



POINT OF VIEW

STAYING AS SMART AS THE JOB CANDIDATES:

HOW TO KEEP YOUR INTERVIEWERS AT THE TOP OF THEIR GAME

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Just a few years ago, hiring managers controlled the job interview—they knew the questions to ask that would elicit the most revealing responses. But that is often no longer the case. Job candidates can now turn to hundreds of Internet sites that list the most common interview questions—and that reveal, step-by-step, how to craft just the right responses to impress the interviewer.

Candidates, hoping to find an edge in a tight job market, have now become highly sophisticated at being interviewed. They know how to use the hiring manager's questions to subtly take control of the interview, and present a picture of themselves and their abilities that may not be completely accurate, but is precisely what the interviewer wants to hear. They are essentially gaming the interview.

DDI research¹ has found that most job interviewers today are ill-prepared for this new level of candidate sophistication. They firmly believe they are controlling the interview, and are obtaining the information needed to determine whether the candidate will succeed in the job, and be a good fit for the organization. Most consider themselves highly skilled interviewers.

However, there is troubling evidence that suggests otherwise. Studies are finding a distressingly high rate of failure among new hires. For example, a recent global study of 20,000 new hires, by LeadershipIQ, found that an astonishing 46 percent had failed within 18 months—the employees were terminated, left under pressure, or received disciplinary action or significantly negative performance reviews. It was particularly revealing that more than 80 percent of the hiring managers in the study admitted that in hindsight, they should have done a better job interviewing those employees.

This inability of hiring managers to keep up with the growing, Internet-aided sophistication of job candidates has serious implications for employers. Years ago, companies may have been able to absorb the occasional poor hire. But in today's streamlined organizations, where high performance is expected from every employee, there is little room for error—each new hire must be just right for the job. And yet these days, nearly half fail.

THE GROWING RISK

Unskilled interviewers can cause other problems for their organizations. Despite a wave of high-profile lawsuits in recent years², a large percentage of interviewers continue to ask illegal questions. DDI research has found, for example, that about 40 percent of interviewers at U.S. companies mistakenly believe it is legal to ask job candidates whether they are married and whether they plan to have children. About a third think it is legal to ask a candidate's age and

religion. Such findings suggest that companies may have a far higher exposure to discrimination lawsuits than they realize.

Misguided interviewing techniques can also hurt a company's employment brand. Job candidates often report that interviews feel more like interrogations. In an age when candidates are quick to post negative job-seeking experiences on social networking websites such as Glassdoor, poorly handled interviews can harm a company's image among both customers and prospective employees, particularly passive candidates. Yet such interviewing problems are common, putting companies at a significant public relations risk—witness the recent outcry over employers requesting the Facebook passwords of job applicants.

Senior managers are generally unaware of how pervasive poor interviewing techniques are in their organizations. While discrimination lawsuits tend to raise red flags, senior managers usually do not trace high rates of new-hire failures directly back to ineffective interviewing. Similarly, when a company has difficulty luring top talent from other organizations, it usually has no idea that potential candidates are being turned off by what they are reading on social networking sites. In both types of cases, senior leaders can be blindsided by a lack of information.

Perhaps the major reason that such problems are so widespread is that organizations rarely treat job interviewing as a discipline, one that requires the same kind of attention as any other important business process. Interviewers usually receive little or no training, and are largely left on their own to decide what questions to ask and how to evaluate candidates. Many are either unaware of or do not follow best practices.

For example, in the 1980s it became widely recognized that behavioral interview questions about past job performance are far more effective at predicting job success than unstructured or theoretical questions, such as, "What are your greatest strengths?" Experts urged interviewers to ask structured questions about candidates' past behaviors that were related to the targeted job, including what the outcomes of these behaviors were. This was followed up by several studies in the 1990s that provided even further guidance on how to use behavioral questions to improve the validity and legal defensibility of the interview process.

Such sound advice never really took hold. Job interviewers today typically claim they do conduct structured behavioral interviews. But in many individual interviews, structured behavioral questions are the exception rather than the rule. Interviewers may include several questions about past performance, but many interviewers still rely heavily on unstructured ones such as, "Why do you want to work here?" "What would your supervisor tell me about you?" or "Is your college GPA reflective of your potential?"

Though such questions shed little light on a candidate's ability to succeed in the prospective job—and candidates often have answers carefully prepared for each one—interviewers often favor them. This is partly because most interviewers have not been trained to conduct structured interviews, but it is also because interviewers tend to trust their skill in asking questions. This was brought home in a DDI survey of job interviewers, which found that 44 percent rely not on training, but on instinct.

However, instinct is not enough. If companies are to avoid high rates of new-hire failure, and if they are to limit their exposure to

lawsuits and protect their employment brands, interviewing must be raised to the level of a discipline. As with all disciplines, it must be planned for, systematically implemented, and continually monitored for feedback and improvement.

CREATING A NEW DISCIPLINE

An essential step is making sure the right questions are asked. To achieve this, organizations must first decide what is needed for success in each job under consideration. What kind of behavioral competencies does the candidate need? What kind of personal characteristics will make the candidate a good fit for the job and the organization? What kinds of knowledge and experience are needed?

Typically, this information is gathered by human resources or a recruiter during a brief phone call with the hiring manager—and so the job profile is based on a single person's opinion. But if interviewing is to be treated as a discipline, job-success profiles must reflect a wider, more comprehensive view of what is needed in a candidate. They should be created using a team of job experts, including incumbents, managers of incumbents, and even strategic leaders in cases where the role of the current job is evolving or changing.

Interviewers can also benefit from pre-employment assessments, which can pinpoint potential weaknesses in a candidate that may need to be explored. For example, a candidate might score high in most areas, but lower in judgment or the ability to make good decisions.

Armed with this information, the individual responsible for the design of the interview process can develop the questions that should be asked, and can decide who will

be conducting the interviews with a candidate and which areas they should cover. Such a methodical approach eliminates the need for interviewers to rely on questions that may provide little insight into whether a candidate will succeed in the job.

Training is key. For interviewers, it is not enough to have an arsenal of questions, no matter how well thought out. They must know how to use those questions to get revealing and valuable responses. Training can help interviewers learn how to get candidates to relax and open up, and keep them focused when they start to ramble. Training can also show interviewers how to get past the prepared answers of candidates who may be trying to game the interview. For example, if a candidate is ready with a story about how he or she handled a past problem, the interviewer might say, "Tell me about another situation," and then, "Tell me another," until the candidate has to go off script.

With training, managers can stay in control of the interview with even the most savvy job candidates. Training also shows interviewers how to make the interview a positive rather than negative experience for candidates, and can help interviewers avoid asking illegal or inappropriate questions that could prompt a lawsuit. Those responsible for creating and executing the interview process can benefit as well from training, in areas ranging from how to design the questions to how to integrate the information collected on a candidate from various interviewers.

Such steps will have a greater likelihood of success if an organization continually monitors and improves its interviewing process. There are a number of ways to measure the effectiveness of both training and the

process as a whole, such as by examining turnover rates, the job performance of new hires, negative comments on social networking sites, and feedback from the interviewers themselves.

Companies can no longer afford to treat job interviewing the way they did 10 or 20 years ago. Too much is at stake to rely on the assurances of interviewers whose techniques and abilities vary widely, and who may be outmatched by today's job candidates. By seeing interviewing as a discipline—with the necessary planning, training, and follow-up—organizations can significantly increase their ability to hire the right job candidates, and reduce legal and public-relations risks.

The stakes are getting higher. Job candidates are getting smarter. More than ever, interviewers must be at the top of their game.

REFERENCES

¹ "Are You Failing the Interview? 2009 Summary of Global Information Practices and Perceptions," DDI, Scott Erker and Kelli Buczynski.

² See "A Review of OFCCP Enforcement Statistics for Fiscal Year 2008," Center for Corporate Equity, David Cohen and Eric Dunleavy, February 2010.

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