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# SEALING THE DEAL



**The Art and Craft of a Great Interview**

# Overview



This document is intended as a guide for employers to help them select the best possible candidate for a given position.

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You understand that **the hiring process is a key element** in the short-, medium- and long-term success of your organization. It must be accorded the same importance as other significant initiatives. It is estimated that recruiting and onboarding an average lower-level or mid-level employee in the U.S. costs between \$4,000 and \$20,000. The higher up the chain of command you go, the more costly it gets. You simply cannot afford to hire anyone other than the optimal candidate. Or even worse, hire the wrong person. The consequences can be catastrophic both financially and for company momentum.

**Before starting the hiring process you should create an ideal candidate profile** -- either through a skills analysis for the role or by using Behavioral Analytics. This

process will allow you to synthesize multiple managers/leaders opinions to arrive at a consensus inside your team about what the job entails and who the ideal candidate is.

If you are interested in incorporating Behavioral Analytics, you can get in touch with **Chris Taylor at [chris@christaylorconsultant.com](mailto:chris@christaylorconsultant.com)**. This will allow you to home in very tightly on various traits, skills, aptitudes, and attitudes that you're looking for.



# Preparing To Hire

You should have created a **large enough pool of qualified candidates** (one or two just won't do the job). It's crucial to find at least three or four individuals (5 is better) who could each be considered excellent candidates. If you only have one or two quality candidates, it becomes challenging to properly assess the differences (sometimes minor) that will help you select the best candidate.

If you're struggling to find enough candidates, consider enhancing your candidate marketing strategies. Most companies post a full job description along with a large list of experience requirements that few candidates can hope to meet. For example, asking for 6+ years of experience for a job that can be done by an entry-level employee is counterproductive.

My preferred approach is to create much shorter job ads with only the non-negotiable requirements and a few major benefits highlighted to attract a broader pool of candidates. The job description can then be used during the interview process once you have attracted your candidates. The job ad could be posted on a company's website and/or on job sites like LinkedIn and Indeed.

## Employer And Candidate On The Same Level

Be aware, the hiring game has changed. Today, **you and a potential employee are more or less on the same level**. Decades ago, employers would unconsciously assume that they held the winning hand and that candidates should be grateful to even get an interview. You cannot afford to have this attitude. While it's true that candidates will be competing to be able to land a job with your organization, you are competing with other organizations to attract top talent. As much as candidates have to sell themselves and their abilities, you have to sell your organization and the position you're looking to fill. There is a war for talent: make sure you are prepared to win that war.

# Prior to the Actual Interview

Prepare as you would for a client presentation: **very thoroughly**. A well-prepared interview almost always goes well. An under-prepared interview can quickly go off the rails.

**Try to schedule all candidate interviews within the same week or two.** This ensures your impressions are fresh and prevents bias in favor of the most recent interviewee(s).

**Prepare questions beforehand.** This can't be emphasized enough: winging it just won't fly.

## Structuring the Interview

There are various ways an interview can be structured. One of the best is to divide the interview into distinct parts:

- Introduction
- Reviewing candidate's background
- Investigation of candidate's hard skills related to the job
- Investigation of candidate's soft skills related to the job
- Company culture fit
- Questions from the candidate
- Conclusion



## Introduction

Ensure that you prepare a few remarks to start your interview. See **During the Interview** section for additional information on how to nail this section of the interview.



## Candidate Background

Prior to the interview, review the candidate's resume. You may think you've got this covered, but it's unlikely that you have. You'll have received many resumes from well-qualified candidates with similar experience. If you see something that stands out, make a note of it and probe this area during the interview.

The goal of this part of the interview is to uncover both the candidate's strengths and weaknesses. Generally, candidates will be most comfortable talking about their strengths. You will have to probe a bit -- with a special eye for the inconsistencies in the candidate's resume, skills, and background -- to get an idea of the candidate's weaknesses. Can they talk intelligently about their background and accomplishments, or have they embellished them?

Your goal is to understand the pros and cons of the candidate. **Be aware that research shows that 79% of candidates have a lie of omission or commission on their resume.** Understanding if this is just a simple cover-up of an embarrassing situation in a short-lived position, or if it is part of a larger pattern in the employment history is critical.

## Hard Skills

Create a list of the two (ideal) or three most important hard skills. Pick two or three skills that are required for success in the role. But do not allow this section to dominate the interview. Hard skills are relatively easy to evaluate but soft skills require much more time. Most people do not fail at a job because of the hard skills, it is most often the soft skills that get in the way of the employee fitting into the team.

**If you already have a job description, then use that document to pull out the most important hard skills for the job.**

If you're not the manager or supervisor of the potential employee, make sure you get in touch with them and review exactly what they're looking for. This way, you'll gain consensus with your team about key skills.

Here are two jobs and the associated hard skills.

- Journeyman Plumber – Mechanical expertise
- Sales Manager – Qualify prospects and create compelling business offers.

The hard skills questions we developed were:

- [Plumber] A customer wants a shower with multiple heads. What would you do to keep the water pressure high?
- [Plumber] You arrive at a construction worksite and the vent stack is improperly built. What would you do to assess and fix the problem?
- [Sales] Describe your process to qualify and grade a prospect pipeline.
- [Sales] Help me understand what you do to make your offers stand out from the competition.



## Soft Skills

Soft skills will be more determinative as to which candidate will fit best in your organization.

Therefore, be prepared to spend more time investigating them than on hard skills that are easier to evaluate. Additionally, look for clues that this candidate has enough self-awareness to be easily coachable.

As an example, for a forensic accounting position, we decided on the soft skills of Accuracy, Analytical Skills, and Organizing.

The four soft skills questions we developed were:

- [Accuracy] What methods do you use to check for quality, especially under tight deadlines?
- [Accuracy] Describe a time you found an error your boss made. How did you address it with them?
- [Analytical Skills] Describe a situation where your initial hypothesis was proven wrong by data.
- [Organizing] How do you prioritize your tasks when managing multiple projects with tight deadlines?





## Company Culture

Ensuring that potential employees are a good fit for your organization's culture is very important. But first you have to define what your organization's culture is.

If your organization has already determined its cultural values, use those. In many cases, you will have to figure this out for yourself. Here are some key determinants of an organization's culture. As always, write them down so you don't have to depend on mental recall alone.

- How are people hired?
- How are decisions made? (Top down? Bottom up? Who gets to contribute and to what degree?)
- How are employees recognized for their contribution?
- How flexible is the organization? (Flexible working hours? In the office or remote or a hybrid?)
- How do employees communicate with each other?
- How do employees celebrate their work and each other?

Now that you have an idea of what your company culture is, you can begin to probe for a good fit with questions like:

- Can you describe your ideal workplace?
- What gets you excited about coming to work?

## Core Questions

Consider the questions that you have developed for hard and soft skills as core questions. They must be asked of every candidate. This is the best way to compare candidates. They should be asked in the same order for every candidate to eliminate bias. If there are multiple interviewers on the panel, then the soft skill questions can be divided among them. There is no need to have everyone ask every question. In fact, this should be avoided because it will slow down the interview. If there are interviewers in multiple locations, then they must follow the agreed-upon plan.

As you can see, having multiple separate interviewers is a big advantage because you can get high-quality answers to more hard and soft skills questions from the candidates.

A good rule of thumb to ensure that you get a useful answer from the candidate is to ask questions and follow-up questions that allow you to understand the full **Situation**, **Tasks** the candidate set themselves, the **Actions** the candidate took, and the **Results** of those actions (STAR). By collecting this information, you will give yourself the best opportunity to understand the candidate and their experience. By asking for specifics in your initial and follow-up questions, you are trying to uncover which candidates actually performed the work themselves and which candidates are claiming undue credit.

## How To Ask Great Follow-Up Questions

One of an interviewer's most important skills is to be able to ask good follow-up questions. This means that an interviewer must actively listen to the candidate and ask insightful follow-up questions to elicit the desired information quickly. This is what distinguishes good interviewers from great ones.

Why is this important? One of my clients is in the event business. Her Delivery Manager suddenly resigned. She was desperate to find a replacement and found someone whose personality closely fit the job profile. But she didn't do proper due diligence in her interview. Had she done so, she would have found out that this individual had an outstanding DUI, which obviously cannot be tolerated in a Delivery Manager.

In a second example, I interviewed a candidate with a phenomenal background. When I asked him about his projects, he had all the right answers and even brought amazing job samples. I pushed him on his work approach and what it took to create the job samples. He suddenly started giving very general answers and couldn't provide specifics. This should have been a big red flag for me. Unfortunately, I didn't listen carefully enough and hired him anyway. I later found out that those work samples were not his work. He contributed to them but did not take the lead role that he claimed. This led to underperformance at my company on his part and a great deal of frustration for me.

## Other Considerations

**Be prepared to answer questions about your organization.** Candidates have every right to expect you to answer openly and honestly about your organization. Indeed, if a candidate doesn't ask any questions about your organization, it's generally a sign that they're not interested in this particular job, but merely interested in any job at your organization.

**Get ready to answer questions about salary.** Obviously, your views and the candidate's must generally align.

**Allocate at least one hour for the interview.** Unless the interview is for a low-level position, it takes this long to understand a candidate's hard skills and to get them to reveal their real attitudes and values.





## Diversity

Diversity is important in the workplace. Countless studies have shown that people from different backgrounds, with different educations, with different communication styles, and different life experiences, can contribute positively to an organization's culture, and make the company more effective, more efficient, more insightful, and more innovative. Using Behavioral Analytics will help you hire people with diverse backgrounds. Just as importantly, you'll be able to hire people with diverse ways of thinking, allowing you to build a more resilient and productive team.

**Ask me for more information** about this, I will be happy to discuss.



## Need To Upgrade Your Interviewing Skills?

If you are looking to improve your interviewing skills, the first thing to do is to bring in a co-worker and have them take notes during the interview and then provide feedback on your questions and follow-ups. They can even improve the interview by asking one or two follow-up questions that you might have missed. Interviewing is a key part of the success of your company. You might consider seeking out a quality training program that includes video recording and professional feedback. When I was a Director at a Fortune 500 company, I had the opportunity to attend a 3-day interviewing course. I cannot overestimate how much this experience helped me improve my interviewing skills.

Finally, understand that interviewing is a skill that needs to be consistently used and polished for optimal performance. Commit to improving your interviewing and you will be rewarded with a better team and fewer square pegs in round holes.

# The Day of the Interview



This is what you should do on the day of the interview to get things off to a great start and to keep the momentum of the interview going.

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## The Setting

**Get out from behind your desk!** Your desk represents a physical barrier to communication, and what you're trying to do is promote communication under what could be stressful circumstances. If your office has a couple of chairs, use them. If not, find a boardroom, a meeting room or other location that demonstrates that you and the candidate are on equal footing.

## The Tour

Good candidates will show up 15 minutes prior to the interview. If they do, give them an informal tour of your organization. This is a natural preface to the interview and may give rise to easy questions later on.

## Punctuality

Be on time. You know how you'd react if a candidate turned up late. If something is holding you up, find a way of getting the candidate the message. And offer them a very sincere apology when you meet in person.

## Make Them Feel At Ease

You want candidates to feel comfortable and at ease. The interview is stressful enough – you want to create an atmosphere where candidates can put their best selves forward. To start off with, there is absolutely nothing wrong with offering them water, tea, coffee or a soft drink.

# During the Interview

These are tips on best practices during  
the interview itself.

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## Time Management

You should allocate no longer than 5 minutes for the introduction and no longer than 5 minutes for the conclusion and sales pitch if you like the candidate. Having the candidate walk you through their background should take about 10 minutes. This will leave you approximately 40 minutes for your core questions. Do the math yourself, but, for example, if you have 6 core questions you will have approximately 6 minutes to get the answers out of the candidate for each question. This is why you can only have a maximum of 6-8 core questions. This makes it easier to get the high-quality answers that you want.

## Introduction

Starting off with “So why do you want to work for this company?” is no way to start an interview. Start with the simple, no-stress, no-wrong-answer stuff.

- How was the traffic?
- Did you have difficulty finding the building?
- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
- What hobbies/activities do you enjoy outside of work?



## Candidate Background

Once the interview starts, I find that a good way to keep candidates at ease and still elicit important information is to start with their background. I often place their resume between us, along with the job description, and ask them to walk me through their background, highlighting parts of each job that would apply to the job they are interviewing for.

## Hard Skills/Soft Skills

Ask the hard and soft skill questions that we covered in the **Structuring the Interview** section.

## Who Does the Talking?

In both the hard and soft skills sections, aim to have the candidate speak more than 50% of the time. This can be challenging when the interviewer is untrained and eager to sell the candidate on the position or talk at a deep level about the technical aspects of the job. This often devolves into a one-sided conversation where the interviewer does most of the talking. This is not what you want.

## Take Notes

Don't rely on your memory alone. It will play tricks on you. Taking notes also shows a candidate that you are honestly interested in what they have to say, leading them to be more thoughtful and expansive in their answers.

Remember your notes can be subpoenaed as part of a lawsuit, so don't write down any physical or discriminatory characteristics of the candidate such as "fat bald guy."

## Style of Questions

Generally, the answers to open-ended questions will be more revealing than close-ended questions that can be answered with a simple "Yes" or "No". For example, "Did you like the culture at your previous employer?" will gain little information, whereas "Can you describe the culture at your previous employer?" will reveal much more.

## How to Conclude an Interview

Don't be overlong, but make sure you cover the following points.

- Ask whether the candidate has anything more to tell you about their candidacy or any questions about the job/employer.
- Tell the candidate that they should feel free to follow up with an email if any further questions arise.
- Explain the next step in the process, including whether there will be further interviews as you make your decision, and how the candidate will be informed of your decision.
- Thank the candidate for interviewing for the position.



## What Kinds of Questions May Not Be Asked?

As a question of basic respect and potential legal liability, you should not ask questions about:

- Age
- Gender
- Criminal history
- Disabilities
- Medical history
- Ethnicity
- Country of origin
- Religion
- Marital status
- Family status

Why? Because they have nothing to do with a candidate's ability to do a given job.



# How To Grade Responses

It is preferable to have a fair and objective scoring system that is used for every candidate so that you avoid going on gut feeling alone.

Best practice is to create a grading system for key factors as well as for each core question.

These key factors could be:

- Background
- Team Fit
- Job Fit
- Company Fit

Interviewers often use a five- or seven-point scale to do this. What follows is a typical five-point grading system that interviewers use to assess their satisfaction with a particular response.

- 1 – Very unsatisfactory
- 2 – Unsatisfactory
- 3 – Neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory
- 4 – Satisfactory
- 5 – Very satisfactory

During the Interview - cont'd

# Scoring Sheet

Keep it simple. In addition to the points raised above you may want to add your own notes. And ask yourself immediately after the interview, yes or no, whether you would hire this person.

Candidate Scoring Sheet			
Candidate Name: _____		Interview Date: _____	
Position Applied To: _____			
<b>Score the candidate on a 1-5 scale on each of the following 4 areas and the three structure Questions</b>			
Experience	Job Fit	Core Question #1 [Insert Question Here]	Score <input type="checkbox"/>
Team Fit	Company Fit	Core Question #2 [Insert Question Here]	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Core Question #3 [Insert Question Here]	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Core Question #4 [Insert Question Here]	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Core Question #5 [Insert Question Here]	<input type="checkbox"/>
Notes: _____ _____ _____		Would you recommend hiring? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Notes: _____ _____ _____			



# Next Steps



If you are the only person interviewing, review all the candidates' scorecards at the same time and select your first and second choices. You want a second choice in case your first choice doesn't accept the job offer. If there is more than one interviewer, meet, compare notes, and come to a consensus on who you want to hire. **Then get that offer out quickly!**

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