shortly afterwards, a coworker says he needs your help on a high-priority project. What do you do?"

Throughout the interview, remember to keep your tone mild and non-judgmental, particularly when asking "the difficult question." Maintain a logical sequence of questions so the candidate does not become confused. Make sure that you pause appropriately in the conversation, to give the candidate time to think. Especially when posing a particularly tricky question, suppress the urge to interrupt. That *can* be difficult, especially if a candidate is struggling with an answer; even so, you want to give each candidate the opportunity to get a point across.

Assess Each Candidate Promptly

Once the interview concludes, it's essential to give yourself time then and there to make notes about anything you heard that might directly influence your decision. Do this as soon as you can, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind. If you prepared properly before the interview, you'll already have decided on key selection criteria; in turn, the final decision should be based primarily on how closely each candidate matched the requirements of the job in question. You may find that a scoring system that awards points to each candidate for each of the respective job requirements will help you reach your decision more objectively.

Three basic questions can be equally helpful:

- *Can* this person do the job?
- *Will* this person do the job?
- *How well* will this person be able to work with our other employees?

Keep an Open Mind—and Obey the Law

Except for jobs that require very specific and expressed physical skills, it's best not to jump to conclusions about a given candidate's suitability; moreover, doing so may be patently illegal. Many companies these days are making real efforts to contribute to their local communities by trying to break down barriers in the workplace and employing people with disabilities. If you are interested in growing your team in this way, there are good sources of help available to you. Disability employment assistance is available from numerous public and private sources in many communities around the country, including Social Security offices. Assistance can include grants to both employers and potential employees with a disability.

Make Your Offer

If you've narrowed your field of candidates to two or three persons, it's now time to invite them back for a second interview. Conduct them much as you did the first, but without all the introductory "rites."

Upon selecting the candidate you want to hire, let him or her know right away. That usually means a phone call, since there is always the possibility that your top choice is also someone else's top choice and may have other interviews pending—and perhaps another offer, too. Discuss salary and benefits in detail with the successful candidate at this point and address any questions that may have arisen since you last met.

If the candidate accepts, follow up your conversation with a letter that formally confirms the job offer and contains such details as starting date, salary, and basic terms and conditions. Finally, both call

and write to unsuccessful candidates. They, too, have a right to know the outcome as soon as the job offer has been formally accepted. On occasion, these candidates may request feedback about their interviews, so be prepared to provide it. Arranging a subsequent time to talk is wise; you can have your notes at hand and be better prepared.

Provide Legal Protection with an Employment Contract

Along with a confirmation letter, you may want to prepare an employment contract. For high-level positions especially, such a practice has become fairly routine. Understandably, employees want some protection from being dismissed “at will.” Without a written agreement, they may feel they’re at the whim of an employer who doesn’t need legal, concrete reasons for terminating them. From a company’s perspective, the people it hires aren’t necessarily bound to protect proprietary information or remain loyal and thus could defect to a competitor on a whim; an employment contract provides some uniform legal protection. A contract also can discourage less-than-honorable persons from applying in the first place. It suggests that your recruitment and hiring practices will likely discover something about their past that might well disqualify them.

If you are preparing a contract for the first time, or rewriting contracts as part of a revision of recruitment and hiring practices, here is a list of key elements to include:

- Name of employee and company
- Job title, description and to whom the job reports
- Effective starting date (and expiration date if contract is of limited duration)
- Salary or pay rate and frequency, bonuses, and performance review procedure
- Company-paid benefits, such as medical, vacations, sick leave, pensions, and retirement
- Terms and conditions of employment—place, hours, any distinct requirements
- Special conditions of employment (for example, a probationary period)
- Conditions for possible termination and notices required
- Process for filing a grievance and recourse for appealing disciplinary action
- Confidentiality, non-disclosure, and non-compete clauses (so that essential information cannot be taken to any new jobs that the employee takes up in the future)
- Ownership rights to property and products (intellectual and real) developed while employed

What to Avoid

You Do Most of the Talking

Don't forget that the main purpose of the interview is for *you* to find out about the *candidate*! Certainly you want to outline the job, describe the company, provide pertinent details about the business and establish a congenial atmosphere. But do it concisely. Interviewers need to be listeners, first and foremost, not talkers.

You Ask Discriminatory Questions

Legally, there are many questions that you must not ask because they are considered to be discriminatory and therefore unlawful. Three of the more obvious ways in which your questions could be considered to be unlawfully prejudicial are:

- *Sex discrimination* Obviously, everyone should avoid making sexist comments, but you must also avoid such questions as, "Are you planning to start a family?" If, say, you refuse to employ a woman because she says that she and her husband are, you are being discriminatory and the candidate has grounds for a formal complaint against you and your company.
- *Racial discrimination* Similarly, you cannot discriminate on the basis of race. This covers both ethnic background and country of origin. Nor can you ask candidates if they have any religious affiliations.
- *Disability discrimination* If the candidate discloses a disability, you cannot use it as a reason not to employ him or her unless it is justified. For example, somebody who is visually impaired would not be able to work as a driver yet could perform numerous tasks in an office with the right equipment. If it will only take small adjustments for a disabled person to do a job and that person is the best-qualified candidate, then you have to make the adjustments. Given federal laws, any questions about disability have to be carefully worded and must center on how you can help enable the candidate with the disability to perform the job, rather than on why the disability excludes that candidate.

Age discrimination is sometimes listed as a fourth problem area. While a formal complaint may be harder to prove, an off-handed comment in an interview about seeking "a younger person" or a reference to "gray beards" can bring harsh consequences. So avoid them, too.

You Allow Candidates to Infer That They Have Been Offered the Job

It's very important to avoid making statements during an interview that one could allege creates a contract of employment. It's easy to casually say "you" while describing what the successful candidate would be doing in his or her job; for example, an interviewer might slip and say, "You would be working with partners on a variety of projects." That could imply that the candidate is going to be hired. Try to avoid this as much as possible; use more general terms such as "the job-holder." Also avoid making excessive assurances about job security. On occasion, courts have held that promises made during interviews *did* create contracts of employment.

You Don't Question Your Assumptions

It's ever so easy for stereotypical assumptions to creep into the interview and hiring process. Especially beware of rejecting candidates due to a "gut feeling" or the notion that they would not "fit in." Federal bodies like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (not to mention private sector advocacy lawyers) are increasingly suspicious of such comments and will make their own assumptions about them being based on discriminatory assumptions. That may lead to complaints and legal challenges.

You Don't Weigh Your Decision Carefully Enough

A rule of thumb among hiring experts is that fully 50 percent of a hiring decision is made when a candidate appears at the door, and another 30 percent is made when that candidate first opens his or her mouth. In other words, only 20 percent of a hiring decision is based on a candidate's skills, experience, motivations and ambitions! The message? Don't base decisions on minutia or frivolous factors. Hiring is the most important decision a manager can make. Do it with care.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Falcone, Paul. *The Hiring and Firing Question and Answer Book*. AMACOM, 2006.

Paetkau, Tyler M. *Hiring and Firing*. Entrepreneur Press, 2007.

Web Sites:

Americans with Disabilities: www.ada.gov

Job Interview Guide: www.job-interview.net

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: www.eeoc.gov

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.