

Interviewing for the Right Skills

“Success in any business is 85% ability to relate to other people and attitude and only 15% job knowledge and technical skills.”

Carnegie Foundation, 2005

Recruiting is one of the most important managerial tasks. Meeting candidates provides the best chance to gain information about their skills and experience, and to match the right person to the job and organization. George Haines, in his article on succession planning (*APIWA Reporter*, September 2006), says that to develop a great team, “you need to recruit and hire not only good people, but the *right* people.”

Interviews are a basic screening method that can be complicated and time-consuming. The higher the level of the position, the more complex the interview process.

There are three major items to look for in the interview process: hard skills, talent, and soft skills.

Hard skills are easily defined, while soft skills are not. Hard skills include technical abilities such as education, certifications, licenses, specialization, and experience.

In his book *First, Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Marcus Buckingham says, in addition to the standard interview questions, one should interview for talent. This is to discover if the candidate’s patterns of thought, feeling or behavior match the job and organization’s. “Great managers, select for talent. . .not simply experience, intelligence or determination.”

Talent may be

- Attitude,
- Drive,
- Personal charm,
- Verbal skills,
- Poise,
- Sense of humor,
- Smile,
- Self-confidence, and
- Integrity.

Talent cannot be taught. Talent makes clear the *why* of a person (drive), the *how* of a person (how they think), and the *who* of a person (how they relate). Talents are unique and long lasting traits. As Buckingham says, “*People don’t change that much.*”

Soft Skills or “People Skills”

Each person has a combination of hard and soft skills. Hard skills are documented on a résumé; soft skills are confirmed in an interview.

Hard skills, talent, and soft skills are distinct elements of a person’s performance. Combined, these elements create employee potential. When a candidate’s work experience, education and other hard skills are equal, the candidate with the best soft skills will get the job.

To assess someone’s soft skills, one must meet them. Remember the phrase—“Works and plays well with others”? That is a critical soft skill, there are many more, all of which are important for any job.

What are soft skills? Many are related to people (or interpersonal) skills. These are the more prominent:

- Effective listening,
- Accountability,
- Assertiveness,
- Time management,
- Delegation,
- Goal setting,
- Team building,
- Stress management,
- Problem solving,
- Motivation,
- Leadership,
- Interviewing,
- Effective communications, and
- Managing resources

The above soft skills can be categorized into four basic groups:

- Problem solving,
- Communication,

- Personal qualities and work ethic, and
- Interpersonal and teamwork.

What are employers looking for? Employers seek a mixture of skills and experience, but they consistently look for soft skills.

A recent study by the Center for Creative Leadership concluded that an estimated 40% of all new managers fail within the first 18 months. The most cited reason was a lack of soft, or people, skills.

As people move along their career path, experience and knowledge that they've gained through their most recent job tends to determine the next career move. Hard skills help to land a job; however, over time, these hard skills may become outdated.

So how does one prepare for interview with a prospective employee or prepare for a new position? Some examples of questions to use:

Problem Solving

- What are the critical factors you look for in evaluating other's work?
- Describe a situation in where you did a good job analyzing a problem and rectifying it.
- Describe a situation where you had to solve a problem without having all the information. What did you do and what happened?

Communications

- Describe a time when you said something wrong. What happened?
- What is your experience dealing with the poor performance in subordinates?
- In the past, how have you had dealt with irate citizens?



Teamwork

- Describe the types of teams you have worked on. What worked well and what did not?
- Discuss a time when there were problems getting others to work together. How did you handled it?

Interpersonal Skills

- Describe how you developed relationships with others when you were new on your current job.
- Describe a time when you had problems with a supervisor and had to communicate them. What did you do and what happened?
- When working with coworkers or citizens, what really tries your patience and how do you cope?

These questions are geared towards soft skills; normally not included on a résumé. Keep questions open ended, require candidates to give answers which may reveal their soft skills. These questions require a story in response. When being interviewed, remember, the interviewer is looking for personal accounts, not the “textbook” answer.

Source:
Sterling, William A. Sterling, *The Baker's Potluck* APWA Reporter, P.E.,
January 2007. p. 21-23

Sometimes, A Conversation is More Meaningful

Email has its advantages. Such as the ability to reach people without having to find them.

However, email has taken over and often communication would be better face-to-face or by telephone. How often does one change what they will say next because of the reaction to their last statement?

Would a problem with a customer be better handled if the customer's response was immediate? The nuance of the spoken voice includes information often missed with electronic communication.

According to NYU's Stern School of Business, as few as half of recipients get the tone or intent of an email. And most people “vastly overestimate” their ability to relay and comprehend messages accurately

At Syracuse University, they say misinterpretation is highest when the email comes from the boss.