



INTERVIEWING PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES

—Douglas R. Kelley, PhD, CH, CSL

Upon Completion of this Segment, You Will Know:

- Why job descriptions are important and how to write them.
- How to conduct an effective interview.
- Three primary interview questions.
- Effective interview techniques and questions.
- Interview red flags.
- How to choose the right employee.
- The value of probationary periods.
- How to decline an applicant.

Look for people who will aim for the remarkable, who will not settle for the routine.

—David Ogilvy

It goes without saying that having the right employees can make or break your business. The quality of members you choose says a lot about your company, your department, and you. Your customers will definitely notice.

The quality of team member you choose will also determine the amount of inter-team issues and problems you'll experience. Poorly chosen employees will cause you unnecessary stress as well as cost time and money. In addition, they can decimate morale and the team spirit as well as upset customers. Disruptive members can create divisions by gossiping and back-biting that often serves to polarize other members of your team. Negative employees will suck the life energy right out of your group. All of this takes time for you to handle, which means that you may not have the time available for more important and necessary activities.

While it's not reasonable to expect zero problems with employees, it's obvious that better choices equal fewer problems. The hiring process including various legalities and is a course in and of itself and is beyond the scope of this material. However, the information that follows in this segment will provide a few tips on interviewing and inviting employees and is designed to help you make better choices. Of course, these tips must be used in the light of your company's policies and any local or

federal laws that apply. If you do not have hiring authority, save these tips for the day in which you can hire people.

JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Over the years of training thousands of managers, I am still surprised just how many employees—including managers—are working without a current and up-to-date job description. Job descriptions are necessary so that members know exactly what their roles are and what is expected of them. A job description is a printed agreement that keeps you and your employees on the same page and serves to minimize potential misunderstandings. Job descriptions are also necessary for conducting effective team member reviews (discussed in the next course, G381).

You likely already have a job description, but if not or if you need to develop job descriptions, the following tips are good to remember.

A job description is generally regarded as a legal document; therefore, any references to race, color, religion, age, sex, national origin or nationality, or physical or mental disability are illegal.

To create job descriptions for your team, first determine what positions you have or need. Once done, write a brief but detailed description for each of these positions. Generally speaking, you should include:

- Title of the position
- To whom the position directly reports (in most cases this will be the manager)
- General description of the position
- Specific duties and responsibilities (in order of general priority)
- Qualifications (necessary skills and experience required for the position)

When writing your job descriptions, use clear, specific, and measurable language. For example, “good communication skills” is too general of a statement. “Able to communicate in a clear, understandable, patient, and personable manner” is more specific. Another example of unclear and non-measurable language is, “Must show initiative.” While it sounds good on paper, you need to define what showing initiative means. A better version would be, “Must show initiative by performing tasks without supervision as well as creating more efficient methods of completing tasks whenever possible and warranted.”

Also, “tasks” are what the person does; “qualifications” are the skills necessary to accomplish those tasks. Be sure to emphasize higher priority items.

You will also want to include a “clause of elasticity” which is usually worded “all other duties as assigned,” or similar. While many employees hate to see this as the last line in a job description, it is absolutely necessary. In any business, there are often little things that need to be done and someone has to do them. Moreover, it would be impossible to “line-item” every little thing. The interesting aspect about this clause is that your star employees will embrace it but your less than desirable employees will complain about it. Any employee who doesn’t understand that someone has to do the mundane things and we all must take our turn is an employee who needs an exit strategy. On the other hand, be careful not to take undue advantage of this clause. If you significantly add to or change

the employee's job description after they've been hired without appropriate compensation, you *could* run into legal issues. Such a thing might be construed as a "bait-and-switch."¹

Once your job descriptions have been written, go over them with your members individually to make sure they understand them completely. Both you and they will sign two copies; they get one and the other copy goes into their personnel file.

SCREENING OPTIONS

Personality profiles are an option in providing more insight into the applicant's disposition. Profiles are available such as the *IMHS Behavioral Profile* (the same one offered in Course G140), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, and the DISC® Profile. An abbreviated version of the *IMHS Behavioral Profile* is presented a little later in this segment.

THE INTERVIEW

The interview is where you will gather the most important data concerning the applicant and, therefore, is the most important aspect of the application process. A successful interview happens when you ask good questions that elicit good answers. Generally speaking, you will allow the applicant to speak the most because he or she is answering your well thought out questions.

Many years ago I attended a seminar on effective hiring techniques at a convention in Las Vegas where I learned about three primary questions that the interviewer needs to ask and answer in his or her own mind during any interview. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the name of the speaker who presented these three questions and my efforts to locate him have proven unsuccessful. These three questions are: *Can they do the job? Will they do the job? And, do they fit my team?* Again, these questions are actually concepts that you must answer in your own mind by asking the applicant many other questions during the interview.

Without a doubt, the last question is the most important question of the three for you to answer. Some people *can* and *will* do the job, but they may not fit your team. So how do you know? Again, experience, keen insight, and good judgment will help, not to mention a good understanding of human nature. Think of your individual team members and their personalities when trying to answer the question of whether the applicant fits your team, and trust your gut instinct.

Effective Interviewing Techniques

The primary objective of the interview is for both you and the applicant to determine if there is a good fit between you, assuming the person is qualified for the position. Your half of this objective is to answer the questions, "Can they do the job? Will they do the job? And, do they fit my team?" To facilitate meeting this objective, following are some tips related to before and during the interview. Tips for after the interview including how to make a good decision are discussed a little later in this segment.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- **Schedule an appointment so that you won't have interruptions.**

¹ This statement is not to be viewed as legal advice. As with any important matter, always consult with your legal professional.

- **Mentally prepare.** Deliberately turn your attention toward the applicant and the questions you want to ask.
- **Review the application and résumé.** Get things fresh in mind.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- **Greet the applicant warmly and put him or her at ease.** Remember to make a good first impression. Use a conversational tone and tempo. This will do much to set the applicant at ease.
- **Build rapport** by making small talk in the beginning. This doesn't have to be extensive, but it will help the interview run smoother. Remember that the applicant is a human being, therefore, show appropriate interest in him or her as such.
- **Use positive body language and smile!** Make good eye contact, open body posture, and acknowledge what the applicant says with appropriate facial expressions.
- **Inform the applicant of the application process.** Let him or her know what to expect with this interview and beyond.
- **Review the application and job description.** Ask for clarification of any necessary items and make sure the applicant understands what his or her role will be.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a yes or a no; closed-ended questions can. Open-ended questions require the other person to expand and explain. An example of a closed-ended question would be, "Do you know how to use Microsoft Excel?" An open-ended version of this question would be, "How would you use Excel?" Additional interview questions are discussed below.
- **Listen, let them talk, and observe.** Once you've asked a question, shut up and listen; let the applicant complete his or her thought before proceeding. Pay close attention to word choice, voice tone, and body language. Your job as an interviewer is to ask questions, not talk too much.
- **Encourage the applicant to be open and honest.** This can largely be accomplished by your warm and inviting demeanor as well as your verbal invitation to express themselves openly.
- **Be flexible.** You may have your list of questions to ask, but you will undoubtedly have impromptu questions about things that come up during the interview. Don't be too rigid on the order of your question list. Just use it as a guide find out if the applicant will be a good fit for your team.
- **Avoid interruptions.** Don't allow anyone to interrupt your interview for any reason short of an emergency. Allowing interruptions (such as phone calls) is a show of disrespect.
- **Answer all the applicant's questions.** The interview process is a two-way street. After you've played the interviewer role, let the applicant assume this role. While you are trying to determine if the applicant is a good fit, he or she is trying to do the same thing (or should be). Therefore, sell yourself and your team.
- **Ask the applicant why he or she should be a member of your team.** This is the last question I ask and is one of the most important. Some people will be ready for this question, but many

won't. The way the applicant answers this question will help you to make a good decision. It says something if the applicant launches into a well verbalized answer, and it also says something if the applicant stumbles around searching for an answer to a question that he or she should have considered previously. One important note on this question: make sure you are also ready to answer why the applicant should join your team. It's unlikely that he or she will ask this question, but if so, it tells you that he or she is trying to make an informed decision. You want this. I immensely respect an applicant who has the self-confidence to ask me this question. In my opinion, it is probably the most important question he or she *can* ask.

- **Thank the applicant for his or her time and interest in joining your company.** Depending on a number of factors, you may or may not know at this point whether you want to invite the applicant to join your team. Decide what your next step will be and inform the applicant before parting. If you are still not sure whether he or she will be a good fit, you may want to schedule another interview for further discussion.

The Art of Effective Interview Questions

Again, the objective of the interview is to determine whether the applicant will be a good fit for your team. Therefore, you will need to consider and plan carefully which questions you'll need to ask to reach your objective.

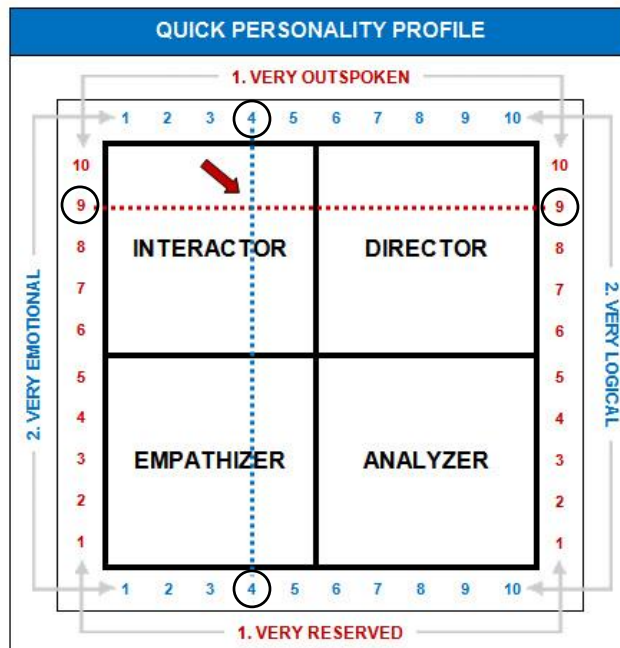
Following are a few sample interview questions in no particular order. While not an exhaustive list, it does outline some of the things you need to know about the applicant. You will need to augment these questions with specific questions of your own that relate to your team.

- Why are you interested in the _____ position?
- Why did you choose this company?
- What do you feel would be the most important qualifications for this position?
- What contribution would you most like to make to the field?
- What excites you most about people?
- What frustrates you most about people?
- Describe a situation at work that made you angry. How did you handle it?
- Where do you see yourself in 1 year? 3 years? 5 Years?
- What motivates you? (You could also use the *Confidential Employee Motivation Survey* in the *Resources* section on the course page).
- What would your spouse/partner/friend/family say is your greatest strength? What would you say is your greatest strength?
- What style of leadership/management would you most like to work with?
- How do you feel about ongoing training and personal development?
- Do you have any questions about the position, the department, or the company?
- Why should you be a member of my team?

Two additional questions will help you to perform a quick personality profile of the applicant. These two questions are fairly simple and will quickly let you know which of the four personality styles makes up his or her dominant style. These questions are based on the *IMHS Behavioral Profile* offered in Course G140. First the questions, and then the explanation:

EXAMPLE

- **Question 1:** Would those who know you best say that you are more outspoken or more reserved? On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being *very reserved* and 10 being *very outspoken*, which number do you think they would pick?
- **Question 2:** Would those who know you best say that you are more emotional or more logical? On a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 being *very emotional* and 10 being *very logical*, which number do you think they would pick?



The first question refers to the red vertical scale in the example on the right; the second question refers to the blue horizontal scale. Once you know the numbers, you can quickly determine the applicant's dominant style. For example, if the client gave 9 as the first number (red) and 4 as the second number (blue), you can quickly draw imaginary lines and see that those lines intersect in the "Interactor" quadrant (see the dotted lines in the example). This would make that quadrant the dominant one for the client. To determine the order in which the remaining quadrants apply, simply determine the order in which they are closest to where the lines intersect. In this example, the Director quadrant would be second, the Empathizer quadrant would be third and the Analyzer fourth. This makes sense because Interactors and Analyzers are polar opposites in style. The objective is for us to be balanced across all four quadrants.

Please refer to *IMHS Behavioral Profile* in Course G140: *Metaphysical Psychology* for a synopsis on the strengths and weaknesses of each quadrant.

Another interview technique is to ask an ethical dilemma question or scenario for which there may not be a "right" answer. This technique gauges the applicant's judgment, discernment, and discretion. You may have an example from your company or you could simply ask the applicant, "Describe an ethical dilemma that you had to deal with in your current or previous job. How did you handle it?"

Questions You Cannot Ask

In the U.S. (at least), there are a number of questions you cannot ask an applicant. Basically, you cannot ask about race, sex, religion, national origin, birthplace, age, disability, or marital/family status, among others. This can be a very confusing subject. On the course page, I have included a couple of resources that expand on what you can and cannot ask during an interview. You can do an online search for more resources. As always, inform the instructor if these links no longer work.

Interview Red Flags

During the interview, be observant and notice everything. Following are a few red flags that may indicate undesirable traits in the applicant. Bear in mind that some people interview well, and some people don't. This doesn't necessarily mean they are not qualified.

- **The applicant doesn't ask meaningful questions.** This implies a lack of depth and interest.
- **The applicant talks too much and/or interrupts you.** When a person talks too much, he or she is not listening; they are dominating the conversation. Bear in mind that during an interview, you are asking the questions and the applicant is answering (for the most part), but this doesn't necessarily mean that he or she talks too much. You can tell when a person is a talker because he or she goes way beyond simply answering your questions. If you invite someone who talks too much to be a member of your team, you *will* have misunderstandings with them and so will everyone else. Also bear in mind that some people might feel nervous during the interview which manifests in talking too much.
- **The applicant doesn't talk enough.** He or she only gives brief or vague answers to your questions, or is otherwise quiet and shy. This indicates poor communication skills which will only serve to strain team relationships. It could also indicate that the person is nervous. If this happens, ask the applicant to expand on the question to get a better feel as to whether he or she talks too little.
- **The applicant shows an interest in everything, but really doesn't know much about anything.** This could indicate a big talker who doesn't follow through.
- **The applicant doesn't really show a specific interest in anything in particular.** This may or may not be a problem. The applicant may be very interested in getting hired, but not have a strong desire to perform any particular position. He or she might be a good and reliable all-around person, or they might just be lazy.
- **The applicant is accommodating to an unhealthy degree.** Signs of this may manifest as an over-concern for your opinion and acceptance which implies neediness on the applicant's part. Needy members make unnecessary demands on your time and attention. But don't confuse an applicant's agreeable attitude with being overly accommodating.
- **The applicant appears to be too good.** Occasionally you'll get an applicant that just seems too perfect. He or she responds to every question with a perfect answer leading you to wonder where they've been all your life. Bear in mind that some people are especially adept at interviewing, but may not really be a good fit. Listen to your gut in these situations and set up a subsequent interview so that you can see if he or she is consistent. Continue further interviews until you can arrive at a good decision.
- **You have a "bad feeling" about this person.** Intuition is that intangible feeling we get when something is not known, and it can be good or bad. If you have an instinctively bad feeling about the applicant, try to determine why (steps in the next section will help). Make sure your bad feeling is not the result of an unhealthy bias of some kind on your part. If you cannot identify the basis for your bad feeling and subsequent interviews with the person don't change the way you feel, then it would probably be best to pass on inviting him or her to be a member. An old adage says, "When there is any doubt, there is no doubt." Statistically speaking, your gut feeling is correct just a little more often than not.

If you observe any red flags, you may want to schedule another interview to see if the red flag(s) continue. Do your best to fully evaluate the person for hiring keeping in mind that he or she wouldn't have applied if they didn't have at least some interest in the field. Your job is to determine the extent and depth of that interest and whether he or she has a place on your team.

NEGLIGENT HIRING

Negligent hiring is simply the failure to exercise good judgment and discretion when hiring an employee. This generally means that managers must not hire a person who may pose any type of threat to other employees, management, customers, or the public. This can obviously be tricky to determine. One website offers some additional advice:¹

Without the exercise of reasonable care in hiring, training, job assignments, and supervision of new employee, we can be held liable for negligence to parties injured by dishonest, unfit, or incompetent employees.

Negligence is the failure to exercise due care under circumstances where the legal duty to care is owed another. By not conducting adequate and appropriate reference background checks, we could unknowingly hire someone whose history indicates the possibility of endangering the property of lives of others. This might be held to be negligent hiring.

Courts expect employers to exercise due care, that is, all reasonable and legal steps to protect the organization, other employees, customers, and the general public. Reasonable and lawful steps we can take include:

1. Request conviction information, if related to ability to perform the specific job.
2. Check out gaps in the records; probe.
3. Check out unclear statements or answers.
4. Document all inquiries, including reference checks, in writing.
5. If an applicant volunteers that he/she was hospitalized for mental or emotional problems, pursue the matter.
6. Turn down applicants convicted of a crime or those with a history of injuring other people when they could possibly repeat their offence in a new job situation
7. If a person is on probation or on parole, talk with his/her probation or parole officer.

The bottom line is to use your own good judgment and discretion when interviewing applicants. Follow your company's policies, and conduct follow up interviews when you are unsure. Also conduct routine background checks on prospective employees.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT EMPLOYEE

At this point, you should have enough information about the applicant to make an informed decision. The final step is to review that information in the light of the second of the *Two Most Important Relationship Questions*. For the sake of convenience, that question again is, "What does the other

¹ http://www.andrews.edu/documents/employment/interview_instructions.pdf.

person bring to this relationship? What do they add? What do they subtract?” Reviewing this question can also help you to identify any negative gut feelings you may have about this person.

Make a T-Chart summarizing the pros and cons of what the applicant would bring to the table if a member, or use the *Two Most Important Relationship Questions Worksheet* in the *Resources* section on the course page. Give each item a “weight” by scoring it between 1 and 10, and then total each column. If the pros outweigh the cons, then you have determined that this applicant will add more than he or she will subtract, which means that this person will likely make a good team member. If, on the other hand, the cons outweigh the pros, you should pass on this person because he or she will likely take more than they will give.

Another way to look at this process is to ask, “Is there any reason why this person *should* be hired?” or, “Is there any reason why this person *should not* be hired?” If someone wants to join my team and I have a position open, I generally seek to find out if anything prevents the person from being hired. If I can’t identify any reasons why the applicant shouldn’t be hired, I extend an invitation. Just remember that red flags given in this segment like “won’t contribute” and/or “insufficient listening skills” are reasons that would prevent the person from joining.

To choose the right members, make sure they can and will do the job, are a good team fit, and will contribute more than they take. While nothing is foolproof, following these methods will generally stack the deck in favor of having top-notch employees who are serious and capable. It will also help you to avoid inviting members that only serve to drain you and your team of precious time and energy.

Probationary Period

All new employees should serve a probationary or trial period (such as 90 days). You likely already have this as part of your company policy. This gives you and the new hire a chance to “test the fit,” so to speak. A probationary period should also help you to verify or rule out any misgivings you may have had in the beginning. Be sure to continue the employee’s training and coaching during the probationary period.

Once the probationary period is finished, meet with the employee to review his or her performance. This is your opportunity to do one of two things: make him or her a permanent employee, or dismiss him or her.

A word of caution: I have heard countless stories in which the manager retained an employee beyond the probationary period even though that employee demonstrated difficult behavior and/or was otherwise not qualified. This often happened because the manager did not want to “hurt” the employee by putting him or her out of a job. While I understand the bad feelings associated to firing someone, you must do the right thing. If the employee does not qualify for the position during the probationary period, then what makes you think things will change once he or she has permanent status? Retaining a difficult employee beyond the probationary period will cause you grief—especially if you are in the public sector or are subject to a collective bargaining agreement where it can be very difficult to fire an employee. Also do not forget that it is the employee’s responsibility to make good on what he or she promised. If they do not perform as expected after they were informed of these expectations, they must bear responsibility for being fired. Generally speaking, a manager doesn’t really fire an employee. The employee fires him- or herself for not meeting expectations. The manager just makes it official.

Declining an Applicant

Most companies have pre-determined protocols when declining a job applicant. Please consult your Human Resources (HR) department.

If you do not have an applicant rejection protocol, then less is more. In other words, be careful of what you say otherwise you might face legal ramifications. Many, if not most, companies have a policy that doesn't allow the manager to share the reasons why a person wasn't hired. Please consult legal counsel in your country for more information.

When rejecting an applicant, you may choose to call the person on the telephone, but you should also send a letter so that it is documented. Here is a brief example of a rejection letter that you can mail that doesn't reveal anything other than your decision to not hire him or her:

Dear [Applicant's first name],

Thank you for applying for the [POSITION] at [YOUR COMPANY NAME].

Unfortunately, we are unable to offer you the position.

We deeply appreciate your time and interest and we wish you our very best.

[Your name/title]

When declining the applicant on the telephone, if he or she gets emotional or angry, then it only underscores that you made the right decision. Don't allow yourself to get drawn into any kind of an emotional and lengthy conversation. Inform him or her of your decision and politely end the conversation.

Turnover

Turnover can be high depending on the nature of the position for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the fit just turns out to be wrong regardless of how the interview went. Sometimes people just grow in different directions, they move out of the area, or they have life changes that prevent them from continuing.

Turnover will always be around for many reasons, but you can minimize it greatly by making better decisions on who you hire as well as showing good leadership.



Again, this segment is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of hiring employees. It is intended to suggest some additional thoughts and tips related to the hiring and interviewing process.

Your next step is to complete the assignment and quiz for this course, then move on to the Course G381 to complete your Certified Leading Professional (CLP) certification.