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Interviewing 101

by Kristi M. Bohn

When I was in college more than 11 short years ago, a very wise professor said something that has stuck with me ever since. He said, "If you find the interviewer going on and on about something, don't interrupt. Know that it is a very good interview. He will obviously like everything he heard."

That professor was correct, from an interviewee's point of view, at least. I credit my two job offers out of school to my willingness to simply listen to my interviewers talk about the job requirements, their own experiences and the painful examination program that I would soon endure.

However, now that I am on the other end of the table, the professor's advice serves more as a warning of what not to do. Sure, if I meet with a potential candidate on an informational basis, it is perfectly acceptable that I go on about the actuarial industry, opportunities, the exam program, the company and my own advice on how to maneuver it all. However, when there is a real position on the line and I am comparing the slate of candidates who have applied for it, my approach is 180 degrees different. This difference is in my best interest, and my previous and current employers have implemented this approach across the board.

The approach, often called "broad-based interviewing", entails that the interviewer need only ask a few open-ended questions in order to ascertain the character, competence and team-orientation of a candidate. Ask the question, and then bite your lips if you even think of asking the candidate a leading question or a question that shows that you assumed something about the candidate's background.

Here are some often-used inquiries that illustrate this approach:

- Tell me about a time in which you were part of a team.
- Tell me about a time where you showed initiative.
- Tell me about a conflict you experienced recently.
- How did you study for your most recent actuarial exam?

If the candidate's answer seems too short to enable you to make an assessment, ask another open-ended question like, "What did you do next?" or "What part did you play?" or "What did you say?" etc.

It's appropriate to give people time to think about their answer. However, if you find yourself sitting across from someone who seems to have taken a vow of silence, or someone who is extraordinarily nervous, consider it a blessing that you found this out now.

Not all of these interviews are painless. I recall sitting across from one candidate who, while looking excellent on his resume, sat silent and nervous for 10 minutes for every question I posed. At the end of the interview, I asked him the conflict question, he explained to me that he did have a conflict that he successfully navigated. He went on to explain that while on spring break, he and his friends were arrested by the Mexican police, yet he was able to get out of jail somehow. Needless to say, we did not hire this candidate

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(because of the nervous silence, not the jail incident). But this brings up a great point about this type of interviewing—candidates will share lots of information and are generally very honest when you stay away from hypothetical questions and concentrate on their actual experiences.

It is crucial to prepare your questions in advance and ask every candidate the same slate of questions. This avoids the problem many people face in social situations of letting conversations get steered in unnecessary directions. More importantly however, is this strategy avoids the problem of presuming what a candidate's answer will be. My current employer considers

this latter point essential in assuring that we do not discriminate in our hiring process by presuming answers based on gender, religion, race or sexual orientation.

As a final note somewhat unrelated to the interview itself, I recommend that as you weigh a candidate's technical experience against his or her approach to tackling a job, you put more weight on approach. The best candidates will excel at any job you give them, regardless of their prior background. It's how they go about things that is important, not what they happen to know. It's all about potential.

Best of luck to you! □

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