

Effective Interviews

We all know the most obvious reason to interview someone is to ascertain their suitability for a role and fit for company culture, but this is also an opportunity for you to create a positive impression of your business.

In markets where there is a shortage of good candidates, you may even have to think about selling the role and your company to the candidate. A person may not become an employee, but they could become a customer, supplier or champion for your company after a positive experience.

Who should interview and for how long?

Interviewing is one of the most complex and difficult skills to learn in any business and also one of the most valuable. It's worthwhile spending time and money ensuring you, and any of your team that are interviewing, have a good knowledge of the structure and process that will help you be more successful, along with critical things to cover and observe.

Experienced recruiters develop an eye for spotting warnings or tell-tale signs. Interviews are just one part of the recruitment process and you should always suspend judgment, particularly if feeling really positive, until all references, work samples (see 'Work Sample' within this Resources section), or work experience opportunities you might provide are completed. It is always best to take your time recruiting, and think very carefully about the messages and overall impression you are getting.

For a full-time role, it's worthwhile interviewing top candidates at least three times so you have enough information and a thorough comparison for better decision making. It's good for the direct manager to meet the person at least twice if not three times. Involving other people is also really important as they will notice and hear different pieces of information. It's usually advisable to let interviewees know in advance who they will be meeting so they can prepare themselves.

One or two interviewers is usually okay although, with younger or very nervous people, having just one interviewer is usually better so they can relax into the interview. The more interviewers, the more on guard your interviewee will be. This will prevent them from relaxing and sharing more personal information, which can hinder you getting to know what they are really like.

If you like someone but they appear very nervous, you might like to reference check early to get more information. If someone has been made redundant or is going through a challenging time that is temporary, you may find they are more relaxed and settled once they are in a welcoming environment and a role they are keen to do.

If the person is applying for a front line role involving a lot of client contact and presentations, you might want to see how they perform with several people and in different situations. Although, it may still be necessary to carry out the one-on-one interviews to try and find out who is behind the more polished, professional exterior.

Interviews should ideally last around one hour. It's better to have three one-hour interviews than one two-three-hour interview, as attention spans drop off after an hour; people become tired and may begin to be distracted.

Always indicate how long you think a person will need to spend with you in advance, especially if they are meeting you in their lunch break or between work commitments. If people become anxious about time, they'll usually struggle to perform at their best. It will also help you keep to time and not appear rude if you have an enthusiastic candidate who seems in no hurry to end the interview.

If it becomes very obvious early on in an interview that the person isn't suitable, it's important to give them at least 20-30 minutes of your time. As well as showing decency and respect, you need to be mindful of the impression you leave them with of your company and how you treat people. Also, you may find that your opinion changes the more you talk. But if it doesn't, at the very least, you'll ensure the candidate feels fairly treated and considered, even if they don't progress to the next stage in the process.

Location

Depending on what you want to achieve, you may like to think about holding the interview off site, at a café or hotel, where it's less informal and more relaxed.

Whether you interview in your office or elsewhere, make sure you have sufficient privacy so you won't be over heard. It's usually best not to interview in an open plan office and use a meeting room or a quiet place where you won't be interrupted. Phones should be diverted or switched off and distractions minimised.

To make a favourable impression, prepare the room before your person arrives for interview so they don't feel as if it is all last minute or not particularly important to you. Make sure the environment is clean, clutter free and comfortable. Check the temperature is okay and the lighting and furniture will help your candidate feel relaxed and welcome. It's not advisable to sit too close or too far away. The right balance will allow your candidate to relax and enjoy the meeting. If there are two of you interviewing, sit together and opposite so the candidate can see you both with ease.

Interview structure

Having a good structure will help you get all the information you need, and the candidate get all the information they need. It also gives a positive impression of the business. It's really important to start with a brief introduction telling the candidate how the interview will proceed as it usually reduces the anxiety they feel and also allow you to control and manage the meeting. A good simple structure to follow is:

- Welcome and a few moments of informal conversation to break the ice and reduce anxiety. A brief introduction of the interview process and structure of today's meeting.
- Always start with information gathering first rather than detailed information on your business. If you tell them all about your company first they may well tell it all back to you and give a far more favourable impression than they would otherwise be able to do.
- Work through the CV, asking questions about the roles and experience they have had. It's common to start with their least recent roles (how far back you go will depend on what is relevant for the role) and move forward to most recent experience. Always ask why they left each of their previous roles.
- Information giving – talking about the business at a fairly high level, e.g., when the business started, how many people you have, which locations, key functions of the business, the culture, why people enjoy working for you, etc. It's always good to ask what else would they like to know? If you don't know an answer to one of their questions, commit to finding out and getting back to them.
- At the end of the interview, give them an idea of when you will be able to get back to them, next steps in the process, i.e., second or third interview, work sample, work trial, references, etc.
- Even if you think you know at this point that a person isn't suitable, it's usually better to take time to consider everything, before letting them know, just in case something changes your mind. Also, it's usually kinder and more respectful to them.
- It is rarely a good idea to offer a job at an interview. There is nothing wrong with indicating you are keen to continue the process but an offer may put the person on the spot and also come across as if you are desperate. If you are extremely keen, wait a few hours at the very least so they can digest the meeting before phoning to offer.

- People have a lot going on in their lives - work, family, and all sorts of challenges - so it's really important to thank them for their time and for attending the interview. Finishing on a positive and considerate note might be the thing that sways them towards your offer rather than a competitor if both roles are appealing.

Depending on the role, the second, third or fourth interview may be used to introduce the candidate to other relevant people in the company. Different perspectives often provide food for thought and give a better, more balanced view and end result. Including other team members also increases their buy-in to the process, and increases the chance they will welcome the new arrival and support them.

Second interviews deepen your knowledge and you will always find out things in the second interview you missed in the first, no matter how thorough your first interview was. A second interview can be set up to be more informal or formal. Creating a different structure may prompt people to tell you more or different things about themselves.

You may also like to consider a social setting for a meeting, perhaps lunch or dinner that includes the candidate's partner, in either a group setting or with you and your partner. If the role means a lot of travel, or hosting or attending formal or informal social events, it would be helpful to see if they conduct themselves appropriately and that their partner will be supportive of this type of role.

Interview Questions

Behavioural questions ask a person to draw on their past experiences, rather than give a yes or no answer. For example, the question, "Are you a team player?" is almost always going to get a "Yes" answer which doesn't tell you much. Asking, "Can you tell me about an effective team you have worked in and why it worked?" will give you a much better idea about the person's views on what skills are important in a team and how they have actually applied them in real life. Alternatively, "Can you tell me about a team you worked in that didn't work and what the issues were?", "What would you have done to improve its performance?"

Once you have worked out the key competencies/skills required for the job, you should aim to have a behavioural question which probes each one. If a person doesn't give you enough information, use phrases like "Tell me more about that?", "What happened next?", "What did you think of that result?", "How did that effect or change the situation?", to dig deeper.

It's important not to make it all about work, as people's values, ability to contribute at a certain level, and happiness are all impacted by their family, friends, hobbies and interests. "What do you like to do when you are not at work?", "What has been your most challenging situation affecting work/life balance?" How did you manage that?", "What do your friends or family think about your choice of career"?

Be very careful not to talk too much in an interview. The candidate should be talking at least 70% of the time if you are going to find out as much as you can in this meeting. Don't be tempted to jump in to fill silences. They are a great opportunity for the person to fill that space with more information that may provide insights.

When you ask a question, give the person ample time to think, and then respond. A common problem is when the interviewer ends up answering the question for the candidate because they are nervous, inexperienced, think they are on the same wavelength or keen to build rapport. It is critical you avoid this at all costs as, in effect, you are hijacking the interview.

Once the candidate has shared information about themselves, their skills, experience, and previous roles, you can go ahead and talk about the company. If you are generous at sharing information about the company and the role, you will give your candidate a much better chance of making a good decision about joining, or in some instances, not joining.

Candidates want to make good decisions, so it is important they know enough to be able to form a fairly comprehensive picture of the culture, role, and expectations. This can ultimately save everyone a lot of time and money.

Taking notes

It is advisable to take notes at an interview, especially when you are meeting several candidates, one after the other. It can be very difficult to recall interview content without prompts.

If two interviewers are going to be involved, you should agree on how you will structure the roles in advance, e.g., interviewer A to welcome, interviewer B to ask questions in the information gathering phase while interviewer A makes notes. Interviewer A to talk about the business ,etc. Basically, whichever person is talking, the other person should make the majority of the notes.

If only one interviewer is present, they will have to talk and make brief notes. It may help you to write notes on a copy of the CV next to the area you are discussing as another way of ensuring you remember what the note relates to.

Anything else I should think about?

The interview process is not unlike a jigsaw puzzle and each point of contact, meeting, work trial, and reference helps to create a more accurate picture.

Suspending judgment until the meeting is over is challenging but very valuable, as you will pick up more information if you are not quietly trying to make decisions while the interview is in progress. Suspending judgement supports active and more effective listening. Listen to

people to understand what they are saying, not just to have an answer for their question, and you are more likely to get a better understanding of who they are, what they are capable of, and what they have been doing well and badly.

We are not always aware of our biases but, as best you can, try to identify judging and biases creeping in when you interview someone. There are various types, all of which distort your ability to select the best person for the role. A few examples are:

- “Like Me Effect” – being more drawn to candidates who are like you (age, background, birthplace, hobbies, etc).
- “Halo Effect” – when one good thing about a candidate overshadows other not so good things (good looks are famous for clouding an interviewer’s judgement).
- “Cloven Hoof Effect” – when one bad thing about a candidate overshadows other really positive things (they spill their coffee on your new carpet).
- “Stereotyping” – when you assume things about people based on one characteristic.
- “Recency Effect” – when you like the person you saw most recently best, because they are fresh in your mind.

To avoid bias, keep reminding yourself not to judge but to do a great job of listening and making notes, coming back to your job description and person specification, and comparing the fit to these more objective benchmarks.

Work samples

Work samples are a short list of questions the candidate needs to answer that are easily understood and relate to everyday work situations in the specific role they will be doing. They can produce surprising insights regarding the candidate’s level of knowledge, personal style, judgement, and decision making. (See ‘Work Sample’ within this Resources section.)

Work trials

Work trials are often said to be the best way of seeing if someone will fit in to the role and your organisation. You may decide to have the candidate work in the office for a few hours or a couple of days so they can see what it’s like and you can see how they get on with your people.

This is not a paid opportunity, but a part of your interview process and needs to be clearly mapped out so you use the time effectively to get more information and greater understanding of you candidate.

Alternatively, you might want to consider giving them a small project or asking them to present or sell something in a role play if that is what they are going to be doing for you.

Reference checking

At the final interview stage, you should ask your preferred candidate for three or four referees' names. It's important to get really good references that build a clear picture of the person's history, and match it with all the information you have found out about them. Referees should preferably be the manager they directly reported to in their previous two or three roles. A customer or supplier that knows them well may also be useful.

People may not want to give you their current manager if they have not discussed leaving with them. If an applicant gives you referees from very distant roles, or says they have lost touch with everybody, it may be cause for concern. Verbal references should always be sought, even if a candidate has glowing written references. If referees are overseas, ask for email addresses to contact them and set up a time that it suits to talk.

Check first with your candidate that they are happy for you to proceed, or whether they need to seek approval or to tell their referees you will be calling. There are usually privacy rules around seeking feedback on a person without their consent, so ensure you obtain agreement before proceeding. If you know one of the referees or an ex-colleague, it is always better to ask the candidate for permission before proceeding. If they have nothing to hide it should not be a problem. By asking and getting a certain response you might find out something you would have otherwise missed.

Please be aware not all referees are fair and honest with their feedback so you will need to be listening for anything you think is overstated, unprofessional or uncalled for. If you get some negative feedback, call the other referees and get to the bottom of the comments. You might find there are two sides to the story. If anything arises that you weren't expecting, don't hesitate to ask for more referees.

Make sure the referee is clear about the job your candidate has applied for. Ask all referees the same thorough questions. Look for themes in answers, i.e., have both indicated time management is a problem? It is easy to ignore alarm bells when you want to hire, so suspending judgement and following process is really important to avoid mis-hires. It is far better to walk away from a candidate and go back to your applicants, or start again, than to hire a person who is wrong for your company.