

How to be an Effective Interviewer

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It's all too easy to overlook the fact that an interview is a mutual screening. Sure, it's your job as the interviewer to assess candidates. But you also need to be able to convince the best ones to stick around! This is especially true in a competitive employment market where you have a hoard of greedy companies all competing for the top talent.

The power dynamic has shifted somewhat. Through popular career sites like *Glassdoor* and *Indeed*, applicants have more information about each company's interview process at their fingertips than ever before. In the words of John Sullivan, an HR guru and professor of management at San Francisco State University, such sites have "taken the mystique and mystery" [1] out of interviews. It's as simple as this - if your interview process is poorly designed or off-putting to candidates, they *will* look elsewhere for opportunities. Today we'll cover the value of proper preparation, forefronting empathy, good note-taking, active listening and selecting the right questions. We'll finish with an important note about unconscious bias. So, without further ado, let's talk about how to maximise your business's chances of securing the hottest prospects in the market!

Let's start with pre-interview preparation. Samuel G Trull, for HBR [2], states how "the lack of adequate planning for an interview is the greatest single fault found in [his] studies of the interviewing process". In the same way a candidate will prepare tirelessly for their potentially career-defining showdown, so too should you do your utmost to get the most out of your time with them. That's why it's critical to figure out and vividly visualise *exactly* what you're looking for in your new hire so that you can ask the right questions and not waste anybody's time, your own included! Try putting together a list of required attributes for the position in question. If it's not yet clear what you're looking for, draw inspiration from your top performers and let them be the "mould". What traits do they share? What did they achieve before joining your company? What roles did they have? Answers to questions such as these will enable you to craft incisive and relevant questions that will provide the most "bang for their buck".

Perhaps the most important virtue of them all is *empathy*. We all know how uniquely stressful interview situations can be. And how our spiking cortisol levels can send our common sense haywire, resulting in disastrous underperformance. It's no wonder, given how full of unknowns the interview process is from a candidate's point of view. Naturally, as an interviewer, you're seeking the truest reflection of your interviewees. You want to see them at their absolute *best* and treat them to fair judgement, which is devoid of any biases, conscious or not. Therefore, it should be your responsibility as an interviewer to give them the best possible chance to actually *be* themselves! How about telling them in advance the topics you'd like to cover so they can adequately prepare? Why not make allowances for them and demonstrate flexibility by meeting at a time that's most convenient for them? Give them a heads-up about your dress code even! The goal is not to catch them out and make them look ridiculous. You should instead endeavour to make your candidates as comfortable as possible so that you can have a productive and professional conversation that is truly representative of their personality and abilities.

OK, so you've got a clear picture in your head of what the ideal person for the role looks like. You've made them exceptionally comfortable in the run-up to the big day. How then should the interview itself be conducted? Let's first talk about numbers. It's no secret that any big decision in life would benefit from seeking the counsel of others. And interviewing is no different. You want to have multiple checks in place to guarantee you're hiring the right person. As Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a senior advisor at global executive search firm Egon Zehnder says: "Monarchy doesn't work. But on the other hand, extreme democracy is also ineffective"[3]. In other words, you need to strike a balance between having enough of your colleagues involved in the process to help you make the right decision but not having so many people involved that the process drags on and grinds to a halt. Three or four interviewers at the most ought to do the trick!

Assuming you have cast a wide enough net, most interview processes will involve a fair number of candidates. As such, it's nigh on impossible to recall every single detail of what transpired during each one-to-one. This is what makes high-quality note-taking so crucial. Whether you prefer to take notes using pen and paper or on your laptop is up to you, but what *is* important is to have a structure. A particularly effective method is to devote the first and biggest section of your notes to the interviewee's answers and the second, smaller section to your observations and impressions. Then leave a third section blank for any questions or challenges you think of mid-interview that you'd like to address a little later. This often happens when you want to follow up on something the candidate said without interrupting them.

As important as note-taking is, it's recommended that you balance active note-taking with another critical skill: active listening. While you want to take solid notes, you should also be mindful of maintaining good eye contact and being constantly 'present' in the conversation such that you can elicit all the nuggets of information you need to make your all-important decision. To this end, try limiting your note-taking style to encompass only the candidates' most important or revealing words and phrases. You

won't be able to record every word, so it's sensible to devise a personalised and efficient note-taking system that uses shorthand, abbreviations and acronyms that perhaps your company already frequently uses. The goal is to create a system that works for you, allowing you to easily absorb your notes post-interview and build up a clear, distinct image of your candidate.

When you're serious about a candidate, and they tick all the boxes on paper, it's necessary to allow enough time in a first interview for you to accurately assess their competency and potential. Most recruitment experts agree on around 2 hours for this. It's paramount that you look for all-important signs of curiosity, enthusiasm, insight and determination during this time. Find out as much as you can about the candidate. For example, how do they learn? Try asking them where they think your industry is heading in the next few years. Obviously, no one can predict the future, but at the very least, you want to onboard someone who is thinking about it every day and can give you a thoughtful response!

Maybe a slightly controversial one here, but consider if there's actually value in asking questions like "What are your weaknesses?" This could essentially be equivalent to asking your candidate to lie to you and will more often than not elicit responses that are rehearsed and inauthentic. Instead, focus on *real*, behavioural and situational questions that are directly related to the job they're vying for. Try explaining an actual problem that your team struggles with and ask the candidate to walk you through how *they* would solve it. Or perhaps you could describe one of your company's existing processes and see if they can detect any inefficiencies or areas for improvement. Contrary to popular "interview culture", it's not necessarily ideal to beat around the bush with random, abstract interview questions for the sake of it. At best, you'll receive a robotic response, and you probably won't come any closer to figuring out their suitability for the job. So, aim to keep it specific and real!

A lot of companies think about the notion of "cultural fit". It's fine to narrow your search for a candidate who will be comfortable upon induction into your organisation, but the importance of cultural fit is too often overstated. Keep things objective by comparing your work environment or the nature of the role with your candidate's leanings. Considerations might include: do they prefer long-term planning or short-term thinking? Or: are they collaborative or not? The key takeaway here is that you shouldn't give undue weight to hazy ideas of cultural fit. Remember that you're unlikely to build up a complete picture of each applicant's personality in the time you have together and that people usually adapt! Reframe it in your mind. Don't ask if they're the right cultural fit based on your limited perception in the interview. Your organisation will inevitably develop over time, too. Perhaps ask yourself instead: do you think they can *adjust*?

Something that has become more frequently spoken about over the last few years is the importance of reducing 'unconscious bias' in the interviewing process. After all, these biases can have a "critical and problematic effect on our judgement, as they cause us to make decisions in favour of one person or group to the detriment of others" [4], according to Francesca Gino, professor at the prestigious Harvard

Business School. By holding a magnifying glass up to your thought patterns and preconceptions, you can start to take steps to address these biases and create a fairer environment for your candidates. You could try to think broadly about ways to simplify and standardise the interview process by asking candidates a similar set of predefined questions. You could even try going 'blind' during the resume review portion of recruitment to ensure focus on your candidate's specific qualifications and talents instead of surface "demographic characteristics". Software is available to hide certain data to level the playing field. Rebecca Knight, for HBR [4], also advises against engaging "in unstructured interviews. Instead, standardize the interviews process by asking candidates the same set of defined questions." This way, you're remaining consistent and on task and leaving less room for bias.

This week, why not reflect on your own experiences as an interviewee? Think about what could have made you feel especially comfortable and engaged. Note if a particular interview or interviewer stands out in your mind, and consider why.

That's all for today. Thanks for listening!

[1] *How to Conduct an Effective Job Interview*, Rebecca Knight (2015)
<https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-conduct-an-effective-job-interview>

[2] *Strategies of Effective Interviewing*, Samuel G. Trull (1964)
<https://hbr.org/1964/01/strategies-of-effective-interviewing>

[3] *How to Conduct an Effective Job Interview*, Rebecca Knight (2015)
<https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-conduct-an-effective-job-interview>

[4] *7 Practical Ways to Reduce Bias in Your Hiring Process*, Rebecca Knight (2017)
<https://hbr.org/2017/06/7-practical-ways-to-reduce-bias-in-your-hiring-process>