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INTERVIEWING TO KNOW THE *REAL* PERSON: GETTING INSIDE CANDIDATES' HEADS AND HEARTS

By Paul Falcone

Getting to really know candidates in the pre-employment process is getting trickier and trickier these days and “piercing the veil” of the candidate façade is both an art and a science. But what is it that you’re really looking for as a hiring manager in the candidates you interview? And what should job candidates come to expect from you—the steward and guardian of the law firm where they’d like to work? Maybe it’s time to simplify the interviewing process so that the interview itself becomes an exercise of value rather than a game of wits, strategies, and defenses that simply provides gateway access into your firm.

Engaging Their Minds and Their Hearts

The key to this kind of simpler, more open interviewing style lies in engaging candidates’ hearts as well as their minds. And you’ll know that you’ve pierced their hearts when they say something like, “Well, I normally wouldn’t say this in an interview, but I feel comfortable telling you . . .” Even without that spontaneous moment of full disclosure, you’ll still get so much more from each interview if you’re willing to ask questions that help candidates learn from the process, think about their own priorities and longer term career goals, and articulate—right on the spot—why the position you’re offering may make sense for them in terms of building their careers.

The questions that follow will serve as a roadmap for building immediate rapport and goodwill and for turning your current interviewing style – no matter how sophisticated it may be – into a more open and honest dialogue that focuses just as much on the candidate’s needs as on the needs of your law firm. After all, almost all candidates meet the technical requirements of a position by the time

they come in for a face-to-face interview. What helps you distinguish the most suitable individual for your firm or department will ultimately be based on a personality match and immediate rapport as well as a compatible business style that complements your firm’s corporate culture and unique personality.

Understand the Candidate’s Real Reason for Leaving their Current Firm

The reason for leaving past positions serves as the link in a candidate’s career progression. It, more than anything, gives you an understanding of the individual’s values, motivations, and career goals. Each reason for leaving a prior company should be fulfilled by the next company on the individual’s resume. That’s how people build careers and justify the chain of jobs they’ve held: they look for greater responsibilities, increases in titles, new technical skills, lateral experience to broaden their perspective, and sometimes compensation and an equity opportunity. Candidates who successfully articulate how these various factors have led to this point in their career add a contextual and historical framework to what you see on their resume.

What’s critical now is the individual’s current reason for leaving his or her present job. Can joining your firm fulfill that reason? Does your opportunity make sense for the individual over the long term? If not, the candidate may be pursuing a strategy of “change for change’s sake,” which will typically lead to premature turnover.

Simply stated, you need to know where a candidate is coming from. It’s your responsibility during the interview and through reference checks to really understand the

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individual's motivation for joining your team and leaving his or her present or former firm behind. To gain a better understanding of where a candidate's head is during an initial interview, ask: "What's your primary reason for leaving your current/previous firm and how would joining us fill that need?" Likewise, you could ask, "What would joining our firm do for you in terms of building your resume over the long term?" As an alternative, try this: "If you were to accept this position with us today, how would you explain it to a prospective employer five years from now? In other words, how would this job provide a link in your future career progression?"

For those employed candidates who may be considering a lateral move into your law firm, be sure and ask, "What would have to change at your current organization for you to consider staying?" Similarly ask, "What would be your next move in career progression if you stayed put?" along with the follow-up question, "And how long would it take you to get there?" In essence, you'll be asking the candidate to articulate out loud what's driving the need to change firms, what's important at this point in his or her career, and why your firm makes sense in terms of building his or her career and resume. It's very open and honest, and most candidates will appreciate your transparency—especially so early in the relationship.

Forcing Career Introspection Builds Goodwill and Trust Early On

You'll find that candidates may be a little thrown off by your self-assessment questions because they may never have had to articulate these details to a prospective employer during a pre-employment interview, but it will open the door to the bonding relationship you're looking to develop. Candidates will walk away thinking, "Wow, I've never interviewed with a firm that took such a strong interest in me and my own needs before. They really forced me to think this move through, and if they put candidates' needs first, they probably do that for their employees as well."

I know – It's so tempting to hire the individual and let her worry about her own career progression. And that's not necessarily wrong: this is business, after all, and we're all responsible for our decisions and results. Truth be told, though, you'll always benefit more if all the pieces fit together both for the firm and for the candidate.

In fact, even if you don't hire the individual, you'll not only have helped a professional gain new insight into how she should be looking at her own career, you'll also have begun to develop a reputation as a skillful and selfless leader and developer of people. In essence, you'll have shifted the "employee development" paradigm to the pre-employment stage. And maybe candidates deserve those few extra minutes of your time to benefit from your expertise. You may just find that a little short-term sacrifice and career counseling on your part will lead to greater stability in your staff and a lot of goodwill in your own career. ■



About Paul:

Paul Falcone is a human resources executive in Los Angeles and has held senior-level positions with Nickelodeon, Paramount Pictures, and Time Warner. He is a long-term contributor to HR Magazine and an instructor in the UCLA Extension School of Business and Management as well as a top-rated presenter at the SHRM national conference.

Paul is the author of nine books published by the American Management Association, including the bestsellers *96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire*, *101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees*, *101 Sample Write-Ups for Documenting Employee Performance Problems*, and *2600 Phrases for Effective Performance Reviews*. Paul's website can be found at www.PaulFalconeHR.com.