

Hotel Business Review

Best practices, insights & trends

The Three Immutable Laws of Corporate Job Interviews

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Mr. Paul Feeney

What began as a dream search turned into a recruiter's worst nightmare. The top candidate for Marketing Director of the company's consumer products division had impeccable credentials, understood branding like few other individuals in the universe and was a natural leader. Highly recommended by the outside search consultant and by numerous references, he had survived tough interviews with the vice president to whom he would report, as well as a senior HR professional. Now it was time to meet the other division officers.

All went well until he walked into the office of the division's legal counsel, who said, "I think I've met you before." As she told the division president later that day, she would never forget the rude individual who had sat next to her on a long flight to Tokyo – resisting all attempts at conversation.

The following morning, the search consultant received the bad news from his disappointed client. The company would pass on Mr. Right.

When Saying 'No' Beats Saying 'Yes'

Here are the three immutable laws of corporate job interviews: (1) Résumés are twice as likely to rule candidates out as to rule them in. (2) Spots appear on ties and blouses, no matter how carefully a candidate eats lunch. (3) Introduce a candidate to enough people, and someone will be rubbed the wrong way.

Given those immutable laws, confirmed by years of careful observation, it is amazing that any job candidate survives the interviewing and hiring process. Moreover, in recent years – and for several reasons – the situation has grown worse.

First, many managers today feel under intense pressure not to make a wrong decision. The negative construction of the previous sentence is deliberate. With companies of all sizes and stripes having slogged their way through the 2001-2003 recession and with numerous positions hovering on the brink of elimination, the emphasis in corporations everywhere has been on avoiding mistakes – not on taking risks. If one doesn't want the proverbial axe to fall, the safest choice is not to stick one's neck out too far. And that applies to hiring, as well as to every other business decision.

Second, many managers wrongly believe that there is currently an almost infinite supply of good people "out there" – so one should not rush into any hiring decision. That line of reasoning is almost as specious as the statement in a well-known HR publication that demographics are wrong about the forthcoming shortage of employees – since no one will be able to afford to retire! (Now that will result in highly motivated workers.) But whether demographics lie or tell the truth, hiring managers can rely on the fact that good people – i.e., those who would receive an A in a Top grading ranking – are always in short supply and are rarely among the unemployed.

Nonetheless, the penchant to avoid sticking one's neck out leads to wanting to hire by committee (so that no one takes all the blame), while the belief in infinitely long unemployment lines results

in an unquenchable thirst to see more candidates before reaching a decision.

Do Interview Panels Work?

Interview panels have been around for ever and ever and are certainly not a creature of the past few years. But while they may be a fact of life, that fact alone does not validate their helpfulness or prove that they are used as wisely today as yesterday.

In the dim past, somewhere in the middle of the last century, enlightened employers regarded the on-site interview day as an opportunity for the company to sell itself to the candidate, as well as vice versa. "You will love working here," the employers said, "and today you will get to meet some of the reasons why." So the job candidate, in addition to being grilled by the hiring manager and the hiring manager's boss, got to meet some of the line and staff people with whom he or she would interact. Those individuals were certainly encouraged to pass along any opinions, pro or con, but they weren't directly part of the hiring decision.

By the 1980s, as many employers became more self-centered, the "sell ourselves to the candidate" philosophy fell by the wayside, and interviewing took on a harder edge. The on-site visit became more like running the gauntlet, pummeled by corporate warriors who viewed their mission as penetrating a candidate's defenses. ("What do you see as your most serious shortcoming?") The ultimate torture was to have the candidate interviewed by the panel all at once, somewhat like the Spanish Inquisition, to determine how well the individual performed "under pressure."

Most recently, in the current century, Sanford Rose Associates has observed an increasing tendency at more than a few companies to use interview panels as the ultimate committee – where everyone has veto power and no one takes all the blame. In addition to the "safety in numbers" protection that committees offer, the interview panel now provides the perfect excuse to keep looking for as long as it takes. Why accept a blemish, if somewhere there is a blemish-free person?

But here's the rub when interview panels become decision by committee:

1. People with absolutely no responsibility for the success of the open position are able to veto strong choices for weak reasons.
2. The focus shifts from what makes a person right (inclusion) to what makes the person wrong (exclusion). And,
3. Employers end up making offers to the least offensive candidates, not the most effective.

How To Do It Better

As various employment experts have noted, past performance is the best predictor of future performance – at least for people, if not mutual funds. So if you need someone to solve productivity problems, look for someone who has de-bottlenecked plants. The problem is that saying so does not necessarily make it so, which has led to the concept of performance-based interviewing – a process akin to peeling an onion:

"I see you increased productivity by 42 percent last year – very impressive! Exactly how did you accomplish such a feat? Was your boss involved? What about your employees? Were you part of a team, or did you have full personal responsibility? What sort of obstacles did you face, and how did you overcome them? (Etc.)"

That kind of questioning, mapped out in advance, might require most or all of a morning. One recommended approach is to have two people conduct the interview – the hiring manager and an HR representative (with one asking questions and the other taking notes). A social lunch follows, and the afternoon consists of get-to-know-you interviews with some potential future colleagues.

There are no "right" or "wrong" interviewing methods. Indeed, if the prospective employee will make frequent presentations to the Management Committee or Board of Directors, then a group interview may be just what the doctor ordered.

But no matter what the specific methodology, wise employers will keep in mind that the

responsibility for hiring should remain centered on the person or persons with ultimate personal responsibility for the success or failure of the new employee. Dissenting opinions from other members of an interview panel obviously should be considered and, if widely shared, acted upon. However, the interview panel that never met a veto it didn't like runs a grave risk of hiring bland, mediocre people.

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