



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Ready, Set, Interview!

by Kevin Leavey

You are in need of some assistance, and miracle of miracles, you actually received approval to get some help. In corporate-speak you've been told you can "add a body," "expand your human capital," "increase your headcount" or, my personal favorite, "go up one FTE (Full-Time Equivalent)." Doesn't that just make you feel all warm inside?

What you need is a person. Are you ready to be the interviewer instead of the interviewee? Do you have all the tools necessary to make a good decision? In the January 2010 issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I discussed the importance of making "Smart Choices". Hiring an employee is one of the most difficult and important choices you will ever make as a manager. In this article, I hope to assist you with steps you can take to improve your ability to succeed.

GET READY

Know precisely what help you need. You should identify at least three must-have competencies. These are the minimum. Keep your expectations reasonable. Just like using a search engine online, more criteria means fewer results. The flip-side, of course, is just as bad. If you target all FSAs with a heartbeat, you'll get too many. If the candidate does not possess your chosen minimum skills, abilities or attributes, you should not move forward with him or her. To aid in your decision making, identify two or three nice-to-have competencies. Use these to compare candidates. If you need help getting started, the SOA has developed a great competency framework to give you some ideas.

SOA COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

COMPETENCIES	DEFINITION
Communication	Demonstrating the listening, writing and speaking skills required to effectively address diverse technical and nontechnical audiences in both formal and informal settings.
Professional Values	Adhering to standards of professional conduct and practice where all business interactions are based on a foundation of integrity, honesty and impartiality.
External Forces & Industry Knowledge	Identifying and incorporating the implications of economic, social, regulatory, geo-political and business changes into the design and delivery of actuarial solutions.
Leadership	Initiating, innovating, inspiring, creating or otherwise acting to influence others regardless of level or role toward a common goal.
Relationship Management & Interpersonal Collaboration	Creating mutually beneficial relationships and work processes toward a common goal.
Technical Skills & Analytical Problem Solving	Applying the actuarial knowledge, skills and judgment required to provide value-added services.
Strategic Insight & Integration	Anticipating trends and strategically aligning actuarial practice with broader organizational business goals.
Results-Oriented Solutions	Providing effective problem solving that addresses relevant interests and needs.



Kevin Leavey, FSA, CFA, MAAA, is AVP, product actuary at Commonwealth Annuity and Life Insurance Company, a Goldman Sachs Company. He can be reached at kevin.leavey@cwannuity.com.

For more information on the SOA Competency Framework, check out this article from the June/July issue of *The Actuary*. <http://soa.org/library/newsletters/the-actuary-magazine/2009/june/act-2009-vol6-iss3-framework.pdf>

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Pull together the questions you want to ask each candidate that specifically address the competencies you've identified. Make sure you have a good mix of situational and behavioral questions.

Situational questions allow you to discern the candidate's ability to think on his or her feet. The questions can provide you with some insight into the candidate's knowledge and judgment. I recall many exam questions that started with, "You're the chief actuary of a small life insurance company ...". You can easily use a similar lead-in. For example, "You're the new product actuary here and you've been asked to peer review a recently completed lapse study...

- What will you do?
- What questions would you want answered?
- How long do you think it would take?"

Behavioral questions will give you a fuller picture than just the candidate's résumé. They will give you examples of how a candidate actually exhibited the competencies you desire.

- I see from your résumé that you ... (insert fabulous résumé-building experience here) Tell me about the difficulties you faced and how you managed them.
- Tell me about a time you were asked to present technical information to senior management.

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- Describe a time when you persuaded others to do things your way.

GET SET

I will conveniently skip over the difficult process of actually finding candidates. My purpose is to focus on you as the interviewer.

Make sure you set the stage appropriately. Think about interviews you've been on that went well. Most likely a lot of planning made it so. Things you want to consider:

- Schedule with multiple interviewers.
 - o You get multiple perspectives, improving your decision-making.
 - o You get to see if the candidate interacts differently with you vs. peers vs. HR. This proved to be invaluable to me earlier in my career. I had interviewed someone I thought was an outstanding candidate: Polished, knowledgeable, motivated. It turns out he alienated all the other actuarial students, made fun of marketing and treated our HR representative like dirt. He was a completely different person with my boss and me, and that added perspective from others saved us from making a bad choice.
- Plan on 45 minutes per person. Often I've seen companies schedule just 30 minutes per person, and the pitfall to that approach is one decent conversation can throw off the entire schedule.
- Avoid windowless conference rooms as much as you can. They foster an awkward atmosphere and severely limit the chance of an open and relaxed exchange.
- Do your homework! Thoroughly review the candidate's résumé prior to the interview. You want to maximize your time with the candidate.
- Get an interview schedule and contact information out to the candidate prior to interview day.
- Be prepared to answer their questions:
 - o Why is this position open?
 - o What skills are needed to be successful?
 - o What will they be doing the first 3-6 months?
 - o How will their performance be evaluated?

o How will your company assist them in their pursuit of professional development?

INTERVIEW!

I always try to be the first and last person the candidate meets. I like to greet him or her, give an overview of his or her time with us, discuss any changes to the interview schedule and bring him or her to the first interview. Then I like to have my interview last, wrap up and discuss any next steps.

Your number one goal is to get the candidate talking. Do what you can to put them at ease. Remember that all interviewees have their “interview” face on. You want to go deeper, get past the well-prepared answers to really see who this person is. You will have to exercise restraint and stop talking so they can talk. Admittedly, that’s not my strongest skill. If they give you short answers, ask them to elaborate. You will be very pleased with how much information you get from “Tell me more about that ...” and 10 seconds of silence.

Take notes, preferably during the interview, but if that is not possible, then immediately thereafter. You want everything down on paper while it is fresh

in your mind. If you are fortunate enough to have many candidates, you will need to remember the finer points of each interview.

Don’t rush to judgment! Don’t be ready to get the hook or plan a victory parade too soon. You will get a gut feeling regarding the person in the first few minutes. Suspend that judgment. Your job on interview day is to gather information.

Finally, be consistent. Ask essentially the same questions to every candidate. It will be the best way to quantify the differences you see between candidates. When you are all done interviewing, you should have the information you need to make the best decision.

This all seems like a lot of work, and it is. However, this process has been very good to me, and it has allowed me to hire several outstanding employees over the years. Good luck! ●