

Copyright © 2013 Len Doherty

All Rights Reserved

CI encourages you to share this content, however, in doing so, you may not alter its contents.

ctinnovations.com

INTERVIEW SKILLS

Employment interviewing is one of the most important – yet overlooked – skills hiring managers can possess. Potential investors in early-stage companies have often stated that they prefer an “A” team with a “B” business plan over the reverse. Therefore, the ability to recruit, interview, evaluate and hire great employees will usually have a major impact on both funding and the ultimate success of the business.

So where and how does one develop good interview skills? University career centers provide pointers on how to interview for a job, but not how to hire employees. Few if any MBA or other graduate programs offer courses on the subject. Professional organizations such as the American Management Association (www.amanet.org) and consulting groups such as The MMS Institute and Saville Consulting conduct workshops of varying lengths (full disclosure: I also conduct one such workshop). Books on the subject range from the classic *The Evaluation Interview* by Richard Fear (likely considered outdated by anyone under 50) to the more modern *Who* by Geoff Smart and Randy Street.

The reality, however, is that most hiring managers (unless they work for a company with a major commitment to the candidate selection process) learn how to interview through trial and error. As usually occurs

with this method, some people develop the necessary skills and enjoy the process, while others struggle and practice avoidance.

Noted management consultant Peter Drucker once observed that, in his experience, only about one-third of hiring decisions turned out well. Since no book, article or workshop is going to magically turn a novice into an interviewing expert, I thought it might be useful to point out some key elements of the process that you may want to keep in mind the next time you sit down with a candidate.

Define the Position

I'm frequently surprised at the lack of thought many hiring executives put into defining both the scope and desired qualifications of the position they're seeking to fill. Too often position descriptions consist of broad generalities or, at the other extreme, a detailed, unrealistic wish list of desired attributes. Keep in mind that the position description should be the template or baseline against which candidates are evaluated both individually and in comparison with one another. As such, it should be as objective and specific as possible.

The position scope should state the reason the position exists as well as expected outcomes/results. For example, a regional sales manager position may be defined as "responsible for creating a southern region

of three to five direct sales representatives who, during the first year, will be expected to generate gross bookings of at least \$1.5M.”

With regard to qualifications, the hiring manager will want to determine what specific experience, skills and attributes the desired candidate will likely possess. Keep in mind that, for most positions, qualifications should include very few MUSTS (which by definition are binary) and varying degrees of WANTS, ranging from “strongly prefer” to “nice to have.”

Create the Environment

Have you ever struck up a conversation with a total stranger during an airplane flight or while waiting in a line? Depending on how long the flight or the line, you probably learned a great deal about this person, as they likely did about you. Why? Because the physical setting was conducive to conversation, you didn’t feel intimidated by the other person, and you both showed genuine interest in what the other person was saying. Even the best interviewer will have difficulty obtaining evaluative information from a candidate unless they meet in an appropriate environment.

But just what is an ideal meeting environment? To begin with, it should be a location free from interruptions (phones, coworkers, etc.) and low

in intimidation factors (such as a large desk separating you from the candidate). Creating a comfortable environment also extends to engaging the candidate in a certain amount of “small talk” (weather, traffic, sports, etc.) as a lead-in to the actual interview process. The whole point is to create an atmosphere of trust so that the candidate will feel comfortable answering your questions honestly and fully, even if doing so may include discussing failings or other personal shortcomings.

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Once the stage is set with an appropriate meeting environment, you’re at the point where the question “now what?” most often comes to the fore. Perhaps you’ve perused books such as *96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire* by Paul Falcone, but you don’t know where to start. Consider this: there are really only three broad questions you want answered during any candidate interview. First, does this candidate have the **experience** and **skills** needed to perform at a high level in this position? Second, does he or she have the appropriate level of **motivation** to successfully perform this job? Third, does he or she have a personality/style that fits the company **culture**? An effective interviewer will devise a set of specific, yet open-ended questions that either answer or provide strong clues to the broader ones.

What's an open-ended question? One that usually can't be answered with a single or a few words. Using our hypothetical regional sales manager position as an example, you might ask the following question to help determine if the candidate has the appropriate level of experience/leadership skills: "Describe the actions you took while at XYZ Company to build an effective sales team from scratch." Or, to get a sense as to whether the person would fit your company culture, you might ask, "Tell me how your immediate supervisor at ABC Company would describe your personality and leadership style."

In each case, assuming you've established an initial level of trust, candidates should provide a good amount of evaluative information. If they don't, or try to evade the question, you have reason to suspect either their intellectual capacity or honesty. Be careful, however, not to rush to judgment. A good interviewer catalogs clues during the course of the interview and is prepared to reject an initial opinion if it's not supported by specific examples.

Along with asking open-ended questions, it's helpful to mix in other types of questions, such as the "laundry list" question (suggesting a variety of possible responses and allowing the candidate to choose among them), the two-step probing question (asking a question, then a follow-up question) and the double-edged question (offering a choice

between two different responses). The intent should be to make the interview more like a controlled conversation than an inquisition. Varying the questions can also help candidates better understand the specific information you're interested in obtaining, especially if they begin to stray off the subject or get into excessive detail.

It's usually a good idea to interview candidates using the same format to cover the main areas of experience, education, outside interests and self-assessment. Some people prefer to start with the most recent or last position, while others prefer to begin with the candidate's first job. Whatever approach you take, try to be consistent: it makes the evaluation process and comparison of candidates less confusing and more objective.

Evaluate the Candidates

It's now time to distill the volume of (hopefully evaluative) information obtained during the interview and decide if the candidate meets or exceeds the qualifications outlined in the position description. You must also determine how he or she stacks up against other candidates for the same position.

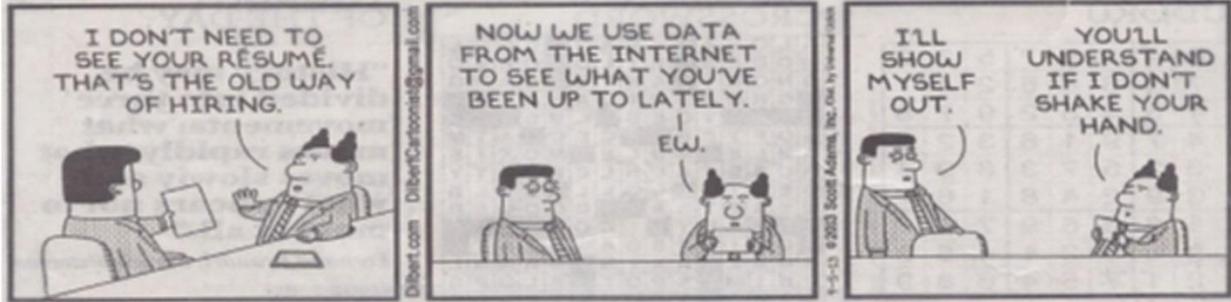
While this process is particularly challenging for the inexperienced interviewer, it can be made simpler by devising an objective system for

evaluation. One such system incorporates a grid, in which the qualifications are listed in order of importance on one axis and specific accomplishments on the other. Another might attach weights to certain skills/accomplishments to obtain an overall "score." My particular system involves evaluating candidates in four broad categories: intelligence, motivation, maturity and character.

Whatever system you employ, it is critical that the three main questions referenced previously are adequately answered with objective supporting data, not conjecture. Only then can you make the type of hiring decisions that lead to the development of a strong leadership team and, in turn, a successful long-term business.

As with any skill, good interview techniques require practice and discipline. While this article does not address illegal questions, issues of honesty, controlling the interview and reference checking, these issues are important to both the success of the interview and the subsequent candidate evaluation. They will be covered in upcoming articles on this website.

DILBERT Scott Adams



By Len Doherty



Len Doherty is the principal of [L.J. Doherty & Associates](http://www.ljdassoc.com), an executive staffing consulting firm in Ridgefield, Connecticut. You can contact him at len@ljdassoc.com.