Strategies for Successful Hiring: Common Sense Interviewing Techniques

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Abstract
Dowling College faculty librarians, working in a team-based department, have developed an almost foolproof interview protocol to use with job applicants. After analyzing the requirements and necessary skills for the open position, they create open-ended questions that are then asked of each candidate. The streamlined procedure facilitates the interview, ensures fairness to the candidates, and improves the process.

Introduction
With the explosion of part time employment, few benefits, and little loyalty, turnover is a fact of life in libraries today. The Library Department of Dowling College is comprised of a strong self-managed team. As such, the faculty librarians all participate in the interviewing of candidates for all open full and part-time librarian positions.

It became apparent that little standardization not only flawed the interview process but resulted in both poor candidate screening and clouded decision-making. The department analyzed the job requirements, identified the skills and talents necessary to successfully fulfill the requirements, and developed an interview protocol.

The much-improved process is no longer dependent on questions formulated by an individual or personality-driven. The librarians have created a win-win situation. Not only is using the same questions for each candidate fair, but also any mix of interviewers can participate and elicit the same reliable results. Interviewees have praised the system, declaring the interviews the most thorough and challenging they have experienced; and the improved process has created a neutral environment ensuring the selection of the best candidates for the job.

This paper will discuss the critical success factors for the development of a successful interviewing document, important aspects to consider, techniques to use, and elements to avoid. Discussion will focus on the best practices to use to ensure the selection of the best candidate for the job.

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**Strategies for Successful Hiring**

**Discussion**
We have all experienced the joys and traumas of the interviewing process. As the interviewee, you want to put your best foot forward. You want the interviewer to recognize that you are eminently qualified for the job AND you want to determine if the potential job would, indeed, be a good working environment for you. Are these colleagues with whom you can work, thrive, and develop professionally or would it be a stifling, controlling situation?

As the interviewer, you have similar concerns. You want to uncover the best candidate with appropriate skills, talents, intelligence, professionalism, compatibilities, and diversity.

When you hire someone for a job, you make a commitment to that person. The interview must enable you to ferret out that individual to whom you are willing to make that commitment. How can all of this be accomplished in the simple interview which we all know to be a flawed experience? With both sides on their best behavior, how can one get a true sense of what it will be like to work with the individual from a 30-minute interview? At Dowling College we developed a protocol using a standardized question format that has been quite effective in streamlining and improving the interview and hiring process. By creating a series of interview questions used for each personnel opening, we are now able to compare responses to the same question and make more reasoned judgments on the best candidate for the job. The process is no longer personality-driven and any combination of committee members can conduct the interview with reliable results.

The standardized question approach uses open-ended questions that are devised to get the candidate talking. In the brief time you have with the candidate you want as much evidence as you can unearth to determine if the person has the skills needed for the job to be done. What are the compatibilities and inconsistencies? What is the skill level? What are the red flags? Determining all of this is hard to do in the few minutes together. The interviewer must be astute, alert, and look for clues. I once hired someone who gave all the right answers...BIG mistake! When I pointed out the candidates superb answers to a very wise man, he asked, “Did she have all the right answers or know all the right answers?” There is, indeed, a difference.

**Process**
Before developing your questions, you must analyze and identify the requirements for the job. What are the areas of concern? What skills are needed? What are the necessary qualifications? What are your priorities? Then you have to create a few questions that will best evoke the type of information about that qualification for each area. For instance, we have a list of areas that we consider important enough to be included in the interview process:

- Communication, Customer service, Decision making, Education, Electronic resources
- Evaluation skills, Experience, Flexibility, Information literacy, Interpersonal skills, Leadership, Motivation, New job, People-orientation, Pressure, Public service, Reference service, Responsibility, Staff interaction, Strengths & weaknesses, Teaching skills, Teamwork, Tenure, Training/presentations, Work history

Some possible questions might be:

_Tell us about an incident in which you dealt with a difficult customer._ This would elicit answers about customer service as well as reasoning and decision making.

_You have been assigned to work collaboratively on a project with a colleague who consistently turns in incomplete assignments and either doesn’t do some of the work or fails to complete the work. What will you do?_ Since we work closely as a team, we want to get an idea about how the individual would work in such an environment. Answers to this question would demonstrate people skills and how the person deals with working under pressure.

_How would you evaluate a new database?_ An answer to this question would give us an idea of the individual’s evaluation skills and familiarity with databases.

_What can a peer do to enhance or reduce your motivation?_ This is another teamwork/people skills question that would demonstrate style.

_Give us an example of when written communication with colleagues was better than verbal communication and vice versa._ This question is meant to address communication and reasoning skills which are very important to us.
Each of the above questions provides an opportunity for the interviewee to elaborate and expound on the subject, and reveal something of him/herself.

We give each interviewer a set of questions (see Figure 1) with enough space to write the answers. That way, the committee has something to which it can refer after the interview. When making up the list, you should identify each section but don’t reveal the heading to the candidate. Although this seems elementary, you must remember that the interview is an unnerving setting, and there were times that we had interviewers tell the candidate just what answers we were seeking. If you want to expose what the candidate truly thinks, you don’t want to give him a heads-up that you are asking a question about customer service skills or his decision making capabilities.

Experiential Component
We include an experiential component in each interview. The available position determines the content of this interview section. If it is for a part-time reference librarian position, it will consist of a database related exercise and a mini-Information Instruction session. If it is for a full-time faculty position, it will be a full-fledged teaching session. In addition, all candidates for a faculty position are asked to prepare some answers to a set of scenario questions that are tailored to the specific position available. These are all designed to get a better sense of the person’s capabilities.

Some examples are:

You have limited funds remaining in the serials budget that you must spend by the end of the fiscal year. You need to make a decision between buying 10 years of microfilm for a heavily used journal, or beginning a new subscription that a professor says she really needs for her class. How would you choose?

Describe how you would prioritize a number of requests [given].

You are working at the Reference Desk when a faculty member walks up to the desk and asks for a reference book. You have handed the work to a student not more than five minutes earlier. Given the nature of the student’s question, the student will be using the book for an hour or more. You explain to the faculty member that someone is using the material and an alternate resource might fill the need. The professor insists that only that book will do and “Please, get it now or point out the user to me and I will get the book myself.” The student is blissfully reading, the professor is fuming, and you are alone on the Reference Desk. What are you going to do?

Interview Techniques
Our department works closely as a team and we are all involved in the interview process. An interview with us will include the candidate and most of the members of the department. We conduct the interview as a round robin of questions with each committee member taking turns asking questions from one of the sections from the question sheet. Thus, the candidate has an experience with each member of the committee and no one person dominates the time.

Phone interviews are particularly tricky. Because the candidate cannot read one’s body language, it is especially important to put the interviewee at ease and help him/her feel comfortable. For a phone interview we use the same technique but are careful to identify ourselves every step of the way. In the beginning, we will each introduce ourselves and, as the interview
progresses, each questioner will identify him/herself once again to the candidate.

**Red Flags**
Always try to look for the red flags when doing an interview. If the person is already asking for special considerations, will this person be willing to conform to your procedures? If everyone is referred to by *Mr.* or *Mrs.*, the chances are great that it will be a formal place to work. Will this person be a good fit? Will the person have a commitment to customer service? How knowledgeable is the candidate? What skills does the candidate have? Will the candidate embody your work ethic? How rule-bound is the candidate? Does the candidate understand policy? Is the person going to stir up trouble? How will his/her personality fit with his/her colleagues? How proactive is this person? Etc., etc., etc. After a while one learns to trust one’s instincts on this but it is important that the committee compare impressions and listen to each member’s comments. Since it is a *job* for which one is interviewing, *not* a social club, it is essential that the person being hired be able to fulfill the job requirements. It is also important to respect and encourage diversity among your employees. A department of clones will not best serve the college, its students or the department.

**Handout**
In order to ensure clarity of communication, we not only specify what the job entails, but we provide the candidates with a printed handout of the information so they can read and take home a copy. This is especially necessary for our part-time positions since there is less day-to-day contact with these individuals and, thus, more opportunity for misunderstandings. We want them to have the information about hours, expectations, responsibilities, and benefits before they accept a position. After they are hired, they are given a copy of our detailed reference manual to read.

**Ads**
In your ads, include the significant requirements of the position. Don’t waste the time of either the interviewee or the interviewers by excluding specifics. If it is a part-time job with weekend hours, say so. If the job requires web design, state it. Do the same when you are setting up an interview with the candidate. Review what the job description is and the hours are *before* bringing the person on campus. Interviews are time consuming for both the candidate and the committee, so don’t waste precious time by not being forthright with the candidate.

**Recommendations**
It is vital that one check the recommendations. Although this sounds obvious, it is not. Try to get a sense from the recommender how the candidate will fit with your organization. Just because s/he did/not work out in one place does not mean s/he will/not work in another. Remember, each situation is unique and your environment may be just the right situation in which the candidate will be able to flourish.

How committed to your organization will the candidate be? Remember that each new employee requires training. That translates into costing the organization both time and money. You want to hire someone who will stay, at least for a while.

**Conclusion**
Having a *canned* set of questions ready when one has to interview candidates will help streamline the interviewing process. Not only will the search committee be addressing all of the areas that the department believes to be essential for the candidate and the job, but each candidate will be asked the same question and it will be much easier for the committee to compare candidates.

A set interview protocol also relieves the committee members of the burden of having to be at each and every interview. The committee members understand that each candidate will have the benefit of the same questions. Because any member of the committee is able to administer the set of questions, getting ready for an interview is less onerous. The time-intensive preparation is spent on the front end of the committee work, not the back end.

And finally, a set interview protocol ensures the fairness of the process. Each candidate is judged by the same criteria and has the same opportunity to shine or not with the same interview questions.

Since we have been using this interview protocol, our new hires have been better prepared. Because they have been forewarned about our expectations of them,
there have been fewer complaints and turnover has decreased significantly. After the interview, most say it has been one of the toughest and one of the best interviews they have had. We learn a lot about them; they learn a lot about us; and they learn a lot about themselves.

Bibliography


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