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Interviews are an opportunity to find company's next star

INTerview. NO MATTER WHAT SIDE OF the equation you're on, it's a word guaranteed to make you sweat.

But for employers in particular, what makes interviewing someone so difficult? After all, you are the boss, and you have a position to offer. On the surface, all you must do is select which qualified, interested candidate best suits you, your company and the job at hand.

The complicating factor is the people involved. In order to conduct a skillful interview, you must explore successfully the candidate's suitability for and fit to the position, while also selling the candidate on the company, the job and the future of both.

Conducting a professional interview is critical to your people plan of finding and securing top talent. In turn, top talent is critical to your organization.

As Colin Powell wrote in "My American Journey," "organization doesn't really accomplish anything. Plans don't accomplish anything either. Theories of management don't much matter. Endeavors succeed or fail because of the people involved. Only by attracting the best people will you accomplish great deeds."

How can you prepare for an interview? The first interview preparation step is changing your perception of the interviewee. Consider the individual with whom you are meeting as a candidate, rather than as an applicant. If this person is a true A player, then he or she is probably employed, successful and well rewarded, and has no need to look for a job.

Since the demand is high for his or her skills, the individual in question will consider an opportunity only if it represents the right career fit and future.

The result? You need to treat these star players as respectfully as you would any valued client. Part of this is basic courtesy. Start the interview on time; do not keep the candidate waiting. Ensure that the candidate is the sole focus of your attention by closing your office door, turning off your cell phone and/or pager, and switching your office phone to voicemail.

Another part is warmth and collegiality. Since chemistry is crucial when building a team, use the interview to



CHRIS NELSON
Mixtec Group

assess the candidate's personality and social skills. Move out from behind your desk and sit with the candidate in a more relaxed setting.

Keep the first interview light and on a getting-to-know-you level; you can always use second or third meetings to drill down on specific questions and concerns.

Should multiple people from your company interview the candidate at the same time, position yourselves within an easy line of sight. Additionally, be sure to have each interviewer give the candidate a business card so that the candidate will know who met with him or her.

What are the keys to a skillful interview?

Confidentiality is the foundation of a skillful interview. Since almost all A players are gainfully employed, you do not want them to fear that meeting with you jeopardizes their current positions. (How would you feel if your boss discovered that you were kicking tires or doing your due diligence about a potential opportunity by interviewing with a competitor?)

Your ability to secure the best talent available hinges on confidentiality. Disclosure — whether to outside parties and/or to internal staff not critical to the decision matrix — at any time of the candidate's interest is not just inappropriate, but also highly detrimental to your recruiting process.

Having established the interview's confidential nature, you must cast yourself in the role of listener, not speaker. Prepare in advance a list of open-ended questions.

The best queries (such as "tell me about yourself") are ones that permit the candidate plenty of leeway. Is the candidate's response concise? Does he or she ramble too much? Does his or her answer demonstrate organized communi-

cation skills? What does the candidate emphasize and what does he or she leave out?

On an unspoken level, be alert to the candidate's body language. Does the candidate make direct eye contact? Does he or she project a professional demeanor? Is the candidate aloof, friendly or something in between? Take notes so that you can later review the candidate's mannerisms and comments.

Throughout the interview, evaluate the candidate on three primary attributes: personality and fit to your culture; character/ethics; and past performance. While no guarantees exist, a winner on these fronts most likely can make a valuable contribution to your company.

How should you close the interview? The interview's close is your opportunity to sell the opportunity and position. Give the candidate a brief overview of the firm's history and principals. Explain the company's roots, its present position and its vision for tomorrow.

Then describe the position as you see it, summarizing its critical elements, its first-year expectations and its role in the company as a whole. End by assessing the company as a whole. Why should the candidate come work there? What makes it special?

At this point, allow time for the candidate to explore the opportunity and company. The candidate's questions will speak volumes. How interested is he or she? Are the candidate's queries appropriate to the position? Do they demonstrate intellect and critical thinking?

Close by thanking the candidate for spending time with you explaining the next step in the process. The benefit of a skillful interview is that, at the worst, you now have a new friend in the candidate; at the best, you just attracted and sold a top-notch individual on your opportunity and company. That's a "win-win" situation we can all appreciate.

— **Chris Nelson is president of the Mixtec Group, a retained executive-search and consulting firm specializing in produce based in Pasadena, Calif. He can be reached at (626) 440-7077.**