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3 questions in interview will reveal best candidate

FINDING AND KEEPING THE RIGHT people is a critical function of senior managers and hiring authorities. A recent study by Barbara Davidson at the Saratoga Institute, Santa Clara, Calif., indicated that the typical mishire, at any organizational level, costs you *at least* 1.5 times the employee's annual salary. The ultimate hiring decision is one that can cost you dearly or benefit you immensely; the secret to success lies in recruiting right, hiring right and training right.

This three-pronged process is best understood through sequential examination. The interview process is an important component of recruiting right. Interviews can be conducted in a variety of settings, formally and informally, and are often defined by personal style. The key to professional, successful interviewing lies in two elements: first, what questions will reveal the most about the candidate? And second, what should you look for in the candidate's responses? This article examines three interview questions I find essential in my work as an executive recruiter:

TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF

Although this is a request rather than a question, it offers a strong way to begin the interview. Not only does this serve as a pleasant icebreaker and give you a chance to gauge initial chemistry, but it also lets you focus on the candidate's primary attributes: personality and fit to your culture, character/ethics, and past performance.

Note the flow of the interviewee's answer. Is it logical and well organized? Does it demonstrate brevity, clarity, and linear thinking? Avoid someone who delivers a disjointed, free-associating discourse that starts somewhere in Mrs. Leahy's kindergarten class, describes high school football tryouts, and ends in the present-day, a lengthy thirty minutes later. (You don't want to sit through "chatty Cathy" at every meeting from now on, do you?)

The ideal candidate is one whose answer is well thought out, logically sequenced, and summarizes experience, skills, talents, and schooling. Respecting your time, "A players"



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tend to deliver tightly focused, succinct answers that are high on specifics and low on ramble. Look for good communication skills; in PMA's 1998 Fresh Track *With a Focus on People* study, 68.8% of respondents ranked the ability to communicate as a manager's most desired characteristic.

WHAT IS/ARE YOUR MOST SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENT(S)?

Since past performance is the best indicator of future results, this question allows you to probe the candidate's achievements. Is the accomplishment discussed worth achieving? Is it even work-related? Does it deal with demonstrable results, such as efficiency, productivity, sales or revenue increases? Does it reflect skills or tie in to problems that relate to your position and company?

A candidate who describes appropriate accomplishments in a concise manner demonstrates not just the ability to do the work required, but also initiative, commitment, leadership and growth potential. Someone who can solve problems and drive change will contribute far more than a mere "maintainer." Focus on what challenges the interviewee faced, what decisions he made/how he dealt with the obstacles at hand, and what he learned from the experience. Be alert, however, for people who claim they cured cancer or eliminated poverty at their last positions. If they are a bragadocio or sound too good to be true, they are not for you.

WHAT SEPARATES YOU FROM EVERYONE ELSE? WHAT MAKES YOU SPECIAL?

Top candidates are self-aware and

acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses. Listen carefully to the candidate's response. Is it candid, or does it overstate the person's assets while downplaying his limitations? Is it egotistical or overbearing? Avoid those who would disrupt your workplace by blowing their own horn or insisting on playing the star.

The ideal candidate is one whose strengths mesh well with the job, the organization and the corporate culture. Although you may hire based on past performance, you will usually fire for human qualities such as chemistry, honesty, integrity, energy, intensity, and leadership. Carefully consider the "soft" skills this question reveals, rejecting interviewees whose attitude renders them a misfit, and therefore a mishire. In other words, make sure you evaluate candidates for their *compatibilities* as well as their *abilities*.

The "A players" you desire are currently employed, happy, successful, and well rewarded. How do you compel the best people to join your company? Consider such interviewees as "candidates" rather than "applicants." These individuals respond well to courteous treatment; you can win their respect by treating them as professionally as you expect them to perform. The interview is your opportunity to not only evaluate the candidate, but also to sell that person on your company, its culture and its potential.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the interview as a hiring tool. This key step in recruiting right lets you evaluate the individual's fit with your company and position, while also permitting you to sell the interviewee on your professionalism and the exciting opportunity your company offers. Improve your interviewing skills, then watch as your new hires improve your workplace.

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