



The Art of Interviewing *by Melissa Wall*

Almost every manager is faced with the prospect of hiring new people and it can be a daunting task – even for the experienced manager. The difficulty lies in that some people interview well but ultimately fail on the job or don't fit the culture, and there are some people that interview poorly but could be the needle in the haystack. How do you sort the wheat from the chaff? While there's no perfect solution, you can improve your success ratio by following a process and not relying so much on your gut instincts.

Define the Role. Effective interviewing starts *before* you meet any candidates. It starts with knowing what you need and thinking through the responsibilities and the type of person that will succeed in the role. Are you trying to find a replacement, add more of the same or is this a new job? Whatever the reason, develop a job description and list the three to five major responsibilities, the secondary duties, the absolute requirements, the "nice-to-haves", education and prior experience. Outline the traits of a successful person in this position. For example, detail oriented, hunter mentality, caretaker vs. change-agent etc.

Develop a list of Questions

Develop open-ended questions that go beyond the obviously stated facts in the resume and that probe for the experience, traits and characteristics that you seek. Use the same question format with each candidate for consistency and comparison. However, remember to consider the type and experience level of the person being interviewed. (See Melissa Wall's list of interview questions at www.distinctmarketing.com)

Only see qualified Candidates. Whether you are sourcing your own candidates or using an outside recruiter, be disciplined about the number of candidates you see. More is not necessarily better. It's quality that counts. Make sure the candidates are pre-screened either by your internal or external recruiters so that they meet the criteria you established. That's their job. You should see no more than five candidates. Otherwise, it's a waste of a manager's time and it becomes harder to ultimately make a choice. If you are not finding the right type of candidate, revisit the job description and the criteria and see if it's realistic. Make sure your hiring agents fully understand what you want.

Identify your Biases. People hire in their own image but ask yourself if a clone is really what you need in this situation. Defining the job and developing a list of probing questions will help guide you through the process objectively.



Prepare: Remember the Ten Minute Rule. Stop what you are doing at least ten minutes before a scheduled interview. Focus on the job description and your questions. Read the candidate's resume and recruiter's notes, if any, so you are prepared.

Meeting the Candidate. Choose a quiet, neutral location, where you will not be interrupted. Put the person at ease with small talk and offer them some refreshments. Sit along side the person, not behind a desk that may create a psychological barrier. Be conversational – you will get more information out of the person if they are relaxed. Encourage them to talk about themselves and ask open-ended questions.

Talk less, listen more

Hiring managers often talk too much during an interview and walk away with no more knowledge about the candidate than when they started. Give the candidate an opportunity to answer your questions and ask their own. Interviewing is a two-way process.

Listen and observe. How do they conduct themselves? Are they dressed appropriately? Are they prepared? Do they know something about your company? Do their expectations seem reasonable? Do they appear flexible or rigid? Focused or haphazard? How do they speak about their current or former employers?

Do they ask good questions? Do they answer your questions? Can you envision this person in the job, interacting with other employees at all levels? Talking to clients, if necessary?

Listen for contradictions in answers and probe for further clarification. Listen for descriptors that match your need...are they not just saying the things you want to hear but substantiating them with examples?

Ask probing, not illegal or potentially discriminatory, Questions. Do **not** ask questions about a person's age, marital status, children/childcare/pregnancy, ethnicity, religion or politics. However, you can ask a person if there are any reasons why they could not perform the duties associated with the position. For example, if a position requires travel, significant overtime, or heavy lifting, it's perfectly reasonable to ask them if they can meet the requirement.

Don't confuse Style with Skills. For example, accountants are different people from sales representatives and they interview differently. Accountants may wait to be asked a question whereas sales people are already looking for the connection before they even sit down and will initiate conversation...and you want them to because that's a characteristic of a good sales person. But it doesn't mean the



accountant can't do the job because he or she is not very outgoing. Remember the hiring objectives and criteria for the job.

Make Notes before you forget. Jot down your impressions either during or right after the interview. What was your overall impression of the candidate? Is this a person who will grow into the position or can hit-the-ground running? Is this position a logical next step for them or just likely to be another entry on the resume?

Sell the Job and the Company. Talk about the positive attributes of working at your company but also explain some of the challenges. Give examples of the culture so the person can determine if they would be a good fit. Even if the person is not a candidate for this particular position, s/he could be for something else. You are an ambassador for your firm, so you want to leave a good impression.

How to end the Interview. Thank the candidate for his/her time. Talk about next steps, the decision-making process and timeframe. Reaffirm the candidate's interest and ask if s/he is close to accepting an offer from another company.

Melissa Wall is the President of Marketing With Distinction, LLC, a B2B marketing services and executive search firm, located in Oxford, CT. She can be reached at 203-888-9995 or melissa@distinctmarketing.com.

|