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HOW TO BECOME A SKILLFUL INTERVIEWER

Randi Toler Sachs

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CHAPTER 4

PREPARING FOR THE HIRING INTERVIEW

“Now, let me just take a look at your resumé, and we’ll begin.”

“Where are you working at the present time?”

“From what school did you graduate?”

“Have you had any supervisory experience?”

“Where were you working before this job?”

What do all of these interview questions have in common? They all demonstrate that the interviewer failed to prepare adequately for the hiring interview. An effective interviewer does not waste time asking questions that have already been answered in writing. It’s essential to prepare in advance for the interview by reading the resumé or application, or both, thoroughly and then putting together questions according to what information you need to evaluate the applicant.

These preparations begin well before you read resúmes—in fact, even before you announce any job opening. The first step is to do a thorough analysis of the open position.

ANALYZING YOUR NEEDS

Too often, when an employee gives notice, the supervisor’s reflex is to dig into the files and pull out that employee’s job description. After a quick read and perhaps a change or two, the supervisor then sends it down to personnel with a request to run an ad to attract candidates for the job. If the supervisor is lucky, the personnel associate will question whether the

description is still accurate. Consider the following scenario as an example:

Personnel: We just received your request for a new administrative assistant. I’d like to go over a few things with you before I run the ad.

Manager: Well, if you want. But I think you can probably run the same ad as last time. He was only here for four years.

Personnel: Let’s see if things have changed. The old ad reads: *Administrative Assistant for busy department. Responsibilities include correspondence, word processing, support services for four salespeople. Ability to work independently important.* How does that sound to you now?

Manager: Actually, there are a few more requirements for the job now. The candidate should have experience in desktop publishing in addition to word processing. There are now six salespeople to support, and I’d really like to find someone who speaks Spanish as well.

Personnel: It’s a good thing we talked. I’ll rewrite the ad and begin looking through the resúmes that we have on file.

When a position opens up, particularly through turnover, it is a great opportunity to reevaluate what is needed to fill that void. Often some of the responsibilities that the departing employee filled can be given to lower-level employees, who will appreciate the chance to take on new tasks that will help them to improve their skills and marketability. Before any recruiting is done is the time to determine what place in the department this individual will fill. That is not to say that you cannot alter this decision if an applicant with more to offer turns up, but you must know what you are looking for before you begin the search process.

Actually, there are three issues to address here:

1. You must determine what the exact job responsibilities of the new employee will be; in other words,

**You must
do a thor-
ough analy-
sis of the
open posi-
tion.**

you must define the job and prepare a profile of the position.

- 2. You must determine what qualifications and skills are required in order to be able to carry out those responsibilities.
- 3. You should determine if the job requires a specific type of personality or temperament in an individual so that you can prepare an "ideal candidate profile." Do you need someone outgoing, for example, or is a more introverted type better suited to the position?

You can use the following questionnaire to make sure you have covered all the aspects of the job.

EMPLOYEE REQUIREMENTS

Employee title: _____

Employee is responsible for: _____

Employee reports to: _____

Employee works cooperatively with following staff members: _____

Employee should be knowledgeable about: _____

Employee should have practical work experience in the following: _____

Formal education/degrees/certification/license required: _____

Computer/technology skills required: _____

Amount of overtime expected: _____

Amount of travel expected: _____

Salary range to be offered: _____

This form can be used not only to prepare a classified ad or provide information for an employment agency or personnel department; it can also be used to assess resumés and applications for job suitability. Determining from the resumé whether an individual meets your qualifications is not always

Sometimes the way a resume is worded makes it difficult to get to the details you need.

easy or straightforward. Sometimes the way a resume is worded, for example, makes it difficult to get to the details you need. This questionnaire can help you take apart the resume bit by bit and make a more accurate judgment after analyzing the information.

For most position vacancies, ask candidates to fill out a job application. It can elicit educational background, job history, the candidate's social security number (which can be used to check references), and starting and ending salaries in past and present positions—information that is useful to you but generally is not included in a resume. The application is a less awkward way to acquire this information than verbal questions, which may be uncomfortable for some people.

EXAMINING A RESUMÉ

Resumes, presented as a job applicant's work and educational history, are really word puzzles that you need to decipher and interpret. Remember that everything in a resume is written to show the applicant in the best light. Your job is to try to uncover as much of the truth as you possibly can. You are limited, however, by an individual's right to privacy and by questions that can be considered discriminatory, topics covered in greater detail in Chapter 8.

When reading a resume, look out for the following:

- Gaps in dates of employment. This often indicates a period of unemployment. What is the reason for the gap? You have the right to ask.
- Companies listed that are no longer in business. Can you verify that the company did indeed exist at the time indicated on the resume?
- Exaggerating the usefulness of training courses. Did the applicant attend a legitimate course that taught a new skill, or was it a

weekend seminar that gave an overview of a topic?

- Claims that the applicant "supervised" or "managed" a project team. How many people were on this team? Could it have actually been an independent project?
- Listing years of experience that do not match the years actually spent in the work force.
- Job changes that do not indicate advancement.
- Exaggerated job titles that are meant to impress.
- A large number of relocations for which the applicant offers no explanation.
- References that all come from out of town. Unless the applicant has only recently moved to your area, this could indicate that she has something to hide.

All resumes should be read thoroughly before the interview takes place. Feel free to underline or circle any items in it about which you would like to ask. Ask yourself the following about the resume:

- Does it give a clear picture of the applicant's work experiences, present and past?
- Does it list the applicant's educational background, and are your requirements met?
- Are there any skills you require that are not mentioned on the resume?
- Is there any contradictory information on the resume? Be sure to ask about that.
- Does the available position seem to be a natural move for the applicant? Why?

Any major omission in a resumé is probably a good enough reason to decide against granting an interview. If you decide to go ahead and interview someone with a questionable resumé, be prepared to obtain the information the applicant has failed to provide. If the omission is a deal breaker—that is, you cannot consider hiring the candidate without the specific qualification that has not been listed—ask the candidate about this on the telephone before committing to an interview.

SETTING AN AGENDA

By reading the applicant's resumé and comparing it with the Employee Requirements questionnaire, you have taken the first steps toward setting an agenda for an effective interview. Next, you must devise a plan for how to question the applicant in order to obtain the information you need.

Assuming the resumé or application submitted was thorough and straightforward, let's look at what information you have and what you don't.

You Probably Know:

- Current and past job titles held by the applicant
- Types of businesses in which the applicant has worked
- Years of experience in the field
- Technical skills claimed by the applicant
- Formal education, degrees, licenses
- Additional education and training

You Still Need to Know:

- Actual responsibilities held by the applicant
- Applicant's approach to work
- Applicant's objectives in seeking new employment
- Applicant's short- and long-term goals
- Applicant's compatibility (work style plus skill level) with your own department members
- Applicant's actual skill level

Every employment interview should have a definite beginning, a middle, and an end, and you need to prepare yourself to carry out the meeting in this structure.

The beginning of the interview serves as an introduction. Welcome the applicant cordially, and direct her to a seat that has been set up for her. Many interviewers like to start off with an innocuous icebreaking remark about the applicant's travel or the weather. You can then take the opportunity to tell the applicant that you have reviewed her resumé and are looking forward to finding out more about her—an easy transition to asking some probing questions.

PLANNING YOUR QUESTIONS

The main part of the interview will focus on asking questions of the applicant that are designed to reveal her actual job qualifications and give you the information you need as to whether this person will be a match for the job. When you prepared for the interview by reading the applicant's resumé and/or application carefully, you planned your questions.

There is nothing wrong with having a list of prepared questions, but if you don't like the idea of reading questions, you can just list the subjects you want to cover. This alternative can work as long as you know what to ask in order to get the answers you need. In either case—prepared questions or a topic outline—plan to take notes during or directly after the interview—or both times. It is too easy to forget an impression made or an idea expressed by a job applicant, particularly when you are conducting multiple interviews and you forget which candidate said what.

During the interview, be prepared to listen. Keep your questions short and to the point so that the applicant has time to reply fully.

If there are any discrepancies or contradictions in information or dates listed in the resumé, you may want to ask about them early in the interview. In this way, you can clear up

any concerns and be better able to concentrate on learning about the applicant's qualifications for the job.

An employment interview has a lot going on beneath the surface. Your goal is to find out as much about the applicant as you can, including any faults or shortcomings. The applicant, however, is determined to answer each question in a way that will show him in only the most favorable light.

ARE YOU READY?

Before beginning any employment interview, go over the following checklist to make sure you have properly prepared for the session:

- My office is neat and presentable.
- I have read and taken notes about the resumé and job application and have them on the desk.
- I have arranged not to be disturbed for the time allotted for the interview.
- I have arranged the furniture in a manner suitable for our discussion.
- I have a copy of the job description of the position available.
- I have available samples of the company's (or department's) work to show the applicant.
- I have prepared questions that are designed to elicit the specific information I need in order to make a fair evaluation.

DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU WANT?

Before you begin any interview, draw up a profile of the person you believe would be best in the position. Use the

following checklist to make sure you know just what type of person is desired.

- I know the responsibilities of the job.
- I have identified the persons with whom the new employee will work.
- I have decided on the educational and experience requirements for the job.
- I have determined whether the job requires an individual with a specific type of temperament.
- I have clarified the salary range I may offer.

CHAPTER 6

GETTING ANSWERS TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

“What is your salary requirement?”

“What do you like least about your occupation?”

“Why did you leave your last place of employment?”

“What are your expectations for your next job?”

“What are the qualities you look for in an employer or a manager?”

These questions are all reasonable to ask in an interview, and if the applicant answered them honestly, you would have gotten some very useful information. Usually, however, the answers to each of the questions are likely to be evasive or incomplete. Or you might not even get an answer.

It's not unusual for job applicants to be hesitant to commit to anything definite, such as salary requirement or job expectations. In fact, the word *requirement* when asked in a question such as, “Is working independently a requirement of a job for you?” can cause an applicant to retract statements already made in order to appear to be well-suited for the position. Similarly, questions that seem to push an applicant to speak negatively about a former employer or work experience can put the applicant on the defensive and cause her to respond evasively.

THE THREE R'S

There are ways to obtain information that the applicant appears reluctant to divulge. They can be called the three R's

The three R's of interviewing: repeat, rephrase, require.

of interviewing: repeat, rephrase, require. Some circumstances call for using just one or two steps, and others may need all three:

1. *Repeat the question.* When an applicant tries to avoid answering your question, try repeating it. Sometimes she is so intent on imparting a specific item of information that she doesn't stop to listen to exactly what you are asking.
2. *Rephrase.* If repeating doesn't get a response, rephrase the question so that it is not as threatening to the applicant. Adding some qualifiers such as, “I know it's a difficult question,” or “I can appreciate why you might hesitate to answer, but . . .” can soften the impact of your question.
3. *Require.* Finally, you may need to require the applicant to answer the question.

Suppose you need to know the applicant's salary requirement. The following exchange covers the three R's:

Interviewer: What salary do you require in order to accept this position?

Applicant: That's hard to say. Of course, there are so many things to consider, and not the least important is the job itself. I'm really looking for a position that gives me an opportunity to increase my skills and that has room for me to grow as I improve.

Interviewer [repeating]: I appreciate that, but I imagine you do have an amount in mind that you would need in order to accept the job. What would that figure be?

Applicant: Well, as I said before, it really depends on the whole compensation package.

Interviewer [rephrasing]: And what would you think is a fair compensation package for you, for this particular position?

Applicant: I'm really not sure at this point. I think I need to know more about the position before I can make that determination.

Interviewer [*requiring*]: I understand your reluctance to commit yourself to a figure, but I do need to know if we are in the same ballpark in order to continue with this interview. I don't want to waste your time if there is no chance of a match. Take a few moments to think about it now, please.

At that point, the applicant has little choice, but to name the salary requirement that he probably has in mind from the start of the interview. Assuming that it is in the range you are offering, you can then continue the interview.

Some of the other questions that applicants stumble over are those that seem to ask them to speak to the negative. Most applicants like to keep interviews upbeat and positive. Rephrasing these questions and then encouraging the applicant to continue by practicing active listening can coax the information from even a closed-mouthed applicant. Here's an example of how it works:

Interviewer: What is it about your job now that makes you want to leave? Are you unhappy there?

Applicant: Oh no, it's not that. I just feel I'm ready to move on to more responsibility and a larger opportunity. This position seems to be just what I'm looking for. I really wanted a position in which I could use my technical skills and yet interact with people more.

Interviewer: Which of those opportunities does your present job fail to offer you

Applicant: Well, I do mostly technical work. I don't get a chance to work with users much.

Interviewer: And you find that frustrating?

Applicant: Well, it's just that I know I'm very good at explaining things. When I do get the chance to work directly with users, it always goes very well. That's why I was attracted to this position. You stated that you wanted someone with both types of skills.

Interviewer: Why do you think you wouldn't be able to increase your working with users in your present position,

especially since you say it's been successful when it happens?

Applicant: That's just not the way it works there. Everything goes through the department manager. Staff members deal directly with the users only when he's away. I don't see that changing at all.

Interviewer: So, you're unhappy about that type of management structure then?

[*Finally, the applicant is ready to reveal why she wants to leave her present job.*]

Applicant: Well, to be honest, I find it stifling. I really need to be in an environment that allows me some more responsibility for what I do.

Interviewer: That's good to know. I believe we do share your philosophy on that.

In this example, it took a bit of digging to find out that the applicant was really looking for two changes: greater responsibility and a different type of manager. It is doubtful that the applicant would have revealed this information had it not been coaxed out of her. Note that each question the interviewer asked is based on information supplied by the applicant's answers. The interviewer is using active listening to its best advantage in this manner. (We will explore active listening in greater detail in the next chapter.) The interviewer rewarded the applicant by reacting positively to her "confession." This response is likely to encourage the applicant to continue being more open, thereby giving the interviewer more insight into what type of employee the applicant might be.

HOW TO USE SILENCE

If you are having a hard time getting an answer to a question from an applicant, you may choose to stonewall and see if your silence or curt responses can bring forth an answer. Most applicants find silence uncomfortable and seek to fill it to keep the interview going. Here's how it might work:

Interviewer: What do you think you can get from this position that will give you the satisfaction you are seeking?
Applicant: Oh, I think this job would be great for me. The description is exactly what I'd like to do.

Interviewer: Did you not feel that way about your present job when you decided to accept that position?

Applicant: No, not really.

Interviewer: Why was that different?

Applicant: Well, it was a different type of situation.

Interviewer: *[remains silent while looking up and making eye contact, seeking further explanation]*

Applicant: At that time I was mostly looking to get started. I really needed my first stepping-stone.

Interviewer: And now?

Applicant: Now I feel that I have the experience to offer you and that this is the type of job in which I could be happy. I'm looking for a place where I can stay and grow. I have a lot of different responsibilities in my present job, and I know that my interest—and I believe my talent—is in doing the work that this position calls for. I'm ready to specialize, so to speak, and my current company does not have that kind of opportunity.

DRAWING OUT QUIET TYPES

Sometimes an applicant is not evasive intentionally but just doesn't offer the information you need to make a fair judgment. Perhaps the applicant is afraid to reveal too much and feels that the less said, the better. You can draw this person out by paraphrasing what has been said and also by acting attentive and interested and requesting further details. Here's an example of how to interview a candidate for a secretarial position who is reticent to offer much information about herself:

Interviewer: Tell me about your present position. What are your responsibilities?

A quieter candidate is not necessarily someone with less to brag about.

Applicant: Oh, it's pretty much your basic secretarial duties. There are three managers who share my services.

Interviewer: That must keep you busy.

Applicant: Yes, I suppose you could say that.

Interviewer: *[realizing that the information will have to be pulled from this candidate]* Can you tell me how you manage to keep up with the needs of three managers? Do they all have similar workloads for you to contend with?

Applicant: Well, actually, one of the managers gives me more work than the other two.

Interviewer: Do you have any trouble keeping it all straight? It sounds like a big job.

Applicant: Actually, I've devised a system of my own to keep things organized. If I stick to that, I don't have much trouble.

Interviewer: Really, that sounds great. Tell me about it.

Applicant: Well, I just keep a log of everything.

Interviewer: And?

Applicant: I organize the work according to type and priority.

Interviewer: And how does that help you?

Applicant: Well, I find that by doing similar types of work together, I save time and energy. Not only do I do work by priority, but the managers and I have come to an understanding about this as well. They accept that I understand what is important and also that I will do my best to complete my assignments. They also accept that since I am one person working for three, there will be times when they will have to wait for something to be done.

Interviewer: You seem to have a strong sense of responsibility and a good understanding of the business your managers carry out.

Applicant: Oh, I think most secretaries do.

Interviewer: Only the good ones.

If the interviewer had not chosen to delve into this applicant's experience, it is doubtful that she would have made such a good impression.

Some candidates boldly boast about their accomplishments, but quieter candidates do not necessarily have less to brag about. They may not be completely comfortable talking about themselves, and if that is not essential to performing the job, you should make the effort to bring out the information these candidates are not sharing with you.

EVALUATING YOUR QUESTIONS

Most employment interviews should be limited in time. Except for a high executive position, forty-five minutes should be sufficient for a first interview. Therefore, it is important not to waste time on questions that do not give the applicant an opportunity to reveal important, evaluative information. Once you have had a fair amount of experience in interviewing, you will probably come up with several favorite questions that you ask all candidates, regardless of the position they are seeking. For example, many interviewers like to present a hypothetical situation to their job applicants and ask how they would resolve it. If you can, write down your favorite "challenging" questions for job applicants below:

Now evaluate each question using the following checklist. If you cannot answer yes to one or more of the questions on the checklist, reconsider whether that question is truly worthwhile.

- Does the question ask something about the candidate you cannot learn from the resumé or job application?
- Does the question ask for specific information you need to evaluate whether the candidate is suited for this job?
- Does the question require the candidate to share opinions and ideas with you?
- Does the question ask the candidate to demonstrate knowledge, skills, or practical experience?
- Does the question require the candidate to reveal information about his work style or how he functions in the workplace?