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Interviewing

Skilled interviewing is an effective way to find out about a candidate, helping you make sure you recruit the right person for the job.

Proper planning, careful preparation and skilled questioning are vital to get the information you need to make a good decision.

1. Interview planning

What are you looking for?

- Prepare a job outline and a person specification. Use these to establish clear criteria against which candidates can be assessed when you make your decision.
- Weight the criteria according to their importance. For example, a customer adviser might need communication skills (weighted nine), then teamworking (six), followed by technical knowledge (five), and so on.

Which selection methods will you use?

- Initial information can be obtained from candidates in writing and used to produce a shortlist.
- A CV or application form provides basic information about experience and qualifications.
- The interview explores candidates' experience, attitudes and skills in more depth. Only interview those candidates who stand a reasonable chance of success.
- Important skills or characteristics can be assessed in other ways. For example, psychometric tests can examine personality, ability and aptitude.

What type of interview will you hold?

Options include:

- Formal interviews, using planned questions to explore the selection criteria.
- Less structured informal interviews, to exchange information and to get to know candidates. Informal interviews on their own rarely form an adequate basis for making fair comparisons between candidates or for reaching final decisions.
- Sequential interviews, involving different interviewers focusing on different aspects of each candidate (eg technical skills). The results of each interview are used to brief a final interview panel.

- Group interviews, involving several candidates, are an inexpensive way of obtaining information and assessing candidates' teamworking and interpersonal skills. Group interviews can be too competitive, however, and unsuitable for senior roles.

Will you interview the candidate face to face, by phone or by video conference?

2. Interview preparation

Select at least two interviewers

- Using two or more people will help you check impressions of the candidates and reach a balanced view.
- This approach protects you against accusations of unfair treatment.
- Involve the candidate's prospective line manager. You may also want to involve other individuals the appointee will work with.
- Include someone with relevant specialist or technical knowledge if necessary. For example, an IT expert to assess whether a candidate has the skills needed for a role as an IT systems administrator.

Make sure interviewers are properly briefed

Interviewers should:

- know the job requirements and selection criteria;
- be trained in questioning and listening;
- be aware of the legal issues;
- know who will handle each part of the interview;
- understand their roles in making the decision.

Decide when to hold the interviews

- Make sure you will not be disturbed. Interrupted interviews create a poor impression and disturb concentration.
- Plan each interview to last 45 to 90 minutes. A longer interview results in loss of concentration; too short an interview leads to essential information being missed.
- Allow time between interviews to complete your notes, to deal with any urgent business and to take a break.
- Do not try to see more than four or five candidates in one session.
- You may need to be flexible for candidates who cannot attend interviews during working hours.

Prepare your script

- Use the selection criteria to identify question topics.
- Decide who is going to ask each question and who will chair the interview.
- Identify points from each candidate's CV or application form that need probing or clarification.

Send written instructions to candidates

- State when the interview is to be held, what time to arrive and who to ask for.
- Make sure candidates know the job requirements.
- Tell candidates what to expect and what preparation they need to do, if any.

Legal issues

You must not interview in a way that discriminates unlawfully

- Decisions must be based on job-related criteria - not on grounds of race, age, sex, marital status (including civil partnerships), sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, pregnancy or maternity, religious belief or nationality.
- In general, you must not ask candidates questions about their health before offering a post.

Avoid over-personal questions

- For example, asking about children or dependants and their care arrangements, family background, out-of-work activities, health, or willingness to comply with dress codes. Only ask such questions if they are directly relevant to the job.

Under the Data Protection Act, candidates have the right to access your interview notes

- Only make notes of factual matters, or your assessment of the individual in relation to the job requirements and selection criteria.

An oral offer of employment made during an interview is legally binding

- If you make an offer during an interview or in a letter to a candidate, it forms the basis of the employment contract.

3. The interview itself

Start by welcoming the candidate

- Put the candidate at ease.
- Introduce the other interviewers. Explain each person's role and contribution to the interview.
- Outline the structure of the interview.

Verify information

- Ask questions to check information provided on the CV or application form.
- Probe any gaps in the candidate's career.
- Ask for details about levels of responsibility, such as the budget and size of projects. Find out who else worked with the candidate on these projects.
- Ask about the candidate's skills, including recent examples of how the candidate has used them.

Explore the candidate's potential

Build on the information in the CV and the responses already given. Ask candidates to:

- identify their main strengths and most important experiences;
- discuss the skills they need to develop;
- outline how they will add value to the company if they get the job.

Provide information to the candidate

- Give more detail on the scope of the job and your expectations.
- Invite questions on the nature of the job, the terms and conditions, or the company.
- Ask candidates if they have any comments or if there is anything they wish to ask.
- Be prepared to explain to the candidate why you asked a particular question.

Bring the interview to an end

- Establish whether or not the candidate is interested in the position.
- Confirm that referees may be contacted.
- Tell the candidate how and when the decision will be made.
- Check you have accurate contact details.

Proof of the pudding

Testing should be a central part of your selection process, helping you check the claims made on applicants' CVs. If you have no experience of the candidate's field of expertise, get someone who has to help you test. For example:

- For sales people, provide a fictional customer profile and product description. Ask candidates to prepare a presentation within a specified time.
- Test accountancy personnel by printing off a sample profit and loss table and asking them to identify problem areas. Always check for knowledge of spreadsheets.
- Ask IT applicants to look at, and suggest solutions for, problems you experience on your IT system.
- Assess prospective engineers by asking them to suggest a maintenance schedule for your key machinery.
- Check basic skills of office employees by asking them to produce a sample document.
- You can use psychometric tests to measure candidates' general aptitude, specific skills and personal qualities.

4. Questioning

Different types of question can be used to reveal different kinds of information

- Open questions which cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' encourage candidates to talk. They are good for exploring and gathering information.
- Probing questions (eg "Exactly what happened next?") aim to clarify what is meant by the answer to an open question. They are good for checking details already given in response to an earlier question, or exploring a candidate's answer further.
- Closed questions (eg "Would you be able to start next week?") are used to establish facts and clarify specific points. They are good for finding out single facts or restricting a candidate who is rambling.
- Reflective questions (eg "Am I right in saying your work involves...?") repeat what the candidate said. They are good for checking the accuracy of your understanding, summarising and leading to a close.
- Situational questions (eg "Suppose you were asked to...?") pose alternative scenarios or viewpoints. They are good for getting the candidate to consider different possibilities or ways of working.

Destructive behaviour can mean you lose the chance to recruit good people

- Offensive remarks (eg "You weren't paid much in your last job") and personal remarks (eg "I like the colour of your jacket") reflect badly on the interviewers and your company.

- Multiple questions (eg "When did you do that, why, what was the outcome...?") can be used to test listening ability, concentration and intelligence, but often just lead to confusion.
- Unfocused behaviour is unproductive and rude. For example yawning, gazing out of the window, checking your phone or interrupting the interview to deal with 'more urgent' matters.

Useful interview questions

- Why are you looking for a job?
- What is most important to you in the job you are looking for?
- What are the best and worst parts of your present job? Why?
- How has your current job changed while you've been there?
- Which work do you find easy, and which difficult?
- Who do you work with best in your current job? Why?
- If we get a reference from your present employer, what will it say about you?
- What did your last formal review say?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What do you think is your greatest success? Your greatest failure? Why?
- When were you last angry at work? What made you angry? How did you deal with your anger?
- What worries you about this job? What excites you? What would you see as the key challenge?

Encourage the candidate to illustrate their answers with real-life examples. Ask unemployed candidates how they have spent their time out of work.

5. Listening

Listen actively and concentrate on what is said

- Avoid thinking about how you are going to respond or how to phrase the next question.
- Resist the temptation to talk too much.

Observe behaviour

- You may be able to tell if candidates are confident or are unsure of their ground.
- Behaviour such as fidgeting, tapping feet or avoiding eye contact can be useful indicators.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions. Check any impressions you form by asking a probing question.

Keep notes to help you remember individual candidates

- The candidates you see first and last tend to be remembered better than the others.
- Notes provide the information you need for the assessment. They will also act as evidence if decisions need to be justified.
- Summarise your notes after each interview, while the discussion is fresh in your mind.

6. Decision time

Assess the evidence for each candidate against the selection criteria

- Use a scoring system to turn observations into numbers. This makes it easier to compare candidates.

Calculate a weighted score

- Multiply the score for each of the criteria by the appropriate weighting and total the results.
- Discount candidates who do not achieve the required standard.

Make your decision

Base this on:

- candidates' weighted scores;
- any other evidence you have collected;
- your judgement.

Inform both successful and unsuccessful candidates of the outcome

- Make it clear if the offer is contingent on matters which you have not yet been able to assess (eg references or a qualifications check).
- Back up any phone calls with written confirmation.
- Try to provide brief, factual and helpful feedback to unsuccessful candidates.

7. Common interview mistakes

Keeping candidates waiting says the wrong thing about your business

- Do not let the interview go beyond its allotted time or allow interruptions to delay another candidate.

Not focusing on selection criteria leads to subjective and arbitrary decisions

- How the final decision will be made should be decided at the beginning.
- The decision should be based on the job-related criteria.
- These criteria should be used in job advertising, shortlisting and the design of the interview.

Failing to explore key skills and knowledge can lead to disastrous appointments

- For example, do not assume that someone who has many years' experience in a technical area (eg finance) can do a management job.

Making snap judgements usually means you are responding to your own prejudices

- Some interviewers favour candidates they personally like, or candidates who are similar to themselves.
- Use notes and evidence to identify which candidate best fits the criteria. You must be able to justify the selection of one candidate ahead of the others in case of a legal complaint.

Deciding too soon is an elementary mistake

- Suspend judgement until all the interviews have been completed.
- Use evidence. Do not pick the first candidate who seems suitable, or rely on initial impressions.

Expecting perfection opens the door to irrational decisions and self-delusion

- Do not expect to find the ideal candidate who will 'hit the ground running'.
- Most people will require an induction period if they are appointed.

Avoid being swayed by candidates with persuasive interview skills

- Look for evidence of ability and potential.
- Do not rely on the interview alone.
- Gather information from a number of selection methods.
- Test skills as objectively as possible and obtain factual information from previous employers.

Signpost

- Read guidance on [recruitment](#) and [selection methods](#) (free registration required) from the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development).
- Find CIPD recruitment and interviewing [training courses](#).
- Download government guidance on questions about [health and disability](#) during recruitment.
- Learn more about [psychometric tests](#) from the British Psychological Society.

Expert quote

"Many interviewers talk too much. You learn more when the candidate talks and you listen." - Frank Thaxton, Thames Valley Partners business advisers

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