Preparing for the Job Interview:
The Interviewer's Responsibility

By Charles E. Davis and Anthony Herrera

"What would you do if I gave you an elephant?" "What do you think of the artwork hanging on this wall?" "If you were a dog, what kind of dog would you be?" These are actual questions that candidates report having been asked in job interviews. But how will answers to these questions help you make an intelligent hiring decision? If you can't answer that question, then you shouldn't be asking the others.

Research confirms what common knowledge suggests—interviews are one of the most commonly used and well-liked tools for selecting employees. Yet most interviewers never receive training on conducting an effective interview. Instead, they fly by the seat of their pants, blissfully ignorant of the fact that they don't know what they are doing or why they are asking the questions on their list—assuming they have thought enough in advance to make a list of questions.

The interview questions on the previous page were reported in Ann Howard, Scott Erker, and Neal Bruce's 2007 white paper, "Slugging Through the War for Talent." Their research showed that training increases the interviewer's confidence in his or her interviewing ability (see Figure 1). Knowing that, it seems that educating interviewers on how best to conduct an employment interview will result in better identification of the best candidate to fill a particular job opening. This article provides you with basic information on how to prepare for and conduct an effective interview.

The key to hiring success is identifying the candidate with the greatest level of "fit" with the job and organization. A candidate's fit with the job may be assessed partially through a résumé or skills testing. But the fit with the organization's values, norms, and culture is best assessed through a face-to-face interview that's structured to accomplish three goals. First, the interviewer must communicate the organization's values, norms, and culture to the candidate. Second, the interviewer must assess the candidate's values, work ethic, and, to some degree, skills and knowledge. Finally, both the interviewer and the candidate must determine the degree of organizational fit.

Why is it important to identify and hire a candidate with a high degree of organizational fit? It's because a bad hire is a costly mistake. In a recent CareerBuilder survey, 41% of the responding companies estimated that a bad hiring mistake cost them more than $25,000, while 24% reported an estimated cost of more than $50,000. The respondents also reported additional negative impacts other than the direct monetary costs, as Table 1 shows.

Types of Interviews

There are three basic interview approaches: task interviews, stress interviews, and behavioral interviews. Each type assesses a different set of skills, so you need to match the purpose of your interview with the type of interview.

In a task interview, the candidate is asked to perform a task or solve a problem. Questions asked during the interview might be similar to "How many stoplights are there in Manhattan?" In this example, the actual answer isn't as important as how the candidate developed his or her answer. An extended task interview model might assign a candidate to work on an actual short-term project as a member of an existing team. The assignment facilitates an assessment of how the candidate solves a particular task and interacts with team members. Task interviews are useful for positions where interviewers are trying to assess a candidate's analytical and problem-solving skills, such as consulting or investment banking positions.

A stress interview is useful for assessing how a candidate reacts in stressful situations. In this type of interview, the interviewer may use long periods of silence between questions and answers, ask leading questions, or frequently interrupt the candidate. Questions may be similar to "I've interviewed five candidates with more experience than you, so why should I hire you instead?" When delivered with an accusatory or harsh vocal tone, such questions will create a heightened level of stress for

Figure 1: Training Increases Interviewer Confidence
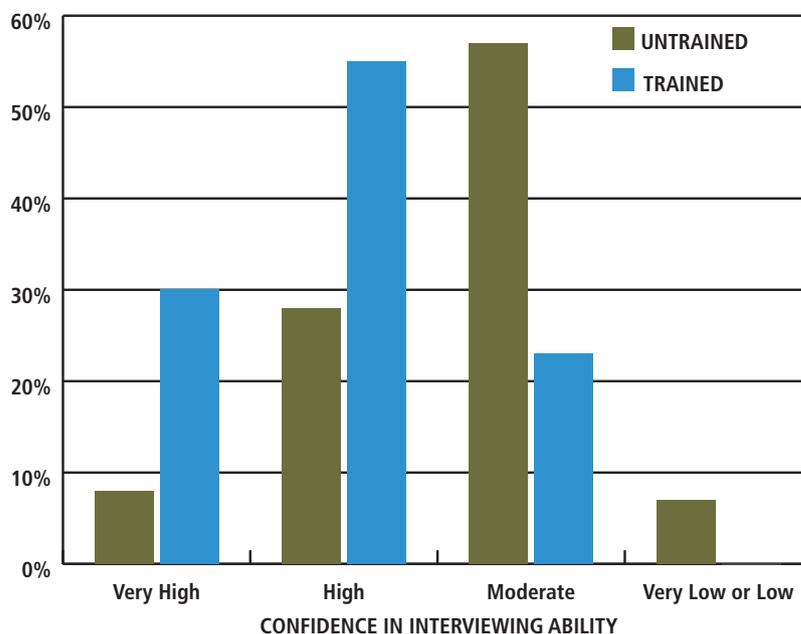
Source: Ann Howard, Scott Erker, and Neal Bruce, "Slugging Through the War for Talent," Development Dimensions International, Inc., 2007. Reprinted with permission from Development Dimensions International, Inc.

Table 1: Negative Impacts of a Bad Hire

IMPACT	% OF COMPANIES EXPERIENCING THE IMPACT
Lost worker productivity	39%
Lost time to recruit and train replacement worker	39%
Negative impact on employee morale	33%
Negative impact on client solutions	19%
Lost sales to customers	11%
Legal proceedings	9%

Source: CareerBuilder.com, "Nearly Seven in Ten Businesses Affected by a Bad Hire in the Past Year, According to CareerBuilder Survey," December 13, 2012, www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?sd=12%2f13%2f2012&siteid=cbpr&sc_cmp1=cb_pr730_&id=pr730&ed=12%2f31%2f2012.

the candidate. Stress interviews are best used for positions that require employees to function under highly stressful conditions, such as collection agents and customer service representatives. Be careful if you choose to use stress interviews, however, as candidates might be offended or bothered by the antagonistic nature of the questioning and will decide not to work for the company even when there's a high level of organizational fit on other components. This is particularly true for entry-level-position candidates in areas such as accounting and finance.

In a behavioral interview, the interviewer attempts to discern how a candidate will behave and react in a particular situation. The candidate is asked to recall a situation he or she has experienced and is then asked a question related to that experience. The candidate's response is used as a predictor of future performance or behavior. Since an employee's behavior influences job performance in many ways, behavioral interviews are useful in a variety of settings from entry-level positions to senior-executive positions. Questions in a behavioral interview will be similar to "Think of a time when you were involved in a project that required attention to details. How did you make sure all the details were covered?"

Research shows that people provide more information and details about their behavior when asked to explain their past behaviors. This additional information helps interviewers make better, more-informed hiring decisions. And while behavioral interview questions can also be structured around hypothetical situations, research shows that interviews based on actual experiences are more valid than those using hypothetical situations.

The Interviewer's Two Tasks

The ultimate goal of the interview is to identify the can-

didate who best matches the organization's culture and needs and to have that candidate accept the employment offer. This means that you as the interviewer have to accomplish two tasks during the interview: a buy task and a sell task.

As a buyer of talent, you must focus on assessing how well a candidate's skills, knowledge, and personality match the demands of the position. This match is determined by asking job-related, behavior-based questions during the interview. If planned systematically before the interview, these questions will provide sufficient information for making the appropriate determination. Of course, the focus on job-related questions means that questions such as the one about the elephant posed at the beginning of this article should be avoided…unless, of course, you're interviewing someone for a zookeeper position. If you want to tap into the candidate's creativity or ability to think fast on his or her feet, spend some time before the interview thinking about how to use well-designed, behavior-based questions to make that assessment.

The second task you must complete during the interview is to sell the company and the position to the candidate. The information you provide will allow the candidate to assess whether he or she will fit in and be successful in the position. As an interviewer, you can do a fantastic job of assessing employee fit from the company's perspective, but if you don't successfully sell the company and position to the candidate, he or she won't accept your job offer.

Recognizing the two goals of an interview, it's important to balance the session between the two tasks. Failure to appropriately plan an interview strategy commonly leads to accomplishing just one of the tasks, which results in an incomplete interview. Spend too much time on the buy task, and the candidate can't assess the degree of cultural fit with the organization. If you spend too much time on the sell task, you won't have a good understanding of the candidate's qualifications. Either way, the interview process would fail, and the likelihood of making a good hiring decision is reduced. Table 2 provides points on how to complete both the buy and sell sides of the interview.

Planning the "Buy" Task

Begin planning for the interview by considering the buy task. Answering the following two questions will give you a good starting point:

1. What are the company's values?

Table 2: Interviewer Tasks

	BUY	SELL
DO	• Ask job-related questions to help ensure quality of hires and reduce potential for legal trouble. • Structure your interview to target pertinent information and limit faking. • Ask behavior-based questions to get specific information about past actions; especially important for high-level, complex positions.	• Sell what the applicant wants to buy: a job and organization that fit personal needs. • Be nice, warm, friendly, and humorous. • Be fair, and keep the process consistent among all candidates.
DON'T	• Wander by asking irrelevant, inappropriate, or personal questions. • Stroke your ego by talking about yourself rather than the candidate or you won't learn enough about the person.	• Devalue candidate by being late, uninterested, preoccupied, or unprepared. • Withhold information about the job or the organization. • Grill the candidate, which can cause stress and repel the person.

Source: Ann Howard and Johanna Johnson, "If You Were a Tree, What Kind Would You Be?" Development Dimensions International, Inc., 2008, p. 9.
Reprinted with permission from Development Dimensions International, Inc.

2. What core competencies must the candidate possess to achieve a high degree of organizational fit?

While you may be tempted to develop a long list of characteristics, try to limit it to four or five key critical values and competencies. These critical competencies may be overarching and may encompass several of the values and competencies from your longer list. Answers to these questions will vary from company to company and from position to position, but common examples include leadership, time management, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and a focus on customer service.

Next, use the list of critical competencies to help you develop the questions you'll ask to assess a candidate's degree of organizational fit. Remember to address both the company's values and the required job competencies. Otherwise, you could end up like the capital management firm we know of. The company has a strong culture in which worker actions are monitored closely—employees are expected to be at their desks at all times and are given specific break times. A search firm recommended a candidate who possessed the desired high level of technical skills and financial modeling skills, but the firm failed to assess the candidate's fit with the strong culture. Once hired, the candidate couldn't conform to the culture and left the company after a short time.

For each of the critical competencies, create two or three interview questions that will lead the candidate to respond with answers that will help you evaluate whether he or she possesses that particular value or core competency. The result will be a list of eight to 15 interview questions that you can use.

Suppose that leadership is a core competency of the position you're trying to fill. You need to develop two or three questions that will elicit answers that reveal a candidate's leadership style and ability. You might consider asking the following:

1. Describe a time when you had to lead a team to achieve an outcome. What was your role? How did you resolve conflict among the team members?

2. Think about a time when your team members disagreed with a decision you made. How did you react to the disagreement?

3. Reflect on a recent team that you led. Give me an example of how you motivated the team members to accomplish a goal you set for the team.

Planning the buy portion of the interview may seem like a relatively easy task, but it's vital. If you skip this step or devote very little effort to it, you'll likely end up with interview questions that fail to generate the answers you need to adequately assess the candidate, and you'll have failed at the buy task.

Planning the "Sell" Task

Interviewers know that they must complete the buy task, even if they don't know how to go about it. The sell task, however, often gets overlooked. It's common for untrained interviewers to never think about it at all. They assume that if the candidate has made the effort to apply for a position with the organization, then that person has already decided that the organization is a good fit and there's no need to sell the organization to the candidate during the interview. But don't make this mistake—there's always more selling that can be done to ensure that the candidate can assess the degree of fit and feel comfortable accepting an employment offer. You don't want to end up losing your top candidate just because you failed at the sell task.

In working with college students, we frequently see instances where firms fail to adequately complete the sell side of the hiring process. The firms do a great job deciding which candidates they want to hire, but they frequently don't do enough to differentiate their firm from similar firms that are competing for the same candidate, thereby failing at the sell side and not landing their targets.

There are two parts to the sell task: selling the organization and selling the position. A candidate needs to be able to assess his or her fit with both. Executing these two sell tasks successfully will give your organization the best chance that the candidate you've identified as the best fit will accept an employment offer.

A good way to begin planning your sell task is by considering what makes your organization unique. These characteristics are the factors that set your organization apart from others in the candidate's mind. Of course, you want these characteristics to be those that are valued by the candidate, so consider the following areas:

1. Work environment—Is the environment casual or formal? What makes it a fun place to work?

2. Organization culture—Are flexible work schedules acceptable and supported? Are work projects challenging and varied?

3. Compensation and benefits—Is the position's salary competitive with your peers' salary levels? What benefits are offered (such as vacation, personal leave, retirement)?

Next, consider how your organization develops its employees. The best job candidates are looking for organizations that are willing to invest in their personal and professional development. It won't be enough to just tell candidates about your training, mentoring, and coaching programs. You'll have to sell these programs to the candidates by describing how current employees are flourishing in the organization because of these programs.

Finally, think about how you can sell the specific position. Determine how the person in the position will contribute in meaningful ways to the organization. Develop an understanding of the position's visibility within the organization and how the candidate will gain face time with key employees in other groups and divisions, including senior management. This visibility analysis will help you illustrate how the successful candidate can build his or her skill set and professional network.

If you want to master the sell task, you must first understand the candidate. Ask the candidate directly what he or she values in an employer and a position. Once you know what the candidate is seeking, you can develop your sell effort to highlight how the organization and position meet those needs. For example, if the candidate values a variety of projects, you'll emphasize how many projects the candidate will work on at one time and how frequently the project assignments will change.

Putting It All Together

The scheduled interview time has arrived. You've planned the interview and developed a set of appropriate questions to help you assess the candidate's skills. The candidate has researched your organization and is ready to answer your questions. You're ready to listen to the candidate's responses for clues on how to sell the organization and the position to the candidate.

Take a deep breath, relax, and welcome the candidate. Establish a friendly yet professional atmosphere, and ask your first question. The rest of the interview will fall into place, and you'll be well on your way to identifying the best candidate for the position and making a successful hire. **SF**

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