

The interview: A few thoughts on an old topic ...

Bob Zahra

The problem with bypassing the phone interview and leapfrogging directly to the face-to-face interview is that it's a mistake to fall in love with the candidate before you know if he/she can do the job. And, as everybody knows, an excellent interview isn't necessarily a predictor of future success.

The candidate who clunks through a gotcha interview, constantly off-balance from a hiring authority expecting extemporaneous, television-talk-show level responses, doesn't get the job. This same clunker candidate interviews elsewhere where his/her tortoise-like proven history is recognized and appreciated, and he/she is suddenly transformed into a valued employee—to the long-term benefit of both candidate and competitive company.

It's wise to spend a little time on the phone prior to the face-to-face interview. Listen. Probe depth and breadth of specific employment history: perceived successes and failures, numbers of people managed, square footage responsibilities, particular cultural expertise (if growing) and sales volume, geography, industry sectors, people managed and level of contact within the customer base (if sales or management).

Top performing, current employees plan their days/weeks/seasons and even their years well in advance. Consider providing challenging interview questions prior to the face-to-face interview. By providing questions in advance, the hiring authority can create an insight into the candidate's preparation and planning skills (among other things).

Question example: "A key employee of our largest customer has made a mistake. Nothing malicious, but a costly, time-consuming mistake nevertheless ... This employee of our largest customer completely ignores his/her culpability and blames our company. It's clear that he/she is covering for his own failure. How do you solve the problem and retain the customer?"

A couple of carefully crafted questions presented as a take-home test in advance of the face-to-face interview also provide a window into the candidate's problem-solving style and ethical foundation. An open, free-flowing case study analysis of the take-home questions during the personal interview can uncover much about a candidate that the traditional interview doesn't capture, by means of personal anecdotes leading to historical operational style. In the process, personal/organizational chemistry can be measured and evaluated.

One last tip: Tell the candidate how to dress for the interview. Don't make him/her ask or wrestle with the decision. Set the stage for success. The overriding goal here is to determine if the candidate can make a sufficient, lasting contribution to your company. At the same time, you can be certain the candidate is evaluating your company for projected immediate and long-term personal and career reward.

Bob Zahra is an executive search consultant with Florasearch, Inc., a certified personnel consultant and past chair of the National Association of Executive Recruiters. He can be reached at (407) 320-8177 or bzahra@florasearch.com. Visit www.florasearch.com.