



Hiring for Best Fit – Interviewing 101

By Rebecca Ripley
Principal with *Challenge It Now*

Hiring mistakes are costly, both in terms of wasted dollars and customer goodwill. The Hay Group estimates that it costs a company 6 months' salary to replace an hourly employee and 18 month's salary to replace one in management. No to mention the sleepless nights you'll spend worrying over a bad hiring choice. If you've ever interviewed the "perfect applicant," only to find him or her morphed into an evil twin three months later, you know what we're talking about.

Finding the right person for the job is a challenge. Poor selection decisions can result in lost recruiting and training dollars, increased coaching and counseling time and energy, reduced productivity, and low morale among all employees who have to work harder to make up for the poor performer. If you terminate the employee prematurely, you may face a costly discrimination charge or have to pay unemployment benefits.

How can you increase your interviewing effectiveness? Pay careful attention to each phase of the hiring process:

- Planning for the Interview
- Conducting the Interview
- Evaluating the Applicant

Planning

The planning process is the foundation for successful hiring decisions. The key is to clarify exactly what you need long before you read your first resume or conduct your first interview. Follow this simple five-step process:

1. Identify job requirements. Write or update the position description to accurately reflect major duties and/or key result areas. What are the skill, education and experience requirements for this job?
2. Identify applicant requirements. What kind of person will best complement your existing staff? For example, if you are hiring a

- second accounting assistant, consider the strengths of the incumbent. If s/he is great at detail work but not exceptionally good with customers, target the search for an accounting assistant with strong interpersonal skills as well as attention to detail. Does the position require a creative, innovative approach or a more orderly, systematic style? Applicant preferences in these areas can be measured in the interview and are an integral part of overall job satisfaction and fit.
3. Now that you have a picture of the ideal applicant's skills, develop a list of questions regarding the required competencies. Write structured, skill-based questions to ask *all* applicants. When you use a consistent set of questions, you conduct a legally defensible interview and ensure that all applicants have an equal shot at the job. In designing questions, the key point to remember is that the best indicator of future behavior is past performance. For example, "Tell me about a difficult customer you faced in your last job. How did you work with the person to solve his/her problem?" This behavior-based question will generate much more useful insights than a generic open-ended question like, "Tell me about your customer service experience." Responses about real-life situations provide valuable, predictive data. Identify the top 2-5 technical skill areas and/or needed performance skill areas (including work habits) and write a few behavioral questions to address each skill set. Use the framework of "Describe a time when..." or "Tell me about a time when you..."
 4. Review applications and resumes. Your review should uncover specific areas to be explored with this unique applicant during the interview. Add these probing questions *for this applicant* to the structured set of questions you already identified. Particular attention should be given to the following "red flag" areas:
 - Salary progression – Did increases appear to be above or below normal?
 - Gaps in employment – Was the applicant in school or doing temp work – or was there something nefarious going on in their life? Due to a legal issue called "negligent hiring," it is imperative that you document all responses regarding gaps in employment. If you "could have/should have" known about someone's past but didn't, simply because you never bothered to ask, you are putting yourself and your company at risk. Even if you can't *prove* that the applicant was traveling in Europe those six months, you can document that you asked and were given a satisfactory answer.
 - Reasons for leaving past jobs – Was it really a voluntary separation? Does the applicant have a track record of not getting along with past bosses? Did the grass always look greener? Were their expectations unrealistic? Assess their responses and the likelihood of a similar separation scenario a year down the road.
 - Extracurricular activities – Has the applicant done anything in his/her free time to develop job-related skills?

5. Prepare hosting arrangements. Plan for someone to greet applicants and make them comfortable. For the interview, reserve a private area free of interruptions. You want to treat the interview as the significant conversation that it is.

Conducting the Interview

An interview is no more than a focused conversation between two people with complementary needs. Your organization needs a skilled employee and the applicant needs a job. The tone should be one of mutual respect and interest. The following guidelines will help structure the interview.

1. **Establish rapport.** Greet the applicant warmly, offer a firm handshake and a beverage, and engage briefly in small talk about the weather, their drive in, parking, directions, etc. This brief conversation helps to reduce the applicant's anxiety and results in a more open, candid discussion. The more candid an applicant is during the interview, the more likely it is that you are getting a realistic picture of their personality.
2. **Present a broad overview of the position.** Don't telegraph exactly what type of person is needed. If a position is described too thoroughly, a savvy applicant will direct his/her responses to your stated preferences.
3. **Ask your prepared questions.** Begin with a traditional question to help put the applicant at ease. "Can you walk me through your work history?" or "Tell me about a typical day in your current job." Then, move into your behavior-based questions, probing to get a complete picture of the applicant's past experiences. If s/he gives you a generic response like, "I've worked with lots of difficult customers, but there was nothing I couldn't handle," follow up with, "OK, now think about one of the most challenging situations, and walk me through exactly how you resolved the situation."

Because college placement offices and job search websites offer guidelines on how to practice for behavioral interviews, don't be satisfied with just one example. Later in the interview, ask another question about the same skill or competency. Can the applicant provide new examples? You want to see a pattern of effective behaviors.

4. **Allow silence.** If applicants have not been exposed to behavior-based interviews, these questions will be challenging to answer. Time is needed to replay life experiences in their minds, searching for relevant examples. If you want the applicant to be comfortable with silence, *you* need to be comfortable. Say something like, "I know these questions can be tough. I want to assure you that I ask them of all applicants, and we've built in time for you to think of specific

examples. Take your time.” If s/he still can't think of anything, coach him/her a bit by suggesting that s/he think back to a school experience or maybe a part-time job or a community project. Then, just sit back and be quiet. Use the time to make your notes more legible or begin to identify assumptions you have made.

5. **Watch nonverbal cues** – yours as well as the applicant's. If you scowl in response to a particular answer, the savvy applicant will steer clear of that subject. An approving nod encourages the applicant to continue to discuss the topic. On the applicant side, if s/he gets uncomfortable discussing his/her last boss, probe more deeply. “You seem uneasy talking about your boss at XYZ Company. What's that about?” It is easy to miss important clues if we don't stay tuned in to the applicant.
6. **Listen carefully.** Most of us talk at about 125 words per minute, but we can comprehend at the rate of 400-500 words per minute. That makes for a lot of “down time.” It's easy to be distracted, especially if the applicant isn't totally engaging. (And for some jobs, an engaging personality is not necessary.) Focus your attention on the applicant's answers, questions, and nonverbal responses. Demonstrate active listening behaviors. Lean forward slightly. Maintain eye contact. Provide regular feedback like, “That's really interesting” or “Tell me more about that” or “Hmmm...” Ask clarifying questions. Fill in the “who, what, when, where, how” of the examples. Avoid fidgeting or looking at a clock or your watch.
7. **Take notes.** Practice taking notes during the interview. Write down snippets of the applicant's verbatim responses that capture the essence of the examples being shared. Use quotations to indicate actual statements. When you take notes, you can review past responses and summarize what you've learned thus far. It also helps you clarify any assumptions you might have made, i.e., “Julie, I'm getting the sense that you really prefer to work independently. Is that an accurate statement?”
8. **Ask the applicant if s/he has any questions of you.** Up until now, you have been in the driver's seat. The applicant may need clarification or additional information.
9. **Review and summarize.** Briefly state what you've heard about the applicant's interests, skills, and abilities. By clarifying your perceptions, you are giving the applicant an opportunity to confirm or negate your assumptions. In the example above about your perception that Julie wants to work independently, she might say, “Oh no, I much prefer to work on a team. It's just that most of my previous jobs required me to work alone. While I work well without supervision, my favorite job was my part-time experience with ABC Company where we had a team environment very similar to yours.”

10. **Sell your organization.** Realistically talk about the job and the company. Help applicants think about how the position fits into their overall career plans. If this job is not a good match, it is better to discover it now, rather than after two or three months on the job. Don't ever make promises you can't keep and don't make the job sound better than it is.
11. **Preview what will happen next.** Let the applicant know when a hiring decision is expected. Find out if s/he has other offers pending that might require earlier decisions. A highly qualified person should never be lost simply because there is one last interview scheduled. Thank the applicant for his/her time and interest and be sure to get back to him/her by the specified date, even if it is to say that the decision has been delayed another week or two. Remember that every interview is an opportunity to build goodwill in your community.

Evaluating the Applicant

Once the applicant leaves, thoroughly record your observations while they are still fresh in your mind. State the specific behavioral examples that will influence the hiring decision. The goal following each interview is to determine the applicant's success potential in your organization. Compare each individual with the job requirements that were identified prior to the interviews. If s/he meets or exceeds the requirements, compare him/her to other qualified applicants to select the person who is the best fit.

Think in terms of the three C's: competence, commitment and chemistry. *Can* they do the job, *will* they do the job, and will they *fit* in? Fit is never about discrimination. It is about work style and approach. If you have a team-oriented environment and this person has an autocratic style, s/he would not be a good addition to your leadership team. They wouldn't be a good *fit*. Think about fit in terms of Southwest Airlines where they "hire for attitude and train for skill." Fit for them is about a love of people and fun and a willingness to offer help wherever it is needed.

Be willing to take risks in the process. Perhaps two applicants have impressive work histories. One has been an accounting clerk in a similar organization for the past two years. The other person has done highly detailed work, but not in accounting. The second person might be selected because s/he may be more challenged by the position and could grow with the company. Think in terms of the job's limitations as well as the promotion potential. What makes the most sense and what does your "gut" tell you?

Before the job is offered to your applicant of choice, check references. If possible, talk with the applicant's past supervisors. Describe the job you have available and ask them whether or not it sounds like a good fit. If you have any specific concerns, mention them and ask the supervisors for their advice. Always verify degrees and past employment. Even if a past

employer will share nothing but start and end dates, you can at least confirm honesty from the applicant.

Hiring competent, motivated staff is a complex, time-consuming process. Extra care during the planning, interview, and evaluation processes will lead to a significant return on your investment.

Rebecca Ripley is a sought-after speaker and facilitator and co-author of the book, "Managing by Thinking Around", a pocket book on creativity. With more than 20 years of experience in managing organizational climate and change, leadership coaching, team building, creativity and innovation, Beck uses her diverse experience base to provide a unique, value-added perspective to such clients as Pfizer, FedEx, Freightliner, Whirlpool, Bank of America, Prudential, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Pepsi. She holds an M.S. Degree in Educational Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

For a more global look at the current state of the hiring world, see Kris Campbell's article, "Behavioral Based Interviewing (BBI): A Discipline Worth Protecting".