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Interviewing & Selecting Exceptional People

From interviews with Don McQuaig, former President, The McQuaig Institute®. These interviews were conducted by Cindy Moser and published as a series of articles in Carswell's Hiring & Firing

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SELECTING THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE JOB — IT'S A MANAGER'S NO. 1 PRIORITY

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SELECT THE RIGHT PERSON
AND YOUR JOB IS EASY

SELECT THE WRONG PERSON
AND YOUR JOB IS IMPOSSIBLE

Part 1

Understanding why hiring mistakes are made

A number of years ago, I was called upon to hire someone for the first time in my life. Using a few how-to articles that were routed my way by the personnel department, I assembled a list of generic interview questions and plunged into the task. I was not worried about making a mistake. I honestly believed that, as long as the person had the necessary work and educational background, I could figure out the rest by relying on my instincts and gut feelings. I was mistaken. The person I hired - although certainly a nice person with a professional demeanour - was not right for the job.

What went wrong? To many, the answer is obvious. I made a mistake that many continue to make today: I put too much emphasis on outward poise and academic history, and too little emphasis on personal characteristics, such as attitude, self-motivation, judgment and capacity to learn.

What I needed was a systematic and structured approach that would have avoided this and other common pitfalls of the hiring process. Such an approach, developed by The McQuaig Institute, is offered here.

The three levels of appraisal

There are three levels of appraisal at work during a hiring interview.

At Level 1

We appraise people based on the way they appear; that is, on the way they dress, on the way they carry themselves in terms of poise, professionalism and self-confidence, and on the way they express themselves.

At Level 2

We judge people based on their skills, abilities and experience; that is, on their work history, on the technical skills they have acquired along the way, and on the training and education they have received.

At Level 3

We appraise people based on their personal characteristics or qualities.

The personal traits associated with Level 3, have the highest impact on how well someone will do a job. There are six personal qualities in particular that are indicative of future performance and potential growth, they are ranked below in terms of the degree to which they can be changed, from the most to the least changeable.

They include:

Attitudes and Beliefs

The set of beliefs people hold that shape the way they interpret the world around them and, therefore, they way they act. It includes the way people think about themselves, work, success, responsibility and failure. Lower performers usually see success as something that happens to others because of "the luck of the draw", while higher performers typically see success as something that stems from doing a job well.

Self-Motivation

The energy and drive people bring to a job. People come with different starting points. Higher performers come with more self-motivation and, therefore, attack new tasks with passion.

Stability and Persistence

The ability of people to deal with setbacks and move forward. Higher performers stick to a job and consistently move towards their goal, finding ways to overcome obstacles that may crop up in the process, and bouncing back from any failures they may experience.

Maturity and Judgment

The degree to which people are responsible and accountable for the jobs they take on. Higher performers are not afraid to take on responsibility and to be held accountable for the outcome. They are also considerate and open to constructive criticism.

Aptitude and Capacity to Learn

The ability of people to solve problems and learn new skills and tasks easily. Higher performers have the natural abilities - e.g., reasoning skills, fine motor skills, etc. - suited to the job in question. They usually get up to speed in a new job fairly quickly.

Temperament and Behaviour Patterns

The underlying behavioural factors that explain why people do the things they do, such as dominance (how much they need to be in control), sociability (how much they need to be with others or, alternately, to be alone), relaxation (how patient they are), etc. These factors go to the core of the person, and are usually deeply rooted. Different jobs call for different temperaments, and the better the behaviour requirements of a job are understood, the more likely it is that the right person will be matched to that job.

The tables on pages 6 and 7 of this section show what distinguishes an exceptional from a non-exceptional employee for each of the three levels and, particularly, for the personal characteristics that are included in Level 3.

Why we concentrate on the wrong levels

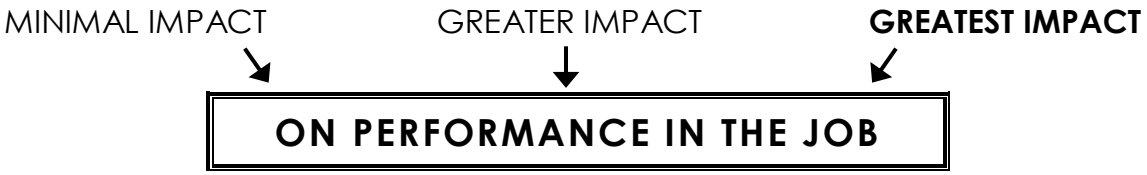
Level 3 characteristics are very hard to change compared to those associated with Levels 1 and 2, and they often have the highest impact on how well someone will do a job. We hire for Levels 1 and 2 and fire for Level 3. In other words, we do not dismiss an employee because we decide we do not like his or her work and academic history, but because we find out that person lacks the maturity, self-motivation or temperament needed to do the job effectively.

Nonetheless, we still over-rely on Levels 1 and 2 when we make our hiring choices. And no wonder. Although it is a highly subjective decision, determining if someone "looks the part" (Level 1) is pretty easy to do. In fact, given the face-to-face nature of interviewing, it's hard not to make such a determination.

Deciding if someone can do the job (Level 2) is a more difficult task, but at least there are objective standards by which these skills can be measured.

However, deciding if someone has the personal characteristics best suited to the job (Level 3) is neither easy nor objective.

Level 1 Appears To	Level 2 Can Do	**Level 3** **Will Do**
• Appearance, Poise & Dress • Manners & Expressiveness • Interests & Goals	• Knowledge & Skills • Training & Education • Experience	• Attitudes & Beliefs • Internal Motivation • Stability & Persistence • Maturity • Intelligence • Aptitudes • TEMPERAMENT



Furthermore, even if we understand the importance of Level 3 characteristics and think we are uncovering these during job interviews, we often mistake strength in one level with strength in another. For example, we might think that someone who is enthusiastic and confident during the job interview is meeting our Level 3 criteria in terms of having the right attitude and beliefs when, in fact, that person is really only meeting the more superficial qualifications of "looking and sounding like they can do the job" associated with Level 1.

How to overcome these common mistakes

When it comes to the interview process, it is better to do an imperfect job on Level 3 than a perfect job on Levels 1 and 2. That does not mean that the first two levels have no impact on the hiring decision; they do. But the trick is to ensure that they only get the weighting they deserve.

This is where a job analysis comes in. You must know the job requirements, up front, and stick to them throughout the hiring process. This ensures that you don't fall in love with each candidate and redefine the job to fit. A job analysis also allows you to develop the interview questions you need to probe Level 3 characteristics effectively.

Professional practices

You start the job analysis by determining the nature of the job and looking at such things as:

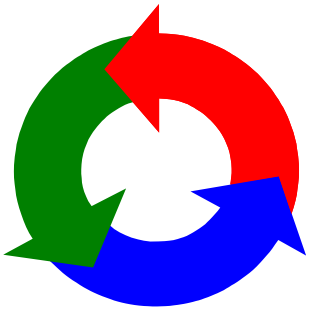
- key responsibilities and the time spent on each;
- immediate issues to be addressed in the job;
- how job performance will be measured;
- how the position relates to others in terms of supervision and teamwork;
- the nature of the work environment, such as degree of pressure, people contact, autonomy;
- the attractive and negative aspects of the job; and
- the opportunities for growth.

Based upon this analysis, you can determine what qualities at all three levels are needed to do the job well. What requirements do you need in terms of presenting a professional image? What job-related qualifications, training, education and experience are needed? Distinguish between those that you must have and those that it would be nice to have. What personal characteristics are needed? Rank the six in terms of their impact on job performance.

Now you weight the three levels in terms of their importance in the overall appraisal.

Now that you have a good understanding of what the job requires and what Level 3 characteristics in particular you are looking for, you are ready to develop the interview questions that will elicit the information you need.

Impact of The Three Levels



LEVEL 1 factors are rarely as important as the weighting they receive. Consciously defend against over-weighting your decisions on this level. Stop judging outward appearances.

LEVEL 2 factors are often weighted too heavily. Setting your standards too high in this area may limit your talent pool unnecessarily, since these factors are changeable. Level 2 is of less importance when you can develop the skills and knowledge to do the job in a reasonable period of time. Avoid arbitrary requirements.

LEVEL 3 factors almost always have the most impact on performance and potential and usually deserve at least 50% or more of the weighting. Set your standards high in this area. Remember that not every characteristic within Level 3 will be of the same importance. You have to decide which are most important based upon the job requirements.

The following tables compare superior (left column) versus unsatisfactory (right column) characteristics for each of the three levels of appraisal.

Three levels of appraisal

Level 1: Appearance and Presence

Makes a favourable impression	Does not make a good first impression
Projects confidence	Unusually nervous or ill at ease
Expresses self well	Not strong at expressing self
Shows enthusiasm	Projects little enthusiasm

Level 2: Skills, Abilities and Experience

Work Experience

Highly relevant work experience	Previous work experience not relevant
Demonstrated record of achievement	Minimal achievement
Significant progress on previous jobs	Progress limited

Educational Background

Relevant and impressive educational background	Has minimal educational credentials
High grades and record of achievement	Poor grades and record of achievement

Level 3: Personal Characteristics

Attitudes & Beliefs

Has shown positive, optimistic approach	Worrisome and pessimistic
Looks for the best in others	Openly critical of previous bosses
Confident in abilities	Shows hesitation, doubt in own abilities
Demonstrates high personal standards	Low personal standards
Enthusiastic	Demonstrates little enthusiasm
Has shown commitment and loyalty in previous situations	Shows little commitment or consideration for others

Self-Motivation	
Demonstrated hard worker	Has not sustained a strong work effort over time
Goes beyond what's expected	Does minimum required
Attacked previous assignments with energy	Little excitement/intensity demonstrated in previous experiences
Passionate about work and activities	Has demonstrated little interest in previous projects

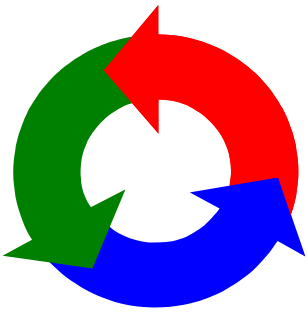
Stability and Persistence	
Has shown consistent interests, goals and activities over time	Little consistency of interests, goals and activities
Has stood up to resistance	Has backed away from adversity
Did not shy away from adversity	Did not stay the course
Completed tasks	Gave up when going got tough

Maturity and Judgment	
Has demonstrated sound judgment	Has acted in the past with little forethought
Common sense approach	Lacks self-discipline and control
Willing to take personal responsibility	Avoids personal responsibility
Realistic about strengths/weaknesses	Unrealistic
Willing to forego short-term rewards for longer-term benefits	Close-minded, inflexible
Shows self-control	Doesn't display judgment

Aptitude/Capacity to Learn	
Demonstrated ability to learn new skills	Finds learning difficult
Absorbs information and ideas readily	Displayed difficulty in grasping new concepts
Has proven ability to solve complex problems	Uncomfortable with complex issues
Progress, achievements are significant	Limited progress and achievement

Temperament/Behaviour Patterns	
Has demonstrated the behaviours (i.e., the right mix of dominance, sociability, relaxation and compliance) associated with high job performance	Has not demonstrated the behaviours that are associated with high performance in this particular job

Summary of The Three Levels



	HOW EASY TO APPRAISE?	HOW OBJECTIVE IS THE APPRAISAL?	HOW CHANGEABLE?	IMPACT ON PERFORMANCE.
LEVEL 1	Easy	Highly subjective	Highly changeable	Low
LEVEL 2	Moderate	Objective	Highly changeable	Medium
LEVEL 3	Difficult	Subjective	More stable	High

Part 2

Asking the questions that reveal the real person

Okay, so you have promised yourself that, when making hiring decisions from now on, you will put more emphasis on "Level 3" factors. But is there really a way to assess personal characteristics such as attitude, self-motivation, persistence, maturity, aptitude and temperament during a one-hour interview?

The key is to remember this fundamental principle: **The best predictor of future performance is past behaviour.**

Level 3 traits tend to be highly stable. That means they are likely to persist in future and, therefore, affect how well someone will perform a job. But it also means these traits are likely to have shown up in the way a person has acted in the past. Your ultimate goal as an interviewer is to predict future performance by getting a deeper understanding of how someone has displayed Level 3 qualities in the past.

For example, say that you have determined through your job analysis that the person most likely to succeed in the job will be very self-motivated. The trick is to not judge candidates based on whether they project motivation in the interview, but on the motivation they have displayed in past situations. That is, you do not ask yourself, "Do they seem to be enthusiastic?" Instead, you ask yourself, "How enthusiastic were they in previous work situations of a similar nature?" If you can learn to make this mental shift - to stop judging bodies and start judging underlying past actions over time - then you will have made an important "180° turn."

Three areas can be explored in an interview to learn about people's past actions: work, schooling and outside activities (hobbies, sports, volunteer work, etc.). Your task is to explore how candidates have behaved in these various situations over time. You are really just taking people back to situations they have had in their lives and asking them to replay them for you, and asking them to reflect on their perception of the world around them.

Principles for exploring past actions

Obviously, you do not have the time during an interview to find out everything about a person's past and his or her reactions to it. So you have to structure your interview to focus on those incidences that reveal the most about how people will perform in future. To that end, observe these additional principles:

The best predictor of future performance is past performance in ***similar*** situations. However, the more ***varied*** the situations in which the behaviour is demonstrated, the more deeply rooted it is.

How people acted in previous work situations is more compelling evidence of future job performance than how people acted in previous academic or social situations. We all know people who may be highly passionate about one area of their lives - e.g., their sports activities - but have little passion for another area - e.g., their work.

Nonetheless, the more areas of their lives in which people demonstrate a particular behaviour, the more deeply rooted that behaviour and, therefore, the more likely it is that the behaviour will be repeated in future. That is, when people are highly motivated not only at work, but also at school and during outside activities, that shows that self-motivation is a strong personal characteristic that cuts across all sectors of their lives.

The following premise should also be considered in the process.

The more ***recent*** the behaviour, the more predictive of future performance. However, the more ***long-standing*** the behaviour, the more deeply rooted it is.

How people acted recently is more telling than how they acted long ago. For example, someone who took on responsibility for a group within the last month is more likely to display the same leadership skills in future than someone who last led a group 12 years ago. In the latter case, you would have to wonder how well-established his or her leadership abilities are.

However, when people act the same way over a long period of time, they are displaying deeply rooted behaviours that are all the more likely to continue in future. Therefore, a candidate who can demonstrate strong leadership skills not only in his or her most recent job, but also in the various jobs held over the years or even decades, is displaying a strong, personal characteristic.

We should also be aware that:-

People reveal their past patterns of behaviour most vividly in incidences where they experienced great ***successes or setbacks***.

People reveal themselves most during those defining moments of their lives - those situations that are often referred to as "critical incidents." This is an important principle because it means you do not need to explore the full life history of candidates during interviews. Instead, you can get a lot of information about their underlying patterns of behaviour simply by having them talk about a few key experiences.

Furthermore, people tend to have vivid recollections of these types of critical experiences. Therefore, they can easily recall the details of the situation and how they felt at the time.

You could spend hours talking to people about what they did yesterday and the day before and not get very much information about the patterns of behaviour underlying their actions. However, if you ask people about the biggest challenges and successes they have faced in their recent jobs, you start to explore something that was a defining moment in their lives. You can learn incredible amounts that way. In fact, one experience can give you a very rich view of a person.

Constructing your interview questions

The answers to questions about recent work history are the easiest to interpret and the most telling about how people will perform in future work situations. You may be wondering, then, why you wouldn't just limit your interview questions to finding out how candidates acted in their most recent jobs. The reason is this: Doing so would not allow you to discover patterns of behaviour. You need examples of behaviour from different situations over time to learn if a certain behaviour is a truly typical personal characteristic.

Furthermore, people are often more candid when they talk about situations outside work, such as their schooling or free-time activities, and when they talk about events that happened in the more distant past, such as their first job. The real richness of the interview is to explore in detail the recent work experience and to use older experiences and other kinds of experiences as a source of additional data that can help you really see whether something demonstrated in recent work experience is a long-standing or broadly-based trait.

As far as how to construct your interview questions, we offer these guidelines:

(A) Focus on the past, not the future. If you accept that a person's past actions are the best predictor of future performance, then you can see why future oriented questions are not likely to reveal very much. The answers to questions such as these are not rooted in any reality, because candidates have a pretty good idea of what you want to hear and will respond accordingly. It's far more revealing to ask about a past situation.

For example, questions such as "Would you be willing to work extra hours from time to time to meet a deadline?" or "Do you think you would like working in our team-based environment?" are not very helpful. What person being interviewed is going to say "no"? But if you say, "Tell me about a time when you had to work extra hours to meet a deadline," or "Describe for me the last time you worked on a team-based project, the role you played and how you felt," you are actually going to find out something about how a person has acted in the past and, therefore, will likely act in future.

The only reason you would ask a question about the future is to determine someone's career goals. Even then, the answer would never be a reason to hire. At most, it might be a reason not to hire. For example, if someone's career goals perfectly fit the description of the job for which you are hiring, that information is of no consequence.

Most people who are trying to get a job or a promotion will put their best foot forward and, in doing so, will try to make their personal goals align with what the organisation is looking for. However, if you are interviewing for a professional or high-level job and find out that what the person is looking for is not in line with what the job offers, then that is information that may point to a bad fit.

(B) Ask for specific examples. Using phrases such as: "Tell me about a time when…" "Can you recall a situation ….?" Or "Describe for me an experience…." Will make people search their histories for actual examples of past incidences that reveal patterns of behaviour. For example, if someone says, "I am an incredibly hard worker," you might reply, "That's great. Tell me about a situation where you had to work to your limit."

(C) Give Direction. Because you are trying to establish patterns of behaviour, it is important to give direction in your questions about the time (first? most recent?) and the situation (at work? at school?) you want the person to describe.

(D) Search for critical incidents. You should try to draw out at least four or five such events from different situations to ensure the patterns of behaviour are clear. To find critical incidents, you can use triggering words such as "most/least", "best/worst", and "success/disappointment." Changing jobs in itself is a critical incident worthy of your exploration. Try asking questions like, "Tell me about the events leading up to you deciding to changing your job", and then explore their thoughts and feelings with supplementary questions. This will give far more information than the standard, "Why did you leave your last job?"

(E) Ask for contrary evidence. You want to find out how people have reacted in adverse conditions as well as positive ones. For example, let's say you are looking for someone who works well in a team-based environment. A job candidate might say, "I work great on a team". You might respond with something like, "I'm glad to hear that. Most experienced business professionals, however, have also been in a team situation where things have not gone so smoothly. Can you tell me about a situation you have been in like that?"

Your aim is not to paint a negative picture of the person but, again, to discover the patterns of behaviour demonstrated. The idea is not to conclude that because someone worked on a dysfunctional team that the person is dysfunctional. It's rather to see how the person dealt with the adverse situations as well as the good ones. In fact, sometimes in describing negative situations, people are actually showing positive characteristics about their attitudes, maturity, judgment and temperament.

(F) Explore all areas. No one area of a candidate's history is enough to allow you to do a complete appraisal. You should explore all areas - work, education and outside activities. Even if 90 per cent of the interview time is spent on the person's recent work history (or, if you are doing a campus interview, on the person's recent academic history), it is essential that the other areas be touched on, even if briefly, in order to get a broader sense of the person.

(G) Have a repertoire of questions, but don't try to ask them all. Most information will come out spontaneously if you ask open questions and listen closely. In other words, you may want to prepare sub-questions in order to probe certain areas relative to the main question (for example, see the probes under the sample questions shown at the end of this section). However, you will likely find you don't need these probes because the information will spill out on its own.

Remember as you construct your questions that there are no right or wrong questions. Some are simply more effective at drawing out the "rich" information associated with critical incidents.

As an interviewer, you will learn which ones work best for you relative to the particular job for which you are hiring. You will find you then tend to rely on these questions. Good interviewing is like fishing: There may be fish in the lake, but someone who is good at fishing knows where the pockets are in which the fish hang out.

Also remember that you probably have certain Level 1 (professional demeanour) and Level 2 (education and experience) requirements that you are looking for in candidates. You will find that the information you need to assess these factors will likely come out when candidates answer the questions you ask to determine Level 3 factors.

For example, let's say you need an electrical engineer to work on a product development team. That person will need certain Level 2 credentials, knowledge and skills.

Some of this information can be obtained from the résumé. But other information will come out when you explore the needed Level 3 requirements, such as the ability to work in a team-based atmosphere. You might ask candidates to describe their most recent team-based experience, the product being developed, the role they played, etc. You will then learn not only about their teamwork skills, but also about their product development skills.

Interpreting the responses

When it comes to interpreting the responses of candidates, it is important that you listen carefully - with an open mind and no prejudices or preconceived ideas.

In particular, emphasise the following:

(A) Do not expect every candidate to have a lot of activity or experience in every area. Find out what activities the candidate ***has had*** and explore these experiences in detail to see what patterns of behaviour they reveal. In other words, do not judge people by the volume of their experiences, but on how they have acted in the experiences they have had. For example, say a person going for a sales job has not played a lot of sports. The hiring sales manager might assume the person is wrong for the job.

But this reasoning, which is typical in the hiring of salespersons, is faulty. The interviewer should find out what the person ***has*** done and use those experiences to find out about the candidate's motivation, persistence, attitude, etc.

(B) Don't judge the activity and the results of the activity alone; judge the Level 3 qualities revealed. Do not jump to stereotypical conclusions about what a person's involvement in a certain activity says about that person. For example, if someone says his or her hobby is bird-watching, do not assume the person is the quiet, studious type, or if someone says his or her favourite activity is playing competitive tennis, do not assume the person is energetic and aggressive. People often judge people on the activities, not on the behaviours they demonstrate in pursuing those activities. That is a trap.

So, too, is judging people on the results of their activities. For example, say a candidate says he or she was fired from the last job. Do not assume there is something wrong with the person without exploring the situation. You could find out that the person's firing was indicative of the positive traits you are looking for, such as a willingness to push back or the independence to stand up for his or her beliefs.

The opposite is also true. Just because someone has been successful in previous jobs does not necessarily mean he or she will be successful in your particular job.

When we say the past is a good predictor of future performance, what we mean is that good attitudes or high motivation in the past means good attitudes or high motivation in the future, not that success in the past means success in the future.

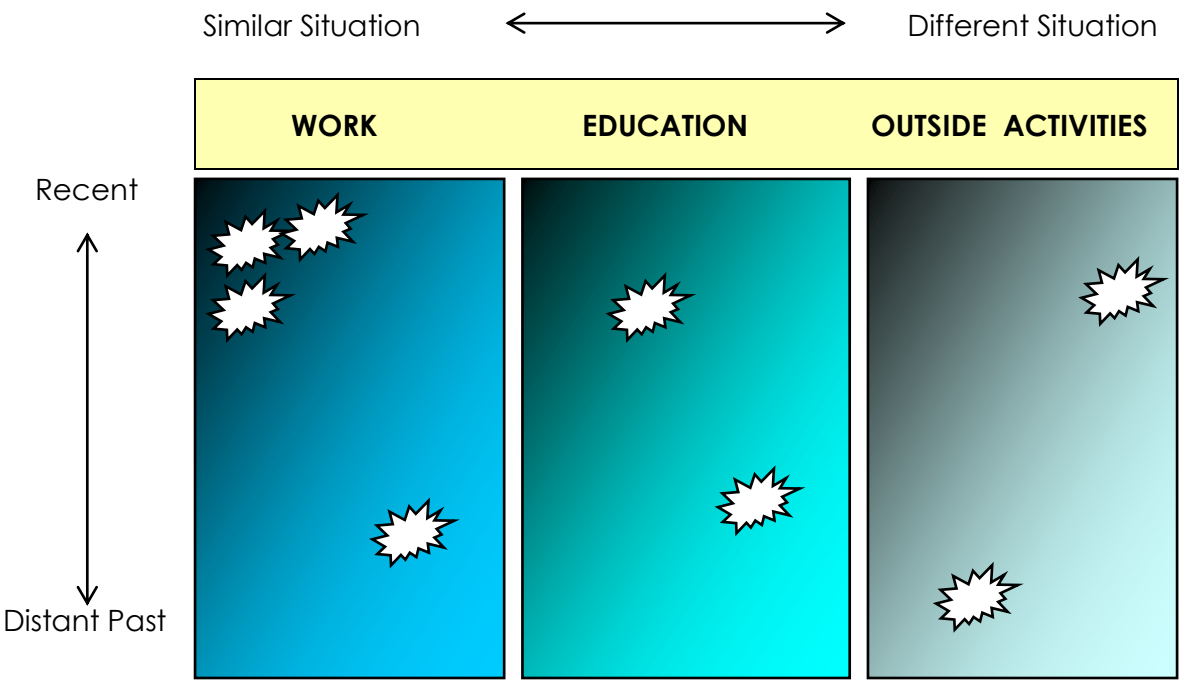
(C) There are no right or wrong answers. Don't ask a question with a preconceived notion of what the answer should be. Instead, look for the patterns of behaviour revealed in the answer. Each candidate will be unique, and each will display patterns of behaviour that reflect his or her personal characteristics.

(D) Don't jump to conclusions. Sometimes someone may say something that causes you to jump in the wrong direction about the characteristics of that person. Don't forget that you are looking for patterns. If you find you are forming an opinion based on one incident, keep an open mind and ask other questions to test your hypothesis. In terms of interpreting the actions that a person has taken, use the following as a guideline: if done once, it is a clue; if done twice, it is a pattern; if done three times, it is a well established characteristic.

Putting all this information together in order to ask effective interview questions and interpret their answers is not an easy task. It is the most difficult task that someone in a leadership or human resources function will ever be asked to do on the job. You're trying to assess and predict a complex human being against a changing set of requirements. It's an art, not a science. Nonetheless, by following the systematic approach described so far, it is possible to do a very good job when it comes to selecting a person who is well matched to the position you are trying to fill.

The Box below shows how an interview might work in terms of exploring personal characteristics.

Exploring the candidate's history



- Horizontally, the box moves from the most similar situation at left to the most dissimilar situation at right.
- Vertically, the box moves from the most recent past at the top to the distant past at the bottom.
- The stars represent critical events.
- The shading represents ease of interpretation in terms of predicting future performance, with the darkest area in the upper left-hand corner (recent work history) being the easiest to interpret and the lightest area in the bottom right-hand corner (outside activities from a long time ago) being the hardest to interpret.

Therefore what the box shows is that you might spend most of the interview working in the upper left-hand part of the box, talking about several critical incidents associated with the person's recent work history. Then you might travel across and down the box by getting the person to talk about other critical events that happened at different times and in different situations. The point is that you do not need to get a person's full linear history to understand his or her patterns of behaviour. A few well-selected questions from the different areas of the box should be enough.

Sample questions to appraise level 3 factors

ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

Do you consider yourself an enthusiastic person? Tell me about a situation recently where you were really excited and enthusiastic.

- What was the circumstance?
- What was it that captured your enthusiasm?
- What impact did it have on your results?
- How long did it last?

Tell me about a situation where you felt it was important for you to take a stand that was openly critical of your boss or a co-worker.

- What was the situation?
- Why was it so important that you say something?
- What reaction did you get?
- What impact did this have on you?

SELF-MOTIVATION

Give me an example of an experience where you felt especially motivated.

- What was the situation?
- What did you find so compelling?
- How long did it last?
- Have you had this experience at other times?

Tell me about a project where you had to work to your limit to get the job done.

- What was the situation?
- How long did it last?
- In what way were you stretched?
- When did this happen?

STABILITY AND PERSISTENCE

Describe a recent goal or project at work where you experienced tremendous adversity or where the results were elusive.

- What was your goal?
- What roadblocks did you encounter?
- How did you respond?
- What was the outcome?

MATURITY AND JUDGMENT

Describe a difficult decision you made on a previous job that required you to exercise judgment or discretion.

- What was the situation?
- In what way did it require judgment or discretion?
- How did you go about making your decision?
- What did you ultimately decide?
- What did you learn from this experience?

It is often difficult to keep an open mind when you have strong views or ideas on an issue. Tell me about a time when you had such an experience.

- What was the issue?
- Why did you feel so strongly?
- How did others react to you?
- Ultimately, how was the situation resolved?

APTITUDE/CAPACITY TO LEARN

Can you give me an example of something at work at which you have excelled even though you did not work especially hard.

- What was the project or task?
- Why do you feel you found it so easy?
- How have you used your skill in that area in your current role?
- How do you feel about that part of your work?

Tell me about an experience on a previous job that required you to learn a new skill or task.

- What was the situation?
- What was your experience in learning?
- How were you able to apply it on the job?
- What was the outcome?

TEMPERAMENT

Tell me about a time at work where you had to work closely on a team to get the job done.

- What was the situation?
- What role did you play?
- Based on your experiences, what have been the pros and cons of working on a team?
- What did you do to get the people working together?

Do you consider yourself a risk-taker? Tell me about something you've done in the past that illustrates your willingness to take risks.

- What was the situation?
- What did you see as the risk?
- How did you go about deciding to take the risk?
- What did you learn from this experience?

There are often peak times at work where the load is particularly heavy. Describe an experience you have had working under tremendous pressure.

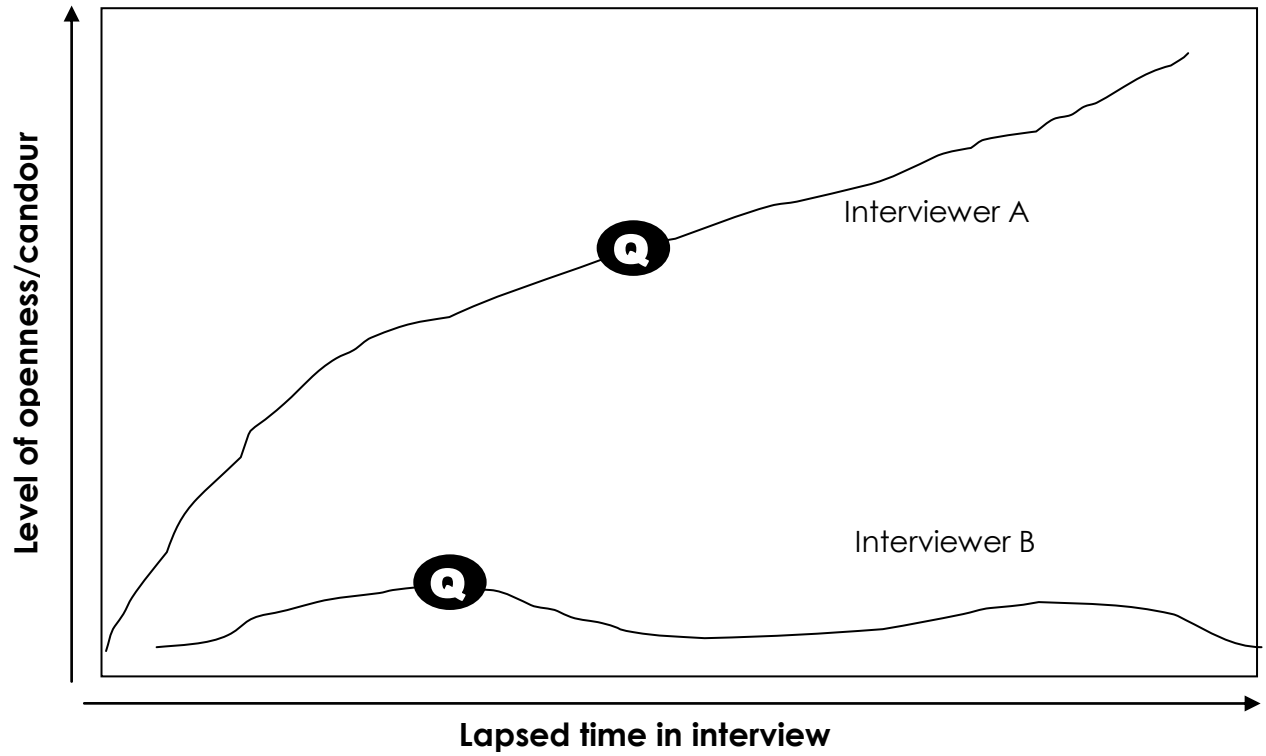
- When did this happen?
- In what way was the pressure heavy?
- How long did it last?
- What was your strategy coping?

Part 3

Establishing rapport during the interview

This chart shows how much more effective an interview will be when rapport with a job candidate can be established quickly. Interviewer A has learned how to put people at ease during an interview shown by the "openness curve" that moves up sharply very early on. As a result, Interviewer A quickly gets open, candid answers that reveal the personal characteristics of the candidate at a deeper Level. Interviewer B, on the other hand, has not learned the same interviewing skills and may even be intimidating and judgmental, shown by an "openness curve" that is slow to rise and quick to fall during the interview.

As a result, the candidate clams up, does not feel safe revealing past experiences and self-censors responses before saying anything that may be too revealing. This shows why Interviewer A and Interviewer B can both ask the same question at the same point in the interview and get completely different answers in terms of the degree to which they reveal the candidate's personal – or Level 3 – characteristics.



For example, in the interview, job candidates are typically nervous, which limits candour. As well, they walk into interviews ready to sell themselves, knowing that they only have a certain amount of time to make a good impression. They often come prepared with what they want to say. At the same time, they often come feeling vulnerable because they want what the other person has to offer - the job. All of these things, and more, make the dynamic of an interview very different to, for example, the first meeting between two people at a conference or a cocktail party. The interview is such a delicate, tricky situation that many managers have to learn they need to do some different things to win people over.

Learning how to conduct interviews so that job candidates answer questions openly - thereby giving you the rich information you need to probe personal characteristics - is a critical business skill for anyone involved in the interviewing process.

You can have two people ask the same question of the same candidate at the same point in the interview and get two different answers.

It's not a matter of whether or not the candidate is telling the truth; it's a matter of the level of truthfulness. What determines the level of truthfulness is the ability of the interviewer to establish rapport with the candidate very early on in the interview.

The sooner the candidate feels comfortable enough to open up, the richer his or her responses will be in terms of revealing personal characteristics.

Many executives or managers may think they are already pretty good at establishing rapport. After numerous business meetings and social functions, they might think they have a good handle on how to put people at ease. That could very well be true in those situations, but job interviews are full of barriers.

So how do you quickly turn around a meeting that is initially fraught with anxiety into one that is essentially a comfortable conversation between peers? The list below offers some simple but practical and effective steps.

(A) Hold the interview in a non-threatening environment: To establish rapport, it is essential that the interview takes place in a location that offers privacy and freedom from interruptions. That means interviews in open-concept offices, cafeterias or rooms where the door is open, where intercom messages can be heard or where people feel free to interrupt are out of the question.

For these same reasons, holding an interview over lunch at a restaurant, although it may seem like a good way to establish rapport, is not a great idea. You are unlikely to get the desired level of openness when waiters are walking by and/or interrupting the conversation, or if other patrons can hear what is going on.

(B) Allow adequate time: People will be more candid in their responses if they do not feel they are being rushed. If they sense at all that time is of the essence, candidates will limit responses to simple-to-explain experiences. If there is a time pressure, make sure you're the only one who knows.

(C) Prepare in advance: By reviewing the candidate's résumé in advance, you can quickly turn the interview from a rigid question-and-answer session into a conversation. For example, the résumé might reveal areas of common interest or past history that can be used to establish initial rapport through small talk: "I understand you used to go to High School X. So did I. Did you ever have Mrs. Smith?" Furthermore, as the interview moves into more substantial areas, you can raise topics informally instead of asking direct questions. For example, instead of asking, "Where did you go to university? What did you study?" you can say, "I was hoping to have some time to talk about your years at the University of New South Wales." This is not only more conversational, but also shows respect because you have taken the time to read the résumé and to remember some of its contents.

Going over the résumé when the candidate is already in the room is not a good idea. "Can you give me a minute to read your résumé?" Sends the wrong message to the person being interviewed - that you didn't think it worth your time to read the résumé beforehand.

(D) Establish rapport quickly: The first few minutes of the interview should be dedicated to building rapport by engaging in conversation that will build confidence in the candidate, making him or her feel accepted and equally powerful.

This can be accomplished by doing some very easy things, such as smiling, being friendly, offering a cup of coffee, engaging in small talk, etc. Do not start off with any difficult questions. You are unlikely to get revealing answers when little rapport has been established. Consider simply asking the candidate to talk you through the highlights of their career.

(E) Set the agenda upfront: When an interview is treated like a business meeting between peers, it is all that much easier to create good rapport. One way to do that is to outline near the beginning of the interview how you expect it will proceed. For example, you might say, "I suggest we start talking about your work experiences and educational background, and then leave some time at the end for you to ask any questions you might have. How does that sound?" This also makes it clear that the interview will focus on the candidate.

(F) Start off positively: Nothing drives rapport up faster than saying something nice. Obviously, whatever positive thing you say must be sincere, but that shouldn't be too hard since, if you're interviewing someone, there must be a good reason why. For example, you might say, "I read your résumé and I'm impressed by your work experience. I'm looking forward to finding out more about it." What this does is move the dynamic from one where the candidate feels he or she has to do a selling job to one where the person knows the interviewer is already interested.

(G) Let the interview unfold in the expected way: Most people expect interview questions to follow a certain logic: moving from recent and past work experiences to schooling and outside interests. Therefore, once you get into the substantive part of the interview (i.e., once you have established rapport early on through a discussion of common interests or other small talk), you should follow the expected pattern. If you start asking a candidate questions about outside activities first, you are going to throw the person off base, thus jeopardising rapport.

(H) Let the candidate do most of the talking: The more the candidate talks, the more relaxed he or she will become. Many interviewers fall into the trap of feeling they have to fill any silences. But if you ask a question and the candidate does not respond right away, give the person some time. The brain is a pretty fast computer and will likely find an answer in 5 to 10 seconds. However, he does not advise letting silences go on too long – i.e., more than 30 seconds. At that point, you can try reframing or rewording your question.

(I) Ask open-ended questions: To encourage candidates to do most of the talking, your questions should be open-ended, i.e., they should not allow a simple yes or no answer. Don't ask: "Do you enjoy working in a team environment?" Instead, say: "Tell me about a project where you worked in a team environment."

(J) Question tactfully: In terms of developing rapport, it's not so much what you ask, it's the way you ask it. Within the bounds of respecting privacy and human rights, you can ask almost anything as long as you ask nicely. For example, if you are trying to learn more about people's weaknesses, don't ask the question in a way that makes them feel inadequate: "What's been your biggest failure in life?" Ask them in a way that does not undermine their respect: "We've talked a lot about your strengths. Do you mind if we talk about some of the things you think you could get better at?"

(K) Demonstrate open-mindedness: Any sign at all that you are judgmental, critical of answers being given or jumping to early conclusions is likely to close the door on building a solid rapport. Do not, for example, make judgmental comments during an interview about other people in your organisation, about people you and the candidate may both know, or even about politics. That tells the candidate that you are just as likely to be judgmental of him or her.

As much as possible, you should be open-minded during the interview. This open-mindedness must come honestly and, for this reason, some managers may need to convince themselves first that being open-minded is the position they want to take. Being open-minded - by responding to information with phrases such as "I see what you mean" or "I appreciate your point of view" - signals that you are really trying to understand the candidate's world.

(L) Downplay negative information: In the same vein, do not react too strongly to negative or sensitive information that may come out during the interview. For example, if a candidate says something about not getting along with a current or former boss, try not to show any negative reaction or concern because the person is likely to get apprehensive or defensive and not want to explore the subject further.

However, you can explore sensitive information by being empathetic. For example, if it's true, you could say, "I've been in that situation and I know it can be tough. I'd like to know how you handled it." Or, if you haven't been in that situation, you could say, "I can only imagine how difficult that must have been. Can we talk about it?"

(M) Recognise your own biases: If you feel particularly drawn to or repelled by a certain candidate, for whatever reason, you must work hard to challenge the assumptions you have made about that person. The strong initial reactions that can set an interviewer off in the wrong direction are usually associated with relatively unimportant Level 1 characteristics, such as looks and manner of dress.

For example, if you feel yourself having an initially strong negative impression of a man who comes to the interview wearing an earring - and you are from a generation where that comes with a lot of baggage, you have to stop yourself and say, "That's not what this is all about. Let's get back to probing Level 3 characteristics to find this person's strengths." You might find the interview changing from one where you could hardly wait to get it over with to one where you wish you had more time to talk to a person who has turned out to be a very interesting candidate.

(N) Affirm and acknowledge strengths: If a candidate talks about an achievement of which he or she is obviously proud, acknowledge the achievement. The more the candidate understands that you can see his or her strengths, the less likely the person is going to feel the need to keep positioning experiences and events in a positive light.

(O) Take notes discreetly: Taking notes, does not increase rapport. It often makes candidates nervous. That being said, notes do have a value in that they can jog your memory when it comes to writing up your interview appraisal. Therefore, at the beginning of the interview when you are setting the agenda, you tell the candidate that you will be taking some notes and offer a pad and pen to the candidate in return so that he or she can also take notes. This, again, sets up an atmosphere of a business meeting between peers.

When you are taking notes, never start scribbling after the candidate has said something sensitive or negative. Notes should be confined to a few words that will remind you of an example or experience the candidate has shared with you. Those who are new to interviewing are probably better off not taking many notes at all. They should concentrate on listening. They will be surprised at how much they can remember.

On the other hand, writing up the results of an interview must be done right away. It's just as surprising, how much can be forgotten during the 10 or 15 minutes it takes to do some intervening task.

(P) Do not give negative feedback: You should not give any feedback if a candidate asks at the end of an interview how he or she did. Because most people understand that more than one person is being interviewed, one of the best ways to respond is to honestly explain that a number of people are being interviewed so it is premature to come to any conclusion.

That said, you don't want to deceive a candidate either. If a candidate is clearly lacking one of the essential Level 2 criterion for the job - e.g., a professional license, being bilingual, no past experience, etc. - it is okay to say so. The essential thing is that you do not talk about any Level 3 deficiencies; i.e., about personal characteristics. People like to walk out with their dignity.

(Q) Be prepared for the next step: Although you should rarely reject anyone on the spot, you should be prepared to indicate the next step to a candidate you are particularly keen on. Despite the fact that it's a tough market out there for job seekers, there is a shortage of talent in some areas, you have to be prepared to move fast if you find someone you want. However, if for internal reasons moving fast is out of the question, your next best bet is to keep the candidate involved in the process through ongoing contact.

You might, for example, tell the candidate that it will be another two weeks before you will be in a position to make a hiring decision, but then ask the person to come in the following week to meet a colleague or superior.

In the end, the best way to establish rapport during an interview is to remember this overriding point: Treat the candidate like you would a customer - with respect.

The strategies mentioned here for building good rapport in order to encourage candidates to answer questions candidly are not manipulative. It's not only in your best interests that the person who gets the job has the personal characteristics necessary to succeed. It is also in the best interests of the job candidate.

You're not doing a favour for anyone if the wrong person is put into a job and he or she ends up failing.

Recap

(A) Hold the in interview in a non-threatening environment

(B) Allow adequate time

(C) Prepare in advance

(D) Establish rapport quickly

(E) Set the agenda upfront

(F) Start off positively

(G) Let the interview unfold in the expected way

(H) Let the candidate do most of the talking

(I) Ask open-ended questions

(J) Question tactfully

(K) Demonstrate open-mindedness

(L) Downplay negative information

(M) Recognise your own biases

(N) Affirm and acknowledge strengths

(O) Take notes discreetly

(P) Do not give negative feedback

(Q) Be prepared for the next step

Part 4

How to read a resume to screen in the right people

The manager plunges into the stack of 50 résumés before her, trying to sort the candidates they represent into three piles: those that must be seen (Pile A), those that might be worth seeing (Pile B), and those not worth spending any more time with (Pile C). She is looking for a new Ad Sales Director.

> *"Oh. This person went to the business school at Western - must be hard-working and ambitious." Pile A. "Spelling mistake. So much for that one." Pile C. "Missing some of the key qualifications, but the résumé looks so professional. Might be worth talking to." Pile B. "Oh oh. Worked at Consumers Distributing. It just went bankrupt. That's not such a good sign." Pile C. "Hey. She went to the same university as me." Pile A. "This résumé is looking a bit ragged around the edges. There's even a small stain on it." Pile C. "Looks pretty good, but he worked at Australia Post for his summer jobs. I don't like that." Pile C. She hesitates. Okay, maybe B. And on it goes.*

This might sound like a pretty haphazard way to go through résumé, and it should. But it is not uncommon. Many managers have seen these assessments made (or something quite like them) at one time or another while looking over the shoulders of interviewers going about the not-so-easy task of reading résumés.

These people were being neither stupid nor mean-spirited. It's just that, in the absence of some kind of strategy about how to distinguish between résumés deserving of Pile A's must-see honour and Pile C's no-go status, they were naturally relying on their own biases when making decisions. In doing so, they were falling prey to a mistake that often plagues people at every stage of the hiring process.

Why mistakes are made – a review

Remember, three levels of appraisal are at work during the interview process.

At **Level 1**, we appraise people based on their appearance, the way they dress, the way they express themselves and the way they carry themselves in terms of poise, professionalism and self-confidence.

At **Level 2**, we judge people based on their skills, abilities and experience, such as their work history and educational background.

At **Level 3**, we judge people based on their underlying personal characteristics or qualities, which breaks down into six different factors: attitudes and beliefs, self-motivation, stability and persistence, maturity and judgement, aptitude and capacity to learn, and temperament and behaviour.

Level 3 characteristics, which are the hardest things to change about a person, ultimately have the greatest impact on how well someone will perform and grow into a job. But Level 3 characteristics are the hardest to appraise. That is why most hiring decisions are based on Level 1 and 2 characteristics. Even though they have less of an impact on how well someone will do a job, they are a lot easier to assess. In the average interview, most hiring decisions are made on Level 1 and justified by Level 2.

This same three-level analysis can be applied to the resume-reading process. Most managers judge résumés on Level 1. They do so in both obvious and not-so-obvious ways. For example, they do so in obvious ways when a résumé is put into the must-see pile in part because it has an eye-catching-design printed on high-quality paper or when a résumé is put into the not-worth-the-time pile because it has a spelling error in it (and spelling is not an important component of the job) or because it has been mis-stapled once and then again, making it look a bit shoddy in the upper left-hand corner.

But managers also make Level 1 decisions about résumés in less obvious ways. For example, they do this when they assume that someone who graduates with an engineering degree from Queen's University must be a good candidate just because the program has a good reputation or, on the other hand, that someone who graduates with an engineering degree from a university associated with a less-prestigious program is not worth seeing. But the person who went to Queen's might have been pushed to go there by his or her parents. The person might have been a loafer who just passed by the skin of his or her teeth.

Take another example. A manager might see that a candidate worked for Microsoft and confer "an aura of greatness" around the person simply because of the manager's own positive impressions about the company. Or a manager might see that a candidate worked for Australia Post and, because of the manager's own negative impressions of the corporation, assume the person is not worth seeing. There's often guilt by association. But there are probably some extraordinarily high-performing people in any organisation.

How to get around the problem

Okay, so you can see that you might be guilty yourself of letting your personal biases get in the way of your résumé reading. You've decided you don't want to be one of those managers who read résumés in such a superficial way. How can you change your approach?

Review résumés with a degree of scepticism.

You have to put résumés in context and remember what their purposes are. For job candidates, résumés are marketing tools that they hope will slot them in the high-potential category.

Knowing this, and knowing that you might naturally be oriented toward people who present themselves well on a résumé or that you might make inferences based on associations that are most likely not valid, you have to view résumé with a degree of scepticism.

Job-seekers are advised over and over again that their résumés should look good, be well written, highlight their strengths and contain positive comments about their past experiences and education that, without being dishonest, relate to what the person doing the hiring is looking for. There is nothing wrong with this, of course. We would advise the same to anybody looking for a job. But if we were instructing a résumé reader, we would say, "Don't be fooled. You have to see past that."

Being on the hiring end, you have to remember that résumés are, at most, evaluation tools that allow you to make an early raw first cut. You want to make sure that this first cut isn't screening out the wrong people. If you screen in only certain kinds of people, you could be limiting your potential pool of good talent.

And here's some food for thought: Consider application forms. A lot of résumés simply don't include the information that would really help you decide whether or not someone is worth interviewing, especially when comparing one résumé with another.

That is why there are a lot of benefits in application forms - a tool used a lot more frequently in the past, but one that is currently out of favour, especially when it comes to hiring managers and other professionals.

Application forms ask everybody to provide the same type of information regarding their capabilities, skills, experience, training, work-related achievements, etc. This gives you, the person on the hiring end, a chance to more fairly compare candidates and make more objective decisions based on standardised information.

Conduct a Job Analysis

In order to be able to assess résumés more objectively - based on Level 2 and Level 3 criteria - it is essential that you get a sense of the key requirements of the job.

To do this, you must conduct a job analysis. You must know the job requirements up front and let them guide you throughout the hiring process.

The job analysis is, in fact, the foundation of everything that follows - from determining what you will look for on a résumé to deciding what questions you will ask during the interview and how you will make your final selection.

Advice on conducting a job analysis was covered in Part I and some of that information bears repeating here. You start by looking at the nature of the job and determining:

- Key responsibilities and the time spent on each;
- Immediate issues to be addressed in the job;
- How job performance will be measured;
- How the position relates to others in terms of supervision and teamwork;
- The nature of the work environment, such as degree of pressure, people contact and autonomy;
- The attractive and negative aspects of the job;
- The opportunities for growth.

Based on this analysis, you can determine what qualities at each of the three levels are needed to do the job well. Level 1 requirements in terms of presenting a professional image are not very relevant to the résumé-reading process. Level 2 and 3 requirements are:-

For Level 2, ask what qualifications, training, education and experience are needed to do the job. For Level 3, ask what personal characteristics are best suited to the job. Now weight the levels in terms of their importance in the overall appraisal, remembering that Level 3 factors almost always have the greatest impact on performance.

Distinguish between the must-have and nice to have qualifications.

When determining the requirements you are seeking in a new employee, you should begin with a list of very specific criteria, becoming more and more precise about what you want - to the point where you can describe exactly the kind of technical skills, work experience, educational back-ground and personal characteristics you would ideally like the candidate to have.

Then step back and question your criteria and determine what you really need versus what it would simply be nice to have. The aim is to broaden your pool of candidates, not limit it. For example, let's say you are looking for someone in the computer field to manage your information systems.

When it comes to Level 2 characteristics, you might first say that the ideal candidate will have worked on a certain hardware platform with a certain kind of software. But when you step back and ask yourself what is absolutely necessary, you might determine that somebody who has worked with related hardware using a similar kind of software language is okay, too, because this person could quickly adapt to your system.

Or let's say you are looking for a financial manager. You might say that, ideally, the person you're looking for is a Chartered Accountant (CA) who has had auditing experience in a large corporation. On second thought, however, you might say that it would also be okay to have an alternate professional accounting designation (such as a CPA or even a Graduate), as long as the person also has the corporate experience you are looking for.

By stepping back and rethinking your must-have requirements, you broaden your pool of potential candidates - perhaps screening in someone who, although slightly less qualified on a Level 2 basis, has more of the Level 3 characteristics - the most important characteristics - you are looking for. You start by asking, 'What does the bull's eye look like and what do the circles surrounding it look like?' Then you have to determine how close to the bull's eye someone has to be before you are willing to interview them. How close that eventually is will depend upon the number of résumés you have to choose from.

Appraise résumés with your Level 2 and 3 requirements in mind.

With your job requirements in hand, you are ready to look through the résumés. Look for Level 2 characteristics first - for the specific knowledge, skills and experience that are must-haves. Then look at the work history, educational record and outside activities for clues of the Level 3 characteristics you have determined to be necessary, such as leadership, self-motivation, self-direction, ability to work under high pressure, ability to work in a team, etc.

Determining if someone has the Level 3 personal characteristics you desire, is a lot more difficult than determining if he or she has the Level 2 traits you seek. However, you must keep in mind as you go about this exercise that you are not making definitive appraisals based on the reading of a résumé. That is why you conduct interviews, where you can get a far better handle on personal characteristics by asking the right questions. But a résumé can give you some indications or clues that can potentially help you during the résumé-reading stage.

There are a number of ways in which, taken together, a person's work and academic history on a résumé can elicit Level 3 characteristics. Being promoted into increasingly responsible jobs within the same organisation, overcoming particularly difficult challenges or problems (the type of information often volunteered in a résumé), doing well in certain types of jobs, such as those that demand working with a team as compared to those that demand being self-directed with minimal structure, getting involved in certain types of activities at school - these can all indicate personal characteristics.

Although these are just very preliminary clues, they are sometimes indicators that you are dealing with someone who has strengths in this area or that. The resume might show that someone has a real leadership orientation or that someone has a real sales orientation. Both of these can be useful indicators if that's the type of person you are looking for. Assuming you are, this type of clue is an important factor in deciding whether to screen somebody on or not.

Merge your A and B piles.

Because résumés are to be viewed with a degree of scepticism, (essentially as candidate marketing tools that, for all intents and purposes that offer insufficient information as to who you should interview or not), merge your must-see pile (Pile A) with your maybe-worth-seeing pile (Pile B).

In other words, view the résumé-screening process as a very preliminary step, designed to weed out only those candidates who are not even in the ballpark and, therefore, not worth spending any amount of time with. It is better to make the pool as broad as possible and to at least consider anyone who meets the minimum qualifications, who has "sort of" what you're looking for. To increase the depth of information before conducting a full interview insert the next step into the résumé-screening process.

Do mini-interviews over the phone.

Phone and talk briefly with the candidates who made it into your A and B piles. Spend 15 minutes or so with each one, asking the person a few questions to draw him or her out. In other words, do a mini-interview. We often underestimate what we can learn in a 15 to 20 minute conversation on the phone. That kind of a conversation can help you get higher quality information about a person - a lot more than how that person presents on a résumé. (This step is obviously not practical in every hiring situation. If you get thousands of résumés in response to a job opening, mini interviews may just not be feasible.)

This step - between screening the résumés and conducting full interviews - is something that candidates - especially "higher level" managers and professionals - really appreciate. It gives them the opportunity to spend a few minutes on the phone to talk about themselves.

Start the conversation off something like this: "We got your résumé and appreciate your interest in the job. We want to get a little bit more information before we get back to people and invite them in for interviews. We can't see everybody, and we wanted to at least have a chance to talk to you."

The type of questions that follow depend on the job you're trying to fill and the type of person you're looking for. For example, if hiring a consultant, ask the candidate to describe recent consulting assignments, and one in particular that really showcased his or her strengths.

As well, adapt a short list of key questions that can also help you sense if this person has not only the experience but also the Level 3 characteristics you are seeking. For example, if you are looking for someone who is an innovative thinker, you might ask candidates a question about something they've done in their field that indicates an ability to come up with new and different ideas that challenged the status quo.

The phone interview is not the basis upon which you make a final determination. It is simply a further step in your process of deciding who is worth spending more time with in a full-length interview and who is not.

Résumé screening, like interviewing, is not easy. You have to be prepared to take some time with the résumé, to go through them thoroughly and to be very clear about what you are looking for. With a clear-cut strategy in place for conducting résumé screening and interviewing, you can certainly improve your odds that the judgements you make will be sound ones.

Further Considerations

When reading résumés, keep these specific points in mind:

Ignore career objectives.

Many résumés contain a "career objectives" line or paragraph, we strongly recommend not paying much attention to this information. If a candidate articulates an objective that is exactly what the company is looking for, it tends to make the person reading the résumé feel good. The person gets excited that the candidate wants exactly the job they have to offer.

But career objectives are largely written for the benefit of the receiver. It's tailored for your eyes, to get favourable attention. There's nothing wrong with the candidate doing this; it shows he or she has a good appreciation of the selection process. But it shouldn't influence your decision too much.

A career objective is never a reason to screen somebody in, only a reason to screen somebody out. The latter would be the case if the objective shows that the person has aspirations that don't fit the job you have to offer.

Watch for clues in career paths.

At one time, it might have been fair to screen résumés for people who have stuck with a job for five years or more if persistence and stability are determined to be important personal characteristics in the person you hire. But the working world has changed so much, and a person who has changed jobs a number of times within a five-year period may not be showing instability or lack of persistence.

For example, it could be that the person got caught in downsizing initiatives in more than one organisation. Or it could be that the person needed to move from one company to another to get ahead because the opportunities for growth did not exist in the companies left behind.

That said, however, a career path that includes frequent changes from one organisation to another over the years needs to be looked at carefully. If you see that the person is moving from organisations where you would expect opportunities for advancement, you have to ask yourself if only people who do not know this person see his or her potential. This may be especially true if the history shows significant changes in direction or even industry.

In other words, the organisations being left behind, after getting closer to the candidate, may have seen that the person did not have the potential expected and was, therefore, not promoted. On the flip side, if a résumé shows that a person has gained significant recognition within one organisation, this may suggest that, as people got closer to the candidate, they tended to value that person more and more.

Look for talents and achievements.

People often reveal particular talents through their achievements in areas such as continuing education, community involvement, professional association work and more. These outside-of-work activities should be looked at for the Level 3 characteristics they reveal in terms of personal attitudes and values.

Part 5

How to conduct meaningful reference checks

The Sales Manager is feeling a sense of relief. After days of interviewing, he has finally met a job candidate who seems to possess almost all the qualities needed to fill a vacant sales position. He plans to call tomorrow to offer the job, and that will be that.

But wait a minute. That *isn't* that. This manager is forgetting about one of the most important steps in the selection process: checking references. Checking references in a rigorous and thorough manner is one of the most underused steps in the hiring process.

Research indicates that even today, less than half of hiring decisions are based upon substantive reference checks. This is surprising when you consider how critical hiring decisions are. Even if you follow all the right advice for conducting meaningful interviews, in the end, you are still making a decision largely based upon information supplied by the candidate if you do not check references.

Just as a stool with four legs is sturdier than a stool with three, so, too, is a hiring decision based upon four sources of information "sturdier" than one based on three. The interview is obviously one source of information; work samples and psychological assessments might be another two. But throw in reference checks, and you have a hiring decision that stands on some pretty solid footing.

Checking references fulfils two purposes. Initially, by verifying with an independent source some of the key information supplied by a job candidate - such as positions held, responsibilities, promotions, salary, achievements, etc. - you can be that much more confident about the information you drew out in the job interview. Then, by asking the right questions of people who have worked closely with a candidate, you get views other than your own in terms of the candidate's underlying behaviours and personal characteristics - those traits that are most telling in terms of how well a person will do in a particular job. These views can either confirm or call into question your own conclusions about the person; either way, the information can have an important bearing on your hiring decision.

Before getting into the nitty-gritty of conducting a reference check, a number of practical matters are worth keeping in mind.

The reference check should come at the end of the selection process.

Reference checks can be time-consuming for all concerned and, for that reason, should come at the end of the hiring process. By the time you start checking references you should be down to two, maybe three, "really hot finalists" or even down to the one person who has shone throughout the selection process. Thoroughly checking references at this point will help you make your final choice as to which candidate is most suitable for the job.

The person doing the hiring should do the reference checking.

The executive or manager who is doing the hiring should check the references himself or herself. This person is the one who has to judge all the information going into the decision about who best to hire, and references can supply some very rich information. Having the hiring manager check the references is a bit of a trade-off because human resources people are likely more skilled at this task. But many managers making a selection decision about a key member of their team, would want to check the references themselves.

However, the human resources department can be called upon to verify information such as educational credentials, employment history, etc., before the hiring manager conducts the "meatier" reference check. The human resources department might also be called upon to check references when the company is doing a mass hiring, as might be the case when staffing an all-new production line, or when filling entry-level and more junior positions.

More than just the people first volunteered by the job candidate should be called.

Collect a list of 12 to 15 names of potential people to call for each candidate. Among the list should be direct supervisors, people who reported to the candidate, work colleagues, clients and customers (if applicable) and people in senior management. Each of these types of people is uniquely qualified to tell you something about the person you are considering hiring. If you need a good leader, who better to ask than former direct-reports about the type of manager the candidate might be? If you need a good salesperson, who better to ask about his or her talents than clients?

As well, by talking to more than the candidate's former boss, you often get better quality information. Peers and subordinates are often less cautious about sharing information about the candidate because they are not in a position of accountability.

Likewise, senior managers who did not directly supervise a candidate are often more candid about a person's qualities. People who are higher up the corporate ladder usually cut to the chase quickly.

The names on the list should not be just the candidate's favourites. What you are looking for is a cross-section of people. It's not that you are going to call them all; it's just that by having a list of people to choose from, you can avoid the trap where you necessarily end up talking to the client who just happens to be the candidate's brother-in-law. And there is nothing underhanded about the collection of these names; you never go behind a candidate's back and call someone whom the candidate does not know you might call.

You can collect your list of names at the end of the interview or in a subsequent phone call, telling the candidate that you are interested in moving forward (if that is the case) and that you would like the candidate to supply a list of colleagues, subordinates, bosses, etc., to call as references.

You might refer to something the candidate said in the interview about his or her role in a team project and ask for the names of a few other people on that team. Or you might refer to something the candidate said about his or her management skills and ask for the names of a few direct-reports.

At least three people should be called.

Call at least three people per candidate for references. That way, if you get three people all saying basically the same thing about a person, then you know you are collecting strong information that either confirms or flies in the face of your own findings.

References must be checked very carefully when a candidate is still working for a company.

If a candidate is still working for a company where most people do not know that he or she is looking for another job, you have to be very sensitive to that candidate's position. You can't do anything to jeopardise that person's current employment in the event that you do not end up hiring that person into the job you have available.

You can ask the candidate if there is someone at his or her current workplace who knows the candidate is talking to you and could provide a reference. Of course, you have to remember the person supplied is obviously in the candidate's "inner circle."

You may have to get your references from people who are outside of the candidate's current organisation. Previous employers, even if it has been years since the candidate worked for them, can still provide useful information. Remember, one of the underlying principles is that personal characteristics and patterns of behaviour do not tend to change very much over time. Although someone who has worked with the candidate over the previous two years will provide information that is easier to interpret, someone who worked with the candidate 10 years ago is still a source of valid information. For more recent information, you can ask for references from people outside of the candidate's current workplace, such as clients, suppliers, industry associates, etc.

The challenges when checking references.

So now you know that the hiring manager is the one who should be checking references, calling at least three people from among a list of 12 to 15 names provided by, but not necessarily the first choices of, the candidate - names that represent a cross-section of people the candidate has worked with, including supervisors, subordinates, work colleagues and, potentially, clients, customers and industry associates. Now it is time to pick up the phone and start asking questions. But before you go ahead and do that, you should be aware of the two challenges you are likely to face in your quest to get meaningful information about a job candidate: "gun-shy" corporations that direct all requests for references to the human resources department and the natural tendency among people not to say anything negative about a former employee.

The first challenge is one that more and more reference checkers are coming up against. The perception out there, and not necessarily a well-founded one, is that all sorts of liability issues surround giving out references. Many have talked about the growing fear among managers and supervisors about the legal consequences of discussing the work habits and personality traits of someone who used to work for them, especially if what they have to say is negative.

Some have advised that you should feel free to offer information and be open and honest about a previous employee as long as you believe what you say to be accurate and true, as long as you speak in good faith and without malice.

Nonetheless, the perception of liability exists and you may find yourself face to face with a corporate policy that says all requests for references must go through the human resources department. This will not do. The people in the human resources department typically have little or no direct knowledge of an individual and, therefore, can be of very little help when asked about day to day behaviours.

So what do you do? First, acknowledge the policy and then just keep talking. For example, let's say you call the candidate's former boss who immediately gives you the company line about the need to go through human resources. You can say, "Okay, I'll do that. But while I have you on the phone, could I ask you a few quick questions? It would be really helpful to me because Joe (the job candidate) said he worked closely with you. You almost ignore the routine. This works in many, if not most, cases: When people se you are legitimately trying to assess a potential candidate, my experience has been that they will speak to you.

If this doesn't work, you can try the second suggestion: Explain to the job candidate that you are having a hard time getting through to the people you need to talk to and ask the candidate to call these people first and personally request that they give you a reference. If someone you worked with for a few years called and asked if you would be good enough to talk to someone about a reference, wouldn't you help? Corporate policy may be one thing, but when asked to help personally, most people will lend a hand.

The other challenge you are likely to face in trying to get meaningful information about a prospective employee is the natural tendency to not say anything negative about another person. A bad reference is as hard to find as a good employee. The way to get around this is to conduct a reference check much the same way you conduct an interview - by establishing rapport and then asking questions about past behaviours that reveal something about a person's underlying characteristics.

Conducting the reference check.

In order to conduct reference checks that go beyond the superficial - that ask for more than a confirmation of employment dates, job titles and salary - you need to draw out specific observations from the person you are talking to so you can judge the candidate's actions yourself based upon the qualities you have determined are essential to the job.

To recap, the best predictor of future performance is past behaviour. Recent behaviour in a workplace setting is more compelling evidence of future behaviour than behaviour from long ago in non-workplace settings (for example, in academic or social situations). However, the more varied and long-standing the behaviour, the more deeply rooted it is. That is, if someone displays leadership skills not only in recent work situations but also in academic situations years ago, chances are good that leadership is a deeply rooted behaviour of that person. To get information that will tell you about a person's underlying characteristics, try taking these steps.

(A) Establish rapport. When doing a telephone reference check, it is essential that you begin by identifying yourself immediately by title and company name and stating your purpose. You might find you have to give the person your phone number so he or she can call you back after verifying your identity. In order to put the reference giver at ease, say something such as, "Joe (the candidate) gave me your name and said you would be a

good person to talk to" This takes the pressure off the person on the other end of the line, who realises that he or she is not being asked to make some big judgment call.

At this point, you might also want to just chat (very briefly) about something you may have in common with the reference giver, such as a recent conference you both attended or a common business venture. From there, you can slip right into the questions you want to ask about the candidate.

(B) Ask questions about, and get examples of, past behaviours. Tailor your reference questions just as you tailored your interview questions so that you elicit information about the personal characteristics of a candidate. Based upon this information, you can decide if a person has the characteristics you have determined (through your job analysis) are essential to doing well in the job you have available.

Just to remind you, the types of characteristics we are talking about here are things such as maturity, good judgment, stability, persistence, self-motivation, leadership, capacity to learn, ability to work in a team, enthusiasm, etc. - those characteristics that are very hard to change about a person but most indicative of his or her ability to do a job successfully.

It is essential that your questions be designed to bring out examples of behaviours that show the possession or lack of these characteristics. For example, let's say the person who fills your job must be a team player. So far, based upon what you heard in the interview, you believe the candidate you are considering is, indeed, a team player. You are now trying to confirm this during the reference check and ask the reference giver if the candidate is a team player.

A positive response on the other end of the line must then be followed up with something like, "Tell me about a situation where Joe worked with others." Or if you ask the reference giver what kind of leader the candidate is and the response is, "Great leader," you should follow up with, "Please describe a situation where Joe demonstrated leadership."

Drawing out negative information is, of course, the most difficult part of a reference check. If a reference giver senses that things are getting too negative, that person might cut you off without giving you the information you need. You can start to explore negative aspects by asking questions such as, "I'll be Joe's new boss and we will be working together quite closely. Can you give me some advice on the type of supervision I should offer?"

This may start the former boss or whoever is on the other end of the line thinking about the person's weaknesses without arousing too much resistance. It's not a trick. You are just trying to get the benefit of the former boss' wisdom.

A good way to end a reference check is to ask if the company would rehire the candidate. You might find that weaknesses are revealed in someone who had received a completely favourable appraisal up to that point. The person on the other end of the line might say that, although the person was a good worker, he or she was unable to co-ordinate his or her efforts with others. Or the person might say that, although everybody liked the candidate, he or she lacked the drive needed to get the job done.

The list of questions at the end of this section provides some examples of the types of questions you might ask while checking work references (as opposed to personal or academic references). Obviously, you cannot ask all of these questions in one phone call and they may not even cover some of the important areas you need to explore. But they give you an idea of the types of questions you can ask to open up discussion. Whenever possible, follow up these questions by requesting a specific example from the reference giver's personal experience in working with the candidate.

Interpret the responses.

If you are at the point of checking a candidate's references, it means this person has already made a very favourable impression on you. If the candidate has been honest with you up to this point, it is likely that the references will confirm what you have already discovered. Getting three or more people whose opinions and examples confirm your own conclusions is very reassuring.

It doesn't take long to see that when two or three reference givers strongly endorse a person, when they all start saying they were sad to see the person go and would absolutely rehire that person, it was worth the time to check the references. Then you know you can move forward confidently in your decision to offer the job. If, however, you get three people whose opinions are in line and differ from the conclusions you have reached, then that should be enough for you to say you likely assessed the candidate inaccurately.

Don't let one person's negative impressions distort your view of a candidate when other reference givers have given positive information, especially when this positive information is also similar to the impressions you have formed. It could be that the reference giver is weak himself or herself and may have been fearful of the candidate because the candidate challenged the reference giver's authority, stepped on his or her toes or refused to comply with his or her domineering style.

If through your reference checking you find out that a candidate has given you incorrect information - something that is clearly not the truth - then you have good reason to be very uncomfortable about that person as an employee. Incorrect information is not the same as differences of opinion.

For example, if a candidate says that he or she helped drive company profits and then you learn through the references that the candidate was one of 100 people in a division where profits rose by 15 per cent, then you should interpret the candidate's responses with a grain of salt. However, the differences are of opinion, not of fact, and not necessarily enough to rule out the candidate point blank.

Taking the time to check references in a substantial way is worth the effort. It's hard to make insightful, accurate and realistic hiring decisions at the best of times, especially when all your information comes from one source: Checking references just means you are in a much better position to make smart people decisions.

Sample work related questions

- When was this person employed with your firm? From... to....
- How would you describe his/her duties and responsibilities?
- What salary increases or bonuses did he/she get?

  Did he/she ever get a promotion?
  Get turned down for a promotion?
  Refuse to accept a promotion?
- How did his/her work compare to others on the job?
- What criticisms did you have of his/her work?
- How closely was he/she supervised on the job?
- Did he/she require more direction than other staff members?

  Did he/she have any supervisory responsibility?
  How many did he/she supervise?
- What were his/her strengths or weaknesses as a leader?

  How would you rate him/her as a leader?
- What contact did he/she have with your customers?

  How would you describe his/her skills in dealing with clients?
  Can he/she sell?
  How would you describe his/her sales ability?
- How did he/she get along with other staff members?

  Supervisors?
  Subordinates?
  Co-workers?
- What clashes did he/she have with others?
- Was he/she difficult to motivate?

  How would you rate him/her on work effort?
- What was his/her reputation within the organisation?
- Was he/she required at times to work overtime?

  How did he/she respond in these situations?
- What motivated him/her most on the job?

  Money?
  Recognition?
  Competition with others?
- What do you consider his/her best characteristics?
- What do you consider his/her greatest weaknesses?

Sample work related questions (continued)

- Why did he/she leave your company?
- How did you feel when he/she left?
- Would you rehire him/her?

  If you were going to rehire, how would you finish this sentence?
  He/she would be an asset, but....

- What did you personally think about him/her?
- How would you describe his/her attitude in general?

  Toward the company?
  Toward management?
  Toward subordinates?
  Toward other staff members?

- What kind of work would you think best suited to his/her abilities?
- If you were advising his/her new boss, what advice would you give?
- Overall, how would you rate this person as a...?
- Is there any other advice you could give us?

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Notes