Conducting Better Job Interviews

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Are you looking for a better way to conduct job interviews? How can you get beneath the surface to learn about a candidate's work skills and abilities? How do you know if an applicant has what it takes to perform on the job? Have you ever been disappointed in the work performance of someone who seemed perfect in the interview?

If you conduct job interviews, chances are you have been bothered at some time by questions such as these. Hiring decisions are among the most important choices an organization makes, both in terms of dollar costs and impact on productivity. You may easily pay half a million dollars or more in salary and benefits over the term of an employee's career with your court unit.

Most people would do a thorough comparative study before spending that much on, say, a new piece of equipment. But when it comes to interviewing and hiring, we often feel that we can muddle through without much planning. As a result, too many hiring decisions are based on gut feelings, rather than solid information about applicants' work experience. Yet, this does not have to be the case—a more effective approach to interviewing is available.

Past Performance—The Best Predictor of Future Success

Experience, backed up by research, shows that past performance is the best indicator of future job success. Knowing that someone has demonstrated competency in a skill is the most reliable indicator that that person will be likely to demonstrate the same skill again in the future. Suppose you are looking for an intake clerk with skill in dealing with irate or difficult customers. You would be in a much better position to judge an applicant's ability if she could describe to you several specific instances of times she had to deal with difficult customers, in each case describing the situation, what she did to address it, and what happened as a result.

A successful track record is the best recommendation you can get. The top goal of a job interview therefore should be to find out about the applicant's past experience relative to key knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for success in the job. With some forethought and analysis, interview questions can be crafted that let you do this. Unfortunately, many employers rely on an unstructured interview format that fails to probe below the surface of candidates' work experience.

Behavioral Interviewing: A More Concrete Approach

An alternative to unstructured interviews is *behavioral interviewing*, so called because it focuses on the applicant's past behavior in relation to key skills. The first step in preparing to conduct behavioral interviews is to think about the job and decide what key skills it requires. In other words, what are the qualities that you want to be sure applicants have when you hire them, because they are essential to success in the job?

Examples of key skills for an intake clerk might include ability to answer questions clearly, skill in handling irate customers, and strong customer service orientation. Key skills for a courtroom deputy might include attention to detail, ability to work under a deadline, and dealing with others diplomatically.

Once you have identified key skills for a job, you need to decide which of them you can develop on the job through training and which you want to base your hiring decisions on. This completes the job analysis phase of behavioral interviewing. The next task is to come up with interview questions that ask for direct examples of how applicants have used that skill in the past.

Asking for examples of past behavior is different from asking candidates for a self-assessment of their skill level. Let's take an example. Traditional interview questions often ask candidates to generalize about their abilities, for example, "How good are you at handling multiple priorities?" If you have used such questions, you may have been frustrated by how easily they allow candidates to "tell you what you want to hear." The answer is likely to be a vague (and glowing) general assessment, such as "I am an excellent prioritizer; I use a 'to do' list, and I enjoy dealing with complex situations." It is difficult to judge the value of such statements made by an applicant who is eager to impress you and land the job.

Consider, as an alternative, the following behaviorally phrased question: "I'd like you to think about a specific time when you had several demanding tasks competing for your attention. Describe the situation and tell me what you did." On the surface, this may seem similar to the previous question. But the behavioral version forces the candidate to give a specific example of past experience, rather than bland assurances and generalities. With some judicious probing, you may learn what the candidate considers to be a demanding task, what techniques were used for prioritizing, what the thinking process was behind the choices that were made, whether assistance was requested when needed, and so forth.

By using behavioral questions, you find out, first, whether candidates have experience using the skill you are interested in; and second, exactly what they have done in relevant situations. Because behavioral questions ask for concrete descriptions of actual experiences, they yield more specific answers than non-behavioral questions. An added advantage of the behavioral approach is that focusing on essential job skills helps prevent interviewers from asking biased or discriminatory questions about characteristics that are not job related.

Situational Questions

In addition to behavioral questions, which ask about specific past experiences, another useful technique is to ask *situational questions*, which describe a hypothetical but realistic work situation and ask how the candidate would respond to it. This kind of question can be used in conjunction with behavioral questions to gauge candidates' thinking about specific kinds of situations they are likely to encounter in the job. Since you specify the situation in advance for this type of question, it is also possible to develop an answer key indicating what kinds of response would be considered good, adequate, or unacceptable. An answer key helps take some of the subjectivity out of rating candidates' responses.

Situational questions can be especially helpful with candidates who are new to the job market, such as recent college graduates or professionals who have taken time off to raise families. But it is always best to ensure that the bulk of your questions are behavioral in nature, so that you find out what applicants have actually done, rather than what they say they would do.

One interview panel in a district court had a vivid example of this. The panel was conducting a behavioral type interview. One candidate was repeatedly unable to come up with work examples

in response to their questions. Out of frustration the panel began to "help" the candidate by asking "What *would* you do in that situation?" The candidate then gave several answers that seemed to show a commitment to the concept of teamwork that the panel was looking for.

But at some point, one of the members of the panel had an idea. "Listen," she asked, "I realize your work experience has been limited, but there are many types of experience that could be relevant. Have you ever done volunteer work, or college projects that involved working with other people?" The candidate said that she had. They went over the behavioral questions again, only this time the candidate gave examples of what she had actually done in real situations. The panel was startled to find that her actual behavior in team situations was dramatically different than what she had said she *would* do in response to a hypothetical situational question. To minimize this kind of unintended distortion, situational questions should only be used in conjunction with a solid base of behavioral-type questions.

New FJC Workshop on Conducting Job Interviews

A new FJC workshop is currently available to help court staff learn how to conduct better interviews. *Hire the Right Person: Effective Interviewing*, is a one-day workshop, which can be taught in your district on request by a Center-trained court manager. The workshop is designed to develop good basic interviewing skills and techniques to court staff who are involved in conducting job interviews. The methods taught are equally useful for interviews for promotional opportunities as they are for hiring from outside.

The workshop addresses the most common problems with job interviews, and how to overcome them using the behavioral interviewing approach. In addition to analyzing key job skills and designing behavioral questions to assess them, workshop participants also learn about other fundamentals of good interviewing, such as how to screen candidates, create an optimum atmosphere for interviews, and rank candidates after the interview in order to reach a hiring decision.

If you would like to schedule an interviewing workshop for your staff, please call David Hendrickson at the FJC, (202) 273-4104, to discuss possible dates. Allow about 6-8 weeks to set up a workshop. The workshop may be conducted for groups of from six to twenty-five. In many smaller districts, it may be efficient to conduct a single workshop for a combined audience from more than one court unit.

When you request a workshop in your district, the FJC will check to see if there is a trainer available to teach it for you on the dates you specify. Training materials will be sent to you by the FJC. You will need to designate a local contact person to take care of logistics such as arranging for training room and audiovisual support.

It is often said that an organization is only as good as its people. *Hire the Right Person: Effective Interviewing* is a useful tool to help you find people with the skills you need—people who will make a good fit with your organization and increase your productivity.