

Direct Hire Associates

Conducting a Better Interview

First impressions are lasting impressions

An interview is a two-way street; it is a chance for you (the potential employer) to meet and evaluate a candidate, and it's a chance for a candidate to gather a sense of the organization and assess if they want to work with your company. This means that you must be ready to make a positive first impression. In order to attract the best talent for your position, you need to approach the interview not as a necessary evil, but as an opportunity to meet your next great employee.

Your interview style

As one of the first people the potential new employee will meet, it is important that you be an ambassador for your organization. If you think a list of 25 questions makes for an effective interview, don't bother; just send them the questionnaire and be done with it.

However, if you want the most out of your interviews, you must understand that the best interviews act and feel like conversations. Yes, you will be evaluating the candidate as you speak with him or her, but unless they are a professional interviewee, their ability to perform in this short period has very little to do with what they do on a day-to-day basis. So be conversational! A conversational style will often yield a truer sense of the person, their ability to reason, and their compatibility with you and your company's culture. The technical aspects are easy to assess, but the intangibles are what will set a great candidate apart from the merely qualified.

Try to include others. With rare exception, how people interact with other people is critical to someone's success in their professional role. Introduce other employees who are not involved in the hiring process and watch the candidate's behavior. Look for certain things like politeness, eye contact, and manners (especially important for positions that expressly manage other staff). However, a word of warning: including other staff members does not mean that you should make your hiring decision by consensus. You want peers and subordinates opinions during the hiring process, but one person must ultimately be responsible for making a strong hire, not just a popular one.

We also recommend that you see manager or higher-level candidates interact with others in a personal setting, whether it's lunch outside the office or walking to grab a cup of coffee. You want to see him or her in public with strangers; it will tell you a lot more than you think.

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Setting the stage

As the interviewer, you must mentally prepare for the situation that you are about to enter. You may be in between meetings, you may be thinking about something else, or the interview scheduled may be flat out interrupting your day. You must realize that the person who is about to be sitting in front of you has likely told their family and friends that they are meeting you today. They may have told some version of a white lie to get time off of work for this interview. They have dressed up, driven in traffic, may have had trouble finding your office, and with rare exception, they are sitting in front of you a tad nervous. As the interviewer, you need to adopt the mindset that you are supposed to be a good host, not an interrogator.

Once the interviewee arrives

First, greet them on time with a welcoming smile. As fast as possible, help them feel more comfortable by offering them something (a glass of water, a place to sit, etc.). Once settled, headline the meeting by verbally providing some kind of outline or agenda. This will, again, make a candidate more comfortable which will give you a more real presentation from them, allowing you to get a better read on who they are as a person and potential employee.

Things to look for during the interview

Throughout your interview, there will be a number of things that might strike you about a candidate, but you'll want to have a clear idea of what you feel is most important to you. The following are some key elements that you should be actively seeking:

- Make sure that you're getting the how and why answers to your open ended questions. Let them answer completely, it will tell you a lot more if you allow them to ramble a bit.
- Notice if he or she presents information about others and past experiences positively.
- Ask about professional accomplishments/results and inquire as to his or her specific role in that work: did he or she generate and/or manage the work, or is he or she describing the accomplishments/results of an entire group or company?
- Trust your instincts: if you feel you are being misled or they are hiding something, don't hesitate to keep them talking. Approach the subject from different angles and ask for more information. Most people cannot lie for an hour, you'll either get clarity or it will get much worse quickly. If the interview feels weird, it probably is – don't ignore it!

Ending an interview

Sometimes an interview is going so well it isn't necessary to fill the entire time allotted. Other interviews might take a turn for the worse and require a quick escape. The easiest way to break someone's rhythm – good or bad – is to simply ask a question. Our favorite "At this point, do you have any questions for me?" If they don't get the hint the interview is ending (warning), you can also do subtle, nonverbal cues like capping your pen, closing your notebook, and even going so far as to stand up if necessary.

If you end the interview by telling a candidate that you will follow up, be specific as to when and how the company will follow up with them.

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Sidestepping common interview mistakes

- Have the meeting scheduled in your calendar. Simple, but necessary.
- Asking the candidate, “Why are you here?” usually doesn’t get things off to a good start. Unless you are Christopher Columbus, there is really no correct answer to this, is there?
- Never ask compound questions. These are confusing, and will result in unclear answers. Simply ask one question at a time and be patient with the answers, especially at the beginning of the interview.
- Don’t ask leading, or yes/no questions.
- Do not ask a candidate to interview longer than 2 hours without offering them a break. We have heard several occasions of all-day interviews (7+ hours) where the candidate was never offered food or water. This was not a very positive experience for the candidate.
- Do not ever be interrupted in an interview. It is a complete violation of common courtesy. If you can’t manage to block out an hour or two before this employee gets hired, what do you think they will perceive as your availability once they join your organization?
- It is our opinion that group interviews, panel interviews, and phone interviews (other than a brief pre-screen) are grossly ineffective. Interviews should be one-on-one, in private, uninterrupted and last between 20 minutes and an hour and a half, depending on the level of the candidate.
- Don’t try to sound too smart. We once had a candidate asked (genuinely), “How many pencils are in Los Angeles County?” These types of questions are nonsensical, and they are insulting to the candidate. The feedback we regularly receive from candidates about their worst interview experiences often involves someone pontificating or asking trick questions.
- Never offer the employee a job on the spot. Changing jobs is an emotional process and if you move too quickly, you will likely scare away a good candidate. If you don’t believe us, consider popping “The Question” on your next first date.
- Discriminating questions are illegal! You MAY NOT ask questions regarding: race, national origin, color, creed, religion, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, political beliefs, marital/familial/parental status, health, and – new for 2010 – anything about one’s genetic information.
 - We have actually known candidates who were asked the following questions in interviews:
 - Why are you asking for so much (money); you’re on social security, aren’t you?
 - Are you planning on making babies anytime soon?
 - How old are you?
 - If I don’t hire you, will you marry me?
 - How would your spouse describe you?
 - On a scale of 1-10, how badly do you want this job?
 - Are you happy regularly working 60+ hours a week?
 - Are you mixed or are you all black?
- Don’t gossip about other interview candidates, employees, or companies. You never know who knows who – you can easily embarrass yourself and no good comes from gossip.
- Don’t stretch out the process either in terms of number of steps, or the time from the first meeting through extending an offer. This is an emotional process and as more and more time passes, the candidates’ interest level will likely decrease or you’ll lose the candidate to another company that moves faster.
- Be ready to pull the trigger. If you meet a candidate who you want to hire, do not make the mistake of looking for three more just like them. We regularly see clients lose out on a great future employee while waiting to meet other choices merely for the sake of having choices.

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