Getting the Right People on the Bus – Behavioral Interviewing

In the popular book, Good to Great, Jim Collins emphasizes the importance of hiring the right people for the job with his analogy of “Getting the right person on the bus”. Jim states “First who, then what”.

Interviewing is still one of the most common approaches used to select new employees. Depending on how you interview, will in a large part determine whether or not you are getting the “right” person.

Many interviewers wait until the candidate comes into the office to decide what questions they ask. Then the interview is somewhat haphazard with them asking whatever pops into their mind like: “Tell me about yourself”. They may look down the resume and ask a few obvious questions, and then make a decision on “gut feel”.

Other interviewers ask mainly situational based questions like “What would you do if you were faced with this kind of problem?” Knowledge type questions are common where they test someone’s understanding. Don’t get me wrong, these kinds of questions can obtain some interesting information. The challenge is interviewees try so hard to impress the interviewer they tend to say what they think the interviewer wants to hear, not necessarily how they would really do things.

The end result is the wrong person gets hired for the job, and you potentially spend months trying to fix them or they leave early in the process. Hiring the wrong person is very costly in productivity and recruiting cost.

**Hiring Criteria**
The starting point for any job search or selection process is to clearly define your hiring criteria. Look at others who do this job well, what is it about them that makes them successful? What schooling or degrees are needed? What job experience and how many years are needed? What is the right pay amount for this position? What are the critical success factors or knowledge, skills, abilities or personality traits that they need to have to be successful on the job. Part of the hiring criteria is fit with the job, company culture, pay, team and manager. Define the personality needed to best fit the job and work environment.

A good job analysis and clearly defined job description are good tools to help in this process.

You should also define non-negotiables, the critical job requirements everyone in this position must perform. For example, non-negotiables may include such things as the ability to lift 50 lbs regularly, to stand for long periods of time, work special shifts, work overtime, travel requirements and so on. For example, Walt Disney does not allow their employees to wear more than one earring, have showing tattoos or for men to wear beards.

**Behavioral Interviewing**
What is the best predictor of how someone will respond in the future? The answer, they are most likely to respond in the future, the same way they responded in the past. The key to effective interviewing then is to ask questions that get candidates to talk about real past job situations that are relevant to your hiring criteria.

Behavioral interview questions require candidates to share how they responded to past real life situations.

Behavioral interviewing is a process of asking pre-determined questions that require the candidate to answer based on how he or she handled things in the past. All other interviewing
approaches put you at risk that the candidate will simply tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear.

A behavioral question is an open-ended question that directs a candidate to provide behavioral evidence of the desired competency. Behavioral questions direct the candidate to focus on past situations where the desired competency would have been tested and require the candidate to paint a vivid, detailed picture of his/her performance in that situation. Candidates must recall what they did, said, and even thought in key situations. This type of question is different than the traditional interview question in that traditional interview questions ask candidates to imagine what they would do in hypothetical situations, not what they did in real events.

Behavioral questions begin with phrases like. ."Tell me about a time where..."., “Give me an example of a time when. .” or "Describe a situation where you. ." and help the interviewer gather information on four key areas:

1. The **Situation** where a desired skill was tested
2. The **Task** that required the desired skill
3. The **Action** the candidate took
4. The **Result** of that action

If I am hiring a Customer Service Representative and one of my hiring criteria competencies is the ability to resolve customer service challenges, I might ask the following behavioral interview question: Tell me about a time when you were confronted with an angry customer.

**Probing Questions**
Probes are additional open-ended questions that encourage the candidate to delve more deeply into the situation he/she is describing, and provide more detailed information on his/her performance in that situation. Examples of probes include, "What did you do next?" and "What were you thinking at that point?" Using the customer service question above, I might start out with the core question of how they handled the irate customer, then ask probing questions like: How did you get them to calm down? How did you resolve the problem? What was the end result?

**Conclusion**
In summary, you are more likely to hire the right person if you clearly define your hiring criteria, develop job-related behavioral interview questions in advance, and use probing questions to get the facts needed to determine if a candidate fits your hiring requirements. Ask the same questions of every candidate, listen carefully to their response and probe for more details as needed. Keep short, yet descriptive notes during the interview, to help you remember key facts needed to make your candidate selection.

**Written by:** Ken Spencer, SPHR, MHRM
President and Human Resources Consultant
HR Service, Inc.
Ken@HRServiceInc.com
(801) 685-8400

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