

INTERVIEWING EMPLOYEES:

Creating an Effective Interview Process



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Hiring can be a long and consuming process for small businesses that don't have a lot of resources to devote to human resources. But because a single hire can have such a large effect on a small company, it is essential for managers to learn how to make the process efficient and successful.

"A bad hire costs a lot of money," says John Wood, vice president of business development at the Dayton, Ohio-based HR Chally Group. His firm does HR consulting for companies of all sizes, and advises its clients that systematic preparation for interviews can make the entire hiring process much more effective.

Even though interviewing is difficult to do, "it's probably the most important job of a manager," says Wood. Here are steps that can be taken before, during and after the interview to help you fill a position with the best person for the job.

Before the Interview

Know your company and know the position. It will be hard to find the right person if you don't know exactly what you're looking for.

"Truly understanding the competencies that are essential for success in a position allows you to ask relevant questions," says Wood. Different jobs require different skill sets, and hiring a jack-of-all-trades for a sales position may be a mistake, no matter how impressive his resume. Understanding the position means prioritizing the skills and talents that are appropriate for that specific job.

Furthermore, applicants will likely ask questions about the company and their future roles there. Not having clear answers about the expectations of the job and details of the company will come across as unprofessional. If you don't already have a mission statement or well-defined job descriptions, this may be a good time to consider putting those things in writing.

Know what to avoid. To avoid repeating past mistakes, you need to know what caused them. Ask yourself who last held the position at the company? Why did that person fail? What did they struggle with? Before the interview, identify characteristics that might clash with the position's responsibilities.

Structure the interview process. After determining the desired performance criteria, a consistent hiring process should be put in place. This will ensure a fair and uniform system with which you can compare candidates.

Before the interview begins, the interviewing team -- which might consist of an HR manager, the positions direct manager, and a colleague with a comparable role at the company -- should meet to decide the objectives of the interview.

They should decide the kind of interview it will be, the method that will be used, the length, and the function of each member of the team.

According to the Wood, inviting multiple people to sit in on an interview allows the candidate to meet more people at the organization, and consequently, get a better feel for the culture. At many small businesses -- where people work together, doing many jobs -- this is an important thing to have happen.

Chally defines four types of interviews, which can be used separately, or in sequence.

Screening interviews are designed to verify that a candidate has the necessary skills for the position.

Inquisitive interviews are designed as a one-way search for information from the candidate as a means of evaluation.

Cooperative interviews are a two-way exchange of information, designed to explore how well the candidate and company would complement each other.

Stress interviews, less frequently used, are designed to see how well the candidate can handle pressure.

Pre-screen candidates. After narrowing the applicant pool on paper, hold short phone conversations with candidates whose resumes look promising. The key things to address at this stage are whether the applicants have the appropriate knowledge and experience for the job, and whether their desired salary ranges meets yours. "Prescreening increases your odds for a good hire," says Wood.

And a 20-minute phone call will weed out applicants, saving everyone time. "A person shouldn't come into an interview where you're wasting time or asking obvious questions," says Wood.

During the Interview

Break the ice. First, establish a rapport with the candidate by welcoming him, introducing the members of the interviewing team, and even engaging in a limited amount of non-job specific conversation. This is a good time to explain the process, the objectives of the interview, and how long the candidate can expect it to last.

Dig for information. Listening to what a candidate has to say should take priority. In order to get him talking, remove all distractions and stay interested in what he is saying. Pick a place free from interruptions, hold outside calls, give him time to finish his thoughts, and respond with questions or comments that engage what he has just said.

Ask for examples and ask open-ended questions that allow the candidate to choose what he thinks is important to tell you about himself. Provide feedback, but be careful not to lead him one way or another. Your wording and reactions should be as neutral as possible. A candidate may read a positive or negative response from you as a cue to say what he thinks you want to hear.

Let the candidate ask questions. After you finish, invite the candidate to ask questions about the company and the position. Be prepared with answers about benefits, policies, and company culture. If you don't know the answer, make a note to follow up with him after you have found the answer.

Don't oversell. Just as you might be leery of candidate who is trying too hard, a candidate might be skeptical if you try to oversell your company. "Offer opportunity, not security," Chally advises its clients. Accentuate the positive, but be realistic about the company, its expectations, and what it is like to work there. A candidate won't work out if they feel have been feel misled.

Take notes. Relying on memory can be dangerous, even if there are a number people on the interviewing team. Likely, you will be interviewing a large number of people in a short amount of time, and by not taking notes, you risk forgetting important pieces of information, or even confusing one candidate with another. A tape recorder is also useful, but you can only use one with the candidate's permission.

Legal issues. Consistency is the best policy, but even asking all candidates the same types of questions can get you in trouble if the questions are inappropriate. Equal Employment Opportunity and Americans with Disabilities Act laws prohibit potential employers from asking about certain things. Stick to questions related to the requirements of the job. Consulting a lawyer about what questions are inappropriate or illegal may be a good idea.

Chally advises its clients to avoid writing anything during the interview in regard to race, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, physical characteristics, or anything else that could be perceived as discrimination.

Closing the interview. End the interview by explaining to the candidate what he can expect as a next step -- and be honest. "If that next step is not to move forward, it's important to let them know," says Wood. "Don't leave them hanging."

After the Interview

Review your notes. If a team conducted the interview, take some time immediately after to discuss everyone's impressions.

Follow-up. Instead of forcing a candidate to stay longer than scheduled, invite him for a follow-up interview. It will give you both time to digest and then start fresh the next time he comes in. If he is visiting from far away, you may be forced to consider scheduling a longer interview the first time or rely on phone interviews.

Follow-up interviews allow you to learn more information and gain a better understanding of things that may have been unclear. Wood recommends a total of two or three interviews for a promising candidate. After three interviews, he says, you should know if this is a serious candidate and if you would like to make an offer.

Don't settle. If you don't find a successful candidate, reopen up the applicant pool and start over.

"The challenge with small businesses conducting interviews is that they tend to rationalize because they need to fill a void," says Wood. But it can be even more dangerous for a small company to hire the wrong person than not to hire someone. "The smaller your business, the bigger the effect a mistake has on it," says Wood.

Consider your reputation. Maintain a professional, respectful, courteous manner, even if the candidate isn't what you're looking for.

In the long run, it will improve the turndown rate, and leave candidates saying good things about the company. Word of a negative experience can spread, making it difficult for you to attract good applicants in the future.

Beyond the Interview

Although interviews are important, they should only be thought of as one step in the hiring process.

There are many things an interview can't do, which is why references, a background check, and assessing the candidate during a probationary period are also essential parts of the hiring process.

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