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Hiring Right

Use behaviour descriptive interviewing to hire the right person for the job.

FROM: MAY-JUN 2005 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

You've been there — a key employee moves to another department, or, even worse, quits, and you're left with the tasks of recruiting, interviewing, and finally hiring a replacement. If you're lucky, the whole process will take a minimum of three weeks, but more often than not, it takes six weeks, or longer. In the meantime, things limp along — you get other staff to pick up some of the key activities, some you do yourself, and all the while you hope that nothing critical falls through the cracks.

Eventually you fill the position and everyone breathes a huge sigh of relief. That is, until you begin to get a niggling feeling that perhaps you didn't hire the right person for the job. Aside from the frustration factor, you're keenly aware that not making the hiring decision correctly the first time costs time and money. In fact, depending on who you listen to, it can cost anywhere from 30 per cent to 150 per cent of an annual salary to recruit and hire a new employee. At an average salary of \$50,000 per year, that translates to anywhere from \$15,000 to \$75,000 wasted if you don't hire the right person the first time.

"Interviewing is a crapshoot," says one manager. "Potential candidates tell you what you want to hear and you do not really get a good assessment of an employee's skills until you get them into a work environment." While it is true that internships and probationary periods are a good way to assess an employee's abilities, you *can* tell a lot about a person's capabilities and potential from an interview, provided you know how to conduct one properly.

Enter behaviour descriptive (BD) interviewing: a successful technique that is proven to achieve significantly better results than more traditional forms of interviewing. This approach, first popularized by Dr. Tom Janz in the mid-'80s, is based on the premise that past behaviour is an indicator of future results. BD interviewing consists of five basic steps:

1. Determining core competencies for the job
2. Designing behaviour descriptive questions to assess for the core competencies
3. Screening résumés for a first assessment for the core competencies
4. Conducting the interviews
5. Evaluating the interviews

Core Competencies

Your objective in this first step is to determine what skills — technical, interpersonal, organizational, problem-solving — are necessary for the successful completion of this job. Perform a mini job audit: list the specific

duties relating to this position, who the person will need to interact with, any formal training required, and other skills needed. Ask other employees to help you determine the answers.

Your audit will help you come up with a list of core competencies. Some possibilities are: teamwork, leadership, communication, business focus, creativity, attitude, attention to detail, conflict resolution, ability to multi-task, customer service skills, judgment, and the ability to apply learning. If you identify more than five or six core competencies, you have too many, as it will make the interview process unmanageable.

Behaviour Descriptive Questions

When composing BD interview questions, rather than asking "what if" questions, ask "what did you do?" questions. Traditional interviews often ask hypothetical questions such as: "What would you do if a team member was not contributing his or her fair share of work to a project?" Candidates usually describe how they would react and offer responses that they think the interviewer wants to hear. In other words, they fake their responses.

Compare that to asking the candidate about a specific situation already encountered: "Can you tell me about a specific time when you were working on a project and one of your team members was not contributing fully?" To answer this question (assuming that the candidate is not lying), the potential employee has to describe what he or she actually did: these prior behaviours can be used as reasonable predictors of future performance. Here are some examples:

- Leadership: We are sometimes called upon to demonstrate leadership by bringing differing opinions together. Can you relate an incident where you were called upon to do this?
- Attention to detail: Describe a particularly complex project or assignment that you had to work on.
- Conflict resolution: People work at different speeds and have different priorities. Tell me about a frustrating experience when you had to work with someone whose pace or priorities were significantly different from yours.

Plan on having at least two questions for each core competency. You'll probably only use one, but it's always a good idea to have a backup question in case one really stumps the candidate.

Screening Résumés

If you are fortunate, you'll get an overwhelming response to your recruiting effort (if you don't, that's a subject for another column). You're then faced with sorting through the stack of résumés on your desk. You need a scoring system. Determine in advance what factors you want to evaluate in the résumés — these could include education, experience, and overall appearance, including the cover letter, organization of the résumé, spelling, and grammar — and assign a point system to each. For example, for an intermediate accounting position, you might decide to assign education points as follows:

- Completed CGA — 3 points
- 4th level CGA or higher — 2 points
- Less than 4th level — 1 point
- Not enrolled in program — 0 points

For the same position, you might choose to assign experience points as follows:

- More than two years experience in a similar position — 5 points
- Less than two years experience in a similar position — 4 points

- Work experience, but not in a similar position — 2 points
- No work experience — 0 points

Your system will be unique to the position you are filling, but having a system is key. Don't use "gut feeling" and intuition to evaluate résumés; that is how most managers get taken in by style over substance.

Your objective should be to have no more than six potential candidates for any job. Six interviews is a full day's worth of work, and trust me, you really don't want to take on any more.

Conducting the Interview

To properly conduct BD interviews, you need to set aside at least 45 minutes for each candidate. Think of the actual interview as having three phases: the opening, the questioning-probing, and the closing.

In the opening phase, spend a few moments putting the candidate at ease. Offer the prospective employee coffee or water, and make small talk for a few minutes. Explain the process, as many candidates are not familiar with BD interviewing. Say "I'll be asking you to think of specific situations from your past experience, and it's okay to take a few minutes to think of a response." Let them know that you'll be taking notes.

In the questioning-probing portion, ask your questions and let the candidate talk. Silence on your part can be a very effective tool for eliciting meaningful responses from candidates. Take notes. Be sure to probe initial answers with questions such as: "So what did you do then?" "And how did he respond?" "What was the result?" This is where the real value of BD questions becomes evident. It is true that candidates can fake responses to BD questions just as they can responses to traditional interview questions; however, when you probe effectively, you'll discover whether the responses are descriptions of actual events, or just concocted to give you the answer the candidate thinks you want to hear.

In the closing phase, let the candidate know the next steps and when they can expect a decision. Thank them, and either show them out, or have someone show them out.

Evaluating the Interviews

Immediately after each interview, score each core competency from 1 to 5 based on your notes. Do not wait until all the interviews are finished. This will ensure that your evaluation is based on fresh impressions, and not influenced by things that may have happened later. But don't add up the scores until you are finished all the interviews.

Once the interview process is complete, total the points for each candidate, determine who has the highest score, and make the job offer. Your probability of success with this new employee is significantly higher than it would have been if you had used traditional interviewing techniques.

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