

# Knowledge is power: Mastering the talent screening process

**I**t's hard to hide unprepared, unqualified interviewers. They bring little value to the interview process, and as a result, stick out like a sore thumb.

What can be done at your organization to ensure those on your selection teams conduct the best, most well informed interviews? Read on!

Resumes are very poor ways to assess a candidate's fit. A resume is simply a display of knowledge. It's information presented in a raw form. Like the job application you filled out for your first job, they provide only a very superficial way to screen candidates. And that is why interviews are key. Make your interviews powerful by getting fully prepared for them and using pre-interview information gathering and a skills survey. Then, collect your pre & post interview review data on a grading sheet.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST: THE SKILLS SURVEY

Before you even think about scheduling an interview, you must be sure to collect all of the information or "knowledge" you will need to create job search materials that bring in qualified candidates



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and help you make informed decisions. You do this by creating a "customized job application" or what I call a skills survey. Interviewing is about finding out the depth of a candidate's skills, aptitudes, and attitudes in relation to how they fit your work and your culture. Having candidates complete a skills survey allows you to focus more time on these issues and aspects of their experience during the face-to-face interview. The skills survey is very different from a standard job application or one that human resources might use at the end of the selection process. Yes, it is yet another step in the hiring process, but it is one that is hugely valuable and actually very easy to execute – I promise!.

### *Here's how to create a skills survey:*

1. First identify the outcomes you want your new employee to achieve.

*For example:*

- Ability to solve problems;
- Flexible with rotating schedules;
- Able to multi-task and stay very organized;
- Well adjusted and able to handle high pressure moments.

2. Now flip these outcomes into questions.

*For example:*

- Describe an example or two of the most significant problems you've solved. How did you identify the problem(s) and go about solving them?

- Have you ever worked nights or weekends? If so where, and for how long at any one stretch?
- Are you well organized? What methods do you use to stay organized?
- How do you cope with or regulate stress and emotions?

If you were training someone who is new to this type of high-pressure environment, what would you suggest to them to help them deal with the stress and emotions that come with it? By now you should be getting a flavor for how easy creating a skills survey can be. In our experience, it is best to keep the number of questions between 10 and 15. As a rule of thumb, the greater the "needle in a haystack" nature of the search (i.e. level of specificity), the greater the number of questions. Working through the process of completing the skills survey forces candidates to really think through the key roles that they'll be responsible for on a daily basis in the position. In other words, it helps them really assess whether or not the open position is the right job for them. It helps them determine whether they are under-qualified or overqualified and their true level of interest. It helps them dramatically improve their preparation for the interview process. Emphasize to them that completing the skills survey in writing helps them to think through the key topical areas that will be focused the most during the interviews.

Also keep in mind that the best interviewers are not always the best candidates, just as terrible interviewers can be great candidates. The skills survey levels the playing field for all candidates no matter how good they are at interviewing. Interviewers often have limited time to find out the depth of a candidate's skills, especially as they relate specifically to the open position. The skills survey process forces candidates to focus, in writing in advance of the interview, on the most important aspects of their experience and skill set. You can then build

on the information they've provided in the skills survey when you are in a face-to-face interview by asking more detailed, behavior-based questions. The skills survey also provides you with much more time in the interview to dig deeper into their relevant background, experience, and skill set because you do not have to use valuable interview time to do basic information gathering.

### **CREATING CLARITY: REQUESTING A COVER LETTER**

Now there's one other information gathering step that, depending on the results of the skills survey review, you may want to use on a case-by-case basis. Follow up Cover letters can be requested at very different times throughout the interview process. Typically they are used very early on in the process to clarify whether or not a candidate should even be asked to complete a skills survey. Sometimes a cover letter is also helpful after candidates have completed the skills survey. At that stage, the cover letter can be used to address remaining concerns about a candidate and to find out details such as why they are interested in your opportunity and/or how well they feel they fit the role.

The request for the skills survey normally comes as a part of the screening process before any interview starts. But, cover letters can be asked for at any time. Sometimes you'll ask for one up front on one issue, and another cover letter on a different matter after the final interview, and maybe even another one right before the final candidate selection takes place. When asking for a cover letter, you might say to the prospective candidate, "Before we proceed further into the process, we want to give you an opportunity to address, in the form of a cover letter, an issue we are concerned about. Please give me a paragraph answering the following question." Then you take the concern and put it in the form of a question, asking the candidate to focus on answering with one paragraph or two at most. Getting a candidate to answer in writing allows the entire selection team to hear the candidate's own words and allows you to

make a hiring decision based on logic, not uncertainty, assumptions, preconceived notions, or lack of information. It also tells you a lot about the candidate's communication style, follow up and organizational skills. Candidates will also accept being screened out with much greater grace, when they see you've really given them a chance during the information gathering and interview process.

### **MAKING THE GRADE: USE EVIDENCE-BASED GRADING SYSTEMS TO COMPARE CANDIDATES**

You now know how to come up with valuable information. The next step is learning how to quantify or measure its value. By this point in the selection process, you will have at least a resume and a completed skills survey and maybe even a cover letter and some notes from your original introduction to the candidate. Note that you will have yet to do an actual interview but you've already collected a good bit of information that will make the interview process a whole lot more productive once you move to face-to-face interviews. The grading sheet is a customized form you complete and then use for every candidate you have screened as a potential fit. If through a superficial quick review of the resumes you can tell that some of the candidates are probably C level in comparison with the others, set those aside for now and grade the rest. The grading sheet will help you objectively weigh all the outcomes and even the preferences in such a way that at the end of the grading process you can be pretty sure who the A+ candidates are, who the A candidates are, and who the B candidates are. Then you focus on scheduling interviews for the A's, set aside the B's as backups (for now), and release the C's. The grading sheet is also good retention tool. Reviewing the grading sheet during a quarterly performance appraisal is another step that can be taken towards making sure there is still a good fit between existing employees and the current roles they're assigned to. People change and their interests,

skills and abilities change with them. If the position a person is in doesn't change, then you need to stay tuned in to the person so when he has grown beyond a certain role you can move him into more fulfilling work as soon as it's available. In the meantime, you may even want to assign special projects to keep employees motivated. Fail to notice the subtle changes in a person's motivation or attitude and you will experience excessive turnover.

What you learn from people about why they are interviewing, what they like and dislike about their current organization, how their organization asks them to do things and how their organization is structured, etc., can be very valuable information. Knowledge is power... so capture as much as you can during the interview process for continuous evaluation and redeployment of talent and even for competitive intelligence purposes.