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Interview Techniques for Employers

If both parties are to get the most out of an interview it is important to give careful consideration to the type of questioning technique you are going to adopt.

Initial exchanges

It is vital to make the interviewee feel at ease when they enter the interview room. Offer a firm, warm handshake and remember that a friendly smile can work wonders on the interviewee's nerves! Making the interviewee feel relaxed and comfortable in the interview environment is essential if you are to get the best out of them and discover if they could be right for the job you are offering. Making the atmosphere between you both, intimidating or threatening could mean that you miss out on someone ideal for the job.

Having said this, make sure you take notice of their body language. Does the applicant sit with crossed legs and arms or fidget and drop eye contact? If so, they may not be right for a job which demands a cool head under pressure. It is also imperative to pay close attention to the opening verbal exchanges between you, before the formal interview has even begun. Does the interviewee appear friendly and enthusiastic about making a good impression to their potential employer? Do they act as though they really want this job? These questions should all be considered before the interview even begins.

Questioning techniques

When questioning the candidate, always try to use open-ended questions (e.g. 'What attributes do you feel you could bring to the job?' or 'You say that you are a good problem solver. Give me an example of how you solved a problem that resulted in a direct cost saving for your department!') rather than closed questions. There is only so much you can learn about an applicant from Yes/No answers! Open-ended questions not only force a longer answer and allow you to find out about the personality of the applicant but will also give you a glimpse into the candidate's thinking process.

Try not to have ideal answers in your mind prior to starting the interview as it is highly unlikely that any applicant will come close to this. However, it is useful to bear in mind certain ideal features that you are looking for. These can include the ability to think for oneself, to show original thought and to be confident in expressing their own ideas, even if they are unsure as to their validity. Conversely, weak applicants may show a leaning towards 'safe' answers, which show little original, inventive thought and will not air their views with any self-belief. Also, tailor the expected response to the job for which you are interviewing. If the job will require quick decisions to be made on the spot, favour those who offer a confident answer in a short amount of time. If the job requires patience and contemplation, favour those who take time to mull over the question in hand before offering their response.

A final point to remember is to continue using open-ended questions throughout the course of the interview, for example in the initial exchanges and at the close of the interview. The more you can encourage the applicant to talk, whether it be about the weather, their journey to the office or the job itself, the better for both parties.

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Psychometric testing

During the past few years, it has become increasingly fashionable to include psychometric testing as part of the job interview process. The British Market Research Bureau states that: "Nearly three quarters of companies now rely on psychometric profiling when recruiting". Employers have become frustrated with the limitations of mere questioning to set applicants apart from each other and the usefulness of psychometric testing should not be underestimated. To be successful within the working environment, an applicant does not just need the right qualifications and the correct knowledge but also a personality to suit.

Prior to testing, it is important to consider the kinds of personality traits you are looking for. Draw up a list of perhaps five personality traits essential to the job. Psychometric testing can give you an instant and representative glimpse of the standard behaviour of a candidate and this behaviour can be compared to your ideas. Ensure that you put the candidate at ease before the testing begins. It is essential to encourage them to be themselves and not try to trick the test, as this will not benefit them or you.

The results of any psychometric test are likely to show areas of strength and weakness. Make sure you give feedback to the applicant, whether they are successful or not. Successful candidates can use the information to improve areas of weakness and learn to perform better in the working environment.

Interviews via telephone

Sometimes, due to time or location restraints or even to cut down the number of applicants you invite for face-to-face interviews, it is more practical to conduct an initial interview with a potential employee over the phone. This poses some initial problems though, as you will be unable to judge anything from the applicant's body language, initial appearance or physical exchanges such as a handshake.

Conduct this call in a quiet location where you will not be disturbed; there is nothing worse than making an important phone call outside on a windy day during your lunch break or in the middle of a busy office environment. Background noise will not only unsettle the applicant but will also prevent you from getting the most out of the interview process. Before you make the call, have a copy of the applicant's CV and cover letter if applicable.

Ask the same types of questions you would during a face-to-face interview and take the same points into consideration e.g. length of time taken to consider an open-ended question. However, bear in mind that the length of time taken before you receive an answer may seem exaggerated because you cannot see the applicant. Do not be put off by this but keep in mind that dialogue over the telephone is more difficult than face-to-face because there is no body language. Keep a pen and paper handy throughout the call to make notes on. When the call has ended, it is very difficult to tell one candidate apart from another if you have not made comprehensive notes.