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Interviewing: Make Sure What You See Is What You Get

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Interviewing today often feels like trying to walk through quicksand: the harder you work, the harder it seems to be to get the real information you need. The main reason for this is a technique known as "behavioral interviewing," which relies mainly on questions about applicants' past behavior. Unfortunately, these questions are frequently asked in a way that reveals the answers employers hope to hear, which has led many employers to hire applicants who answer questions well but perform poorly on the job.

Past behavior is important. It's still the best predictor of future behavior. But unfortunately, over the past few years, this type of interviewing has become so popular that most job applicants who have done much interviewing know how to answer most of the questions that will be asked before interviewers even ask them.

The problem is that this makes it even harder to get the information you need to make a good hiring decision. The solution is making sure the questions you ask about applicants' behavior get you "real-world" information you can check after the interview is over.

Great interviewing calls for taking the best of every system - behavioral, biographical and stress interviewing - and building them into an evidence-based process that asks for proof of what candidates have done and how they did it.

What Kinds of Questions Should You Ask?

Basically, there are four types of hiring questions: Questions that ask for facts, questions that determine skills, questions that reveal attitudes and references. How you ask for this information determines how revealing the answers you get will be.

Instead of asking, "Tell me about a time you had to deal with an aggravated customer," which cues applicants to give you the "I never take it personally and am the most patient person on earth" kind of answer they know you want to hear.

On the other hand, asking: "Tell me about your first paying job," allows you to move on to asking other questions such as "What achievements did you have from that

job?" "What did you accomplish after your first job?" "Which achievement are you most proud of?"

Asking about achievements makes applicants feel proud and allows you to follow up with questions such as, "What were the three most important things you learned from that?" "How did you apply them?" "What makes the achievement stand out, what were the complications from it, what did you learn from it?" The answers to these kinds of questions will provide valuable information. And even an applicant who has never worked for wages before can talk about achievements in other parts of life.

Ask applicants about their skills. If you're hiring someone who has already done the job, ask, "What do you think it takes to be a good (fill in the blank)?" "Who is the best person you ever worked with (tell me about him or her)?" is another good question - as is "On a scale of 1-10, how would you rank yourself?" "What do you think puts you at that rank?" "What would it take to get better?"

Ask Questions You Can Build On

When you ask about previous jobs, ask if the applicant's former employer conducted a performance review. If so, did the applicant receive a copy? What parts of performance were reviewed? What was the scale like? If you like the applicant, ask him or her to bring a copy to the second interview. If applicants didn't get a copy, ask for specific examples of how they performed customer care. When you check references, you have examples to verify.

A great way to end this part of an interview is by saying, "I've been asking you a lot of questions, and now I'm going to let you ask me one. What is the most important thing you want to know about the job, company or organization? Why is that the most important?" What makes this great is that people always respond honestly to this question, and in doing so they tell you what they consider most important. By the way, applicants who are looking for a better job are more likely to ask challenging questions than those who are looking for "just a job."

In addition to these questions, you need to make sure applicants have the physical and mental capacity necessary for the job. For example, if the job requires loading 50-pound sacks onto a truck, can the applicant demonstrate this capability? If the job calls for filling written work orders and managing logs, can the applicant do this?

The Main Reason Employees Fail

The main reason employees fail is not that they can't do their jobs, but that they won't do them. It's much easier to train an employee with a great attitude how to do a job than it is to train a skilled grouch to be pleasant to your customers. Do the facts you've gathered reveal the attitude you want, the dependability, initiative and willingness to serve customers who are necessary for success? Do applicants have a good track record of arriving to work on time? Of remaining polite with difficult customers? Of being willing to fill in when a co-worker is ill?

Will this applicant's personality fit well with the personalities of the job, the manager and the company? Few (if any) employees will mesh perfectly with all three. The

most important dynamic is how closely the applicant's personality matches the job requirements - attention to detail, working well with others, good counter skills and more. Can the applicant manage his or her personality around the requirements of the job?

Many employers overvalue the importance of skills. If you don't have the time or ability to train and you need a skilled employee right away, you'll have to base your hiring decision on capacity and skill. But remember: An applicant who has the capacity, attitude and personality you need can often be trained for the necessary skills.

A great hiring system treats every part of the hiring process as a test. It also keeps you focused on the qualities applicants need to successfully perform the job. For example, if the job requires arriving for work at 5 a.m., scheduling applicant interviews at that time will reveal who can and can't meet the requirement. If the job demands a great phone manner, talking with applicants on the phone should be one of your first steps. An applicant who leaves you with a favorable impression will leave the same impression with your customers.

There are two sources of information: the applicant and others who can provide information about the applicant. Your hiring tools should include an employment application that records pertinent information in an organized, standardized format; a demonstration release that relieves you of liability when testing applicants' abilities to do the job; a reference verification form that gives you permission to gather information about applicants; and a reference release that allows you to provide information about employees to others.

To receive a free copy of Kleiman's *Pocket Guide to Interviewing*, visit:
www.melkleiman.com.

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