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**Five Secrets To Successful Interviewing and Hiring**

**By Karen O'Keefe**

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The technical communications profession involves a unique mix of technical and communication skills, which is not easy to find. Most managers have had the experience of interviewing and subsequently hiring a candidate who later turns out not to be the right person for the job. This situation begs the question of how to identify which candidate is a good fit for a given position. The answer is that there are five key activities that make the difference between a successful hiring decision and a not-so-successful one. We have all been on both sides of the interview, and this article will attempt to make you, the interviewer, more successful.

This article covers five key activities, including:

1. Writing a detailed job description
2. Making sure the setting/environment is conducive
3. Conducting a programmed interview
4. Using multiple interviewers
5. Considering testing

**WRITING A DETAILED JOB DESCRIPTION**

Probably the biggest mistake managers make is to be under-prepared, from the moment they write the job description. Because the job description encapsulates requirements for a given position, you must first have a good grasp of what the position entails, from personality traits to knowledge to skills and experience.

You may include any of the following qualifications in a job description:

- \* Years of experience (for example, three years of technical editing in a DoD environment)
- \* Degrees, certifications (for example, B.A. in English or Journalism)
- \* Physical qualifications (for example, a Web-design position might require color vision)
- \* Personality traits (for example, excellent communication skills or attention to detail)

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\* Specialized skills or knowledge (for example, ability to write JavaScript)

Ultimately, the job description is the inspiration for any subsequent interview, so defining the position in detail up front will make finding the right person for the job much easier. Plus, it will help the candidate understand whether the job is right for him or her.

### MAKING SURE THE SETTING/ENVIRONMENT IS CONDUCIVE

The setting in which an interview takes place is important and can make the difference between a good interview experience and a bad one. The candidate deserves your full attention and you will be better able to make a decision if you are fully engaged without distractions. Make sure that, at a minimum, your setting entails the following:

\* **Quiet:** Set your phone to "Make Busy" and do not take phone calls or allow interruptions. Make sure you are in a quiet place (for example, an office with a closed door or a conference room). If you are sitting behind your desk, move away from your PC and turn its volume to mute.

\* **Comfort:** Show the candidate where the restrooms are and offer coffee or water if appropriate. If you have a drink, make sure you offer one to your candidate. Offer to take the candidate's coat or identify a coat hook/rack.

\* **Time:** Adhere to your schedule. If you are interviewing more than one candidate and/or have other meetings scheduled around the interview, make sure one appointment does not overlap the next. Neither of you should be forced to rush through the interview.

\* **Information:** Give your business card to the candidate, so he or she does not have to struggle for your name and will have your name/address handy when writing a thank-you note.

\* **Invitation:** Invite the candidate to sit down. Where the person sits will tell you a great deal, and this will make the person feel more comfortable.

The environment can make the difference between a good interview and a bad one. I once interviewed in an office that was once a closet. The four interviewers sat on the edge of the desk, while I sat considerably below them in a chair. It was intimidating to say the least and it taught me a lot about candidate comfort.

### CONDUCTING A PROGRAMMED INTERVIEW

A programmed interview involves defining questions up front, along with acceptable answers, which will tell you whether a candidate possesses each of the qualifications for a given job. One important caveat: consult with your personnel department or manager and make sure you understand the EEOC guidelines as well as the kinds of questions you can and cannot legally ask. To conduct a programmed interview:

\* Develop a list of standard questions you will ask all candidates.

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- \* Make sure your questions are open-ended, but limited in scope. (For example, "tell me about a time you had conflicting comments in a document review and how you resolved it" or "tell me about a time you had a tight deadline and you were asked to increase the scope of a document.")
- \* Identify a list of minimum acceptable answers. (For example, acceptable answers to the previous question might be "I would schedule a meeting with both reviewers and try to reach a consensus" or "I would work to gain a better understanding of both comments and identify a solution that would work for all parties.")
- \* Ask a negative question so you can see how the person handles stress and conflict (for example, "tell me about a situation where you failed" or "tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss").
- \* At the most, you should talk only 25–30% of the time. By mostly listening and observing, you will gain maximum information about each candidate.
- \* Leave time for the candidate to ask questions. You will see whether the person is prepared and/or

took time to research your company. A candidate who does not ask questions probably did not prepare adequately for the interview.

- \* Observe each candidate. Ask yourself whether each has a business-like presentation and whether they look the part of the job. I also like to see how well they can articulate their role on a given project. It is a bad sign when candidates seem unfamiliar with their own work.

As important as the tangible requirements are for the job, so are the intangible ones. Look for a firm handshake, direct eye contact, professional bearing, and appropriate clothing.

Understanding how to ask questions is very important and there are numerous references on the subject. Years ago, I was asked during an interview whether I planned to have more children. Of course, the question was an illegal one, but a surprising number of people still manage to ask similar questions. Being prepared and informed is the best way to avoid these pitfalls.

### USING MULTIPLE INTERVIEWERS

Having more than one person interview a candidate increases your perspective. What you may see and what someone else may see can be quite different. When you are trying to choose between two very good candidates, a second or third opinion will make the decision more clear. You might consider having any of the following participate:

- \* Technical personnel (perhaps an engineer or programmer who may act as a subject matter expert)
- \* Other department staff (co-workers can provide excellent feedback as to whether they will feel comfortable with the candidate)
- \* Personnel staff

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Although you may be the person with the ultimate hiring authority, you will find it very useful to be able to talk each candidate over with other people. You may find that they like a candidate you did not or vice-versa. In general, consensus hiring will produce better results than a unilateral hiring decision, so take their feedback seriously.

One manager I interviewed for this article uses a weighted system when considering a candidate: 30% skills, 30% personality, and 40% business-like presentation. In my own experience, the latter two are the greatest predictors of a candidate's success. When candidates don't work out, the reason tends to involve how they handle conflict or how well they communicate. You will, of course, need to develop your own system.

### CONSIDERING TESTING

Although I have not yet used a test for candidates, I have certainly taken them as part of a job application and I am considering using them in the future. You cannot be sure the candidate shows you work they have actually done, but you will be able to see their work if you give them a test. Many companies develop their own tests. You may consider anything from a personality profile to a writing and/or editing test.

### IN CONCLUSION

There is no boilerplate method or template that you can apply directly to your department, group, or company. However, you can use this process as a model to develop your own process, guidelines, and interview questions. What you look for and what someone else looks for in a candidate are likely to be quite different. But by developing a process, defining the position, and nailing down your questions well in advance before interviewing candidates, you vastly increase the likelihood of a successful hiring decision.

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### **I Don't Need A Resume - I Can Tell Them What I Do When I Get There**

**By Ann Baehr**

Gone are the good old days when you could walk in off the street and speak with the hiring manager for a competitive position. Although some companies still operate that way, a resume is usually required first.

Pretend for a moment that you are a hiring manager. The receptionist knocks on your office door and announces that Mr. Smith has arrived to interview for the currently advertised pharmaceutical sales representative position. Baffled, the hiring manager states that there must be a misunderstanding because she never scheduled Mr. Smith for an interview. She instructs the receptionist to tell Mr. Smith to forward his resume and cover letter to express his interest in the company and the position.

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Some people might think the hiring manager should have interviewed Mr. Smith since he showed an effort to apply for the position. Others would have done exactly what the hiring manager did. Why? Because she didn't know anything about this candidate. She would have been unprepared to address his qualifications without having had the opportunity to review his resume beforehand. What's more, she really didn't understand what his situation was or if he even qualified for the job. For example, does he have a required bachelor's degree? Does he have sales experience? Is his background in bio chemistry, pharmaceuticals or in medical equipment sales? Is he a job-hopper? Was he out of work for many years? Is he changing careers? Did he recently relocate? These are all very important factors to consider when trying to paint a picture of a candidate to get a feel for who they are and how they would be a good fit for the company.

This is why it is so important that a resume is sent first so that the hiring manager can PRE-QUALIFY a jobseeker. This saves a lot of time and hurt feelings. After all, why would the hiring manager want to spend a half hour interviewing a candidate that does not qualify for the position? If every unqualified candidate showed up unannounced and was interviewed, there wouldn't be time to interview the qualified candidates! Believe it or not, there are still occasions when a resume is not needed. But, that is only when a company invites applicants to fill out a job application form or if there is a mutual acquaintance who puts in a good word for the candidate, and the hiring manager schedules and interview without needing to see a resume. Keep in mind, the hiring manager has been introduced already by the mutual acquaintance who has done the job that the combination of a resume and cover letter -- the dynamic duo -- is intended to do: to introduce them to the reader and to provide a professional background and expressed interest in a company and a particular position.

Ann Baehr is a CPRW and President of Best Resumes of New York. Notable credentials include her former role as Second Vice President of NRWA and contribution to 25+ resume and cover letter sample books. To learn more visit



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