

“Is the Interview on Its Way Out?”

In a recent Wall Street Journal article, “The Case for Hiring Managers Sight Unseen” the author, Sam Walker, cites a Gallup study that indicated, “Only 18% of managers [that] companies hire have the ideal mix of skills to succeed.” After spending three months examining how companies interview potential managers to identify the most likely to succeed, Walker concludes that, “The best way to interview leadership candidates is to *not to*.”

This may sound a bit extreme, but there are some compelling arguments in favor of just dropping the interview.

1. The interview doesn't predict performance on the job. Good performance in the interview may only mean that the candidate did his homework and prepared well for the interview questions. Google provides lists of interview questions that make it easy for a candidate to polish his answers prior to the interview. Research on the effectiveness of the interview consistently shows that the interview's ability to predict job performance is no better than a coin toss, fifty-fifty. In short, the interview doesn't work.
2. Interviewers, like all human beings, are biased. And each interviewer's biases are unique to that interviewer. This means that one interviewer may judge a candidate as strong while the second interviewer sees the same candidate as weak. Interviewers tend to give positive ratings to people who are like them in physical appearance, attitudes, values, background, etc. Finally, tall extroverts tend to make a great impression in the interview, regardless of how well qualified they are.

I ran across a bizarre case of interviewer bias a few years ago. I talked with a C-suite executive who believed he could tell whether a candidate was good or bad by the way the candidate crossed his legs at the knee. Legs crossed right leg over left = Good Candidate. Legs crossed left leg over right = Bad Candidate. This must have worked for him just often enough to convince him that it always worked, but his actual track record depended more on how well-screened candidates were before he saw them.

3. Leadership is not an inborn human character trait. Leadership is situational-driven behavior. A leader can demonstrate his leadership by being forceful and

assertive, or by being reserved and thoughtful. In this sense, leadership is like beauty, art, and love. We know it when we see it but, at the same time, we all have our own definition of what it is.

Useful Tips for Interviewers

Regardless of these reasons why the interview isn't effective at predicting success on the job, it is such an entrenched part of the selection process that it is unlikely to go away any time soon. Here are some tips, therefore, to help you get as much useful information as you can from a flawed process.

1. **Let the candidate do most of the talking.** The more you talk, the less you learn about the candidate.
2. **Ask open-ended questions.** Avoid questions that can be answered with a "Yes" or "No." "Yes" or "No" answers don't tell you very much about the candidate. Phrase your questions so that they require more information, "Tell me more about that..." or "How would you handle a situation like...?"
3. **Don't take the candidate's answers at face value.** Well-prepared candidates will have practiced answers to many of the questions you want to ask. As a result, all you may learn is that the candidate is well-prepared. While that in itself is a useful data point, it still doesn't tell you much about the candidate. Ask for more clarification; for example, don't accept "management" as an explanation of duties on a previous job. Follow up by asking for a description of specific responsibilities and how the candidate executes them.
4. **Ask specific follow-up questions about any indication of improper or questionable behavior.** Probe tactfully to understand any gaps or inconsistencies in the candidate's employment history or questions raised by his resume. Follow up respectfully until you clarify the issue. Unpleasant or difficult subjects are often exactly the ones you want to know about.
5. **Don't cut the interview short.** Take as much time as necessary to obtain as complete and representative a picture of the candidate as possible. The more time you spend with a candidate, the better you will get to know him or her, and the better the quality of information you will have.

Make a Good Stew

Putting together an effective selection process is like making a good stew. First, you combine different ingredients. Then you let those ingredients simmer for a while. To complete the process, you serve that hearty stew.

Combine – Combine your subjective impressions from the interview, information from references and resume, objective information from validated psychological assessments, background checks and drug tests. A work sample, if it is representative of the candidate's prospective job duties, can provide a hands-on sample of the candidate's abilities.

Simmer – Share these results with the candidate's prospective boss and two prospective coworkers. In preparation for a final meeting, scheduled for the following day (this is the "simmer" part), have each prepare two short lists, one list of reasons why the candidate is a good fit for the job (strengths) and a second list of why he or she is a questionable fit (weaknesses.) Everyone goes away and sleeps on it.

Serve – The next day, reconvene, weigh the pros and cons and make a decision.

One Big "Don't" to Consider

Don't give in to the urgency to fill the position and make a decision based solely on interview impressions. Remember grandpa's old saying about marriage, "Marry in haste, repent at leisure." The appropriate version here is, "Decide in haste, repent at leisure." A good hire decision is almost always better than a quick one.