

The art of interviewing

By V PRADEEP KUMAR

In today's somewhat lopsided demand and supply of human resources, sourcing people is an important skill. The success of effective recruitment lies in the art of interviewing too.

Interviewing is a complex process to assess the attitudes, skills and knowledge of the candidate as relevant to the position and the organisation. The following are some of the important factors in interviewing as relevant to today's situation.

1. The basics: It's important to check the basics and any compromise here will be to our own peril.

a. Family background: A probe into family background will allow us to understand the candidates' character, behaviour and attitudes and assess the cultural fit of the candidate into the organisation. For example, family background in defense or teaching generally leaves certain unquestionable attributes.

b. Education: A strong academic performance indicates dedication and result orientation, though one cannot generalise and conclude the converse.

Mark year of completion of each stage of education and check for any break in education and other loopholes.

In a recent interview, I discovered that a candidate claimed completion of graduation at 18, whereas it's possible to complete only by 20.

When confronted, the candidate said, "I am from Bihar". But, wait a minute! He had not faked the certificate. It seems it was a tradition in the family to understate the age to get the bene-



fit of higher retirement age. This was indeed a revelation.

c. Hobbies: Many interviewers ask these questions as routinely as the candidates write them in the CV's. However this is an important area to probe and understand the personality of the candidate.

Once, we asked a candidate to sing a ghazal to check if indeed he was a singer as claimed in the CV. A candidate who has keen interest and skills in outdoor games such as football is most likely to have an aggressive mindset as opposed to someone who is interested in a game of chess who could be intelligent but introverted. Even though inconclusive proofs, they help us in overall assessment.

d. Strengths and weaknesses: The importance of

this area to probe is obvious. However, don't just list down the strengths and weaknesses, as candidates do come prepared.

Become an expert interviewer and go to the next level of probing asking a candidate to self assess his strengths and weaknesses on a scale of lets say 1 to 5. Ask open ended questions to understand the candidates thinking about ways and means to exploit the strengths and minimise the weaknesses. Ask the relevance of a particular strength in the context of the position.

e. Languages: A multi-lingual candidate is generally desirable for positions requiring customer interaction etc. A good way to understand the truth is to ask the candidate to answer some of the questions in particular language and not

go by claims.

2. Stability of career: If you probe well, candidates reveal useful information about attitudes towards previous organisations, superiors, colleagues, ability to handle pressures etc. At the same time, an unexplained personal problem for leaving a job could be a case of camouflaging the real reason.

3. Contributions in previous assignments: Many candidates fumble in answering this important but unexpected question. Employees often think that fulfilling a job requirement by itself is a significant contribution. As an employer, clarify this to your potential employee.

4. Relevance of previous experience: No matter how successful is the candidate in a previous assignment, it's important to

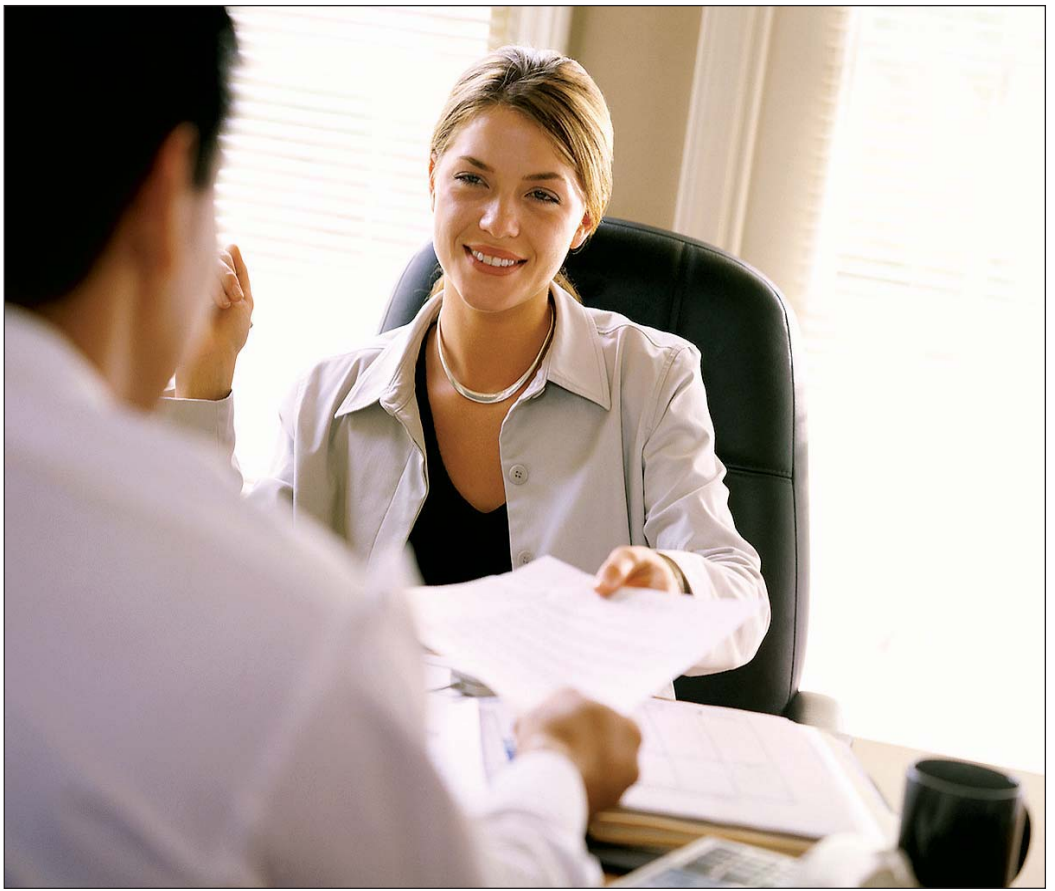
assess its relevance. Assuming there is a compelling need to employ someone from a different industry, it's necessary to assess if the acquired skills are useful or can be adapted to the requirements of the new assignment.

5. Skill tests: Despite in-depth interviewing, adopt skill tests before the final decision. Such tests are common for positions in IT, programming, call centres, front office positions, sales and marketing jobs, editorial, design and other creative jobs.

6. Ask and expect the unexpected: Just as there are expert interviewers, I have also come across candidates who have mastered the art. Also, remember that the candidate in front of you also could be involved in recruitments and hence aware of interviewing techniques. Therefore, build an element of surprise and ask the unexpected. A good way is to ask hypothetical questions. Also be prepared for the unexpected and beware of actors dramatising to impress and gain sympathy. Years back, we selected a candidate from South Canara who broke down telling her distressing story in an attempt to establish her compelling need for a job. Later, we found her to be a 'pathological liar' requiring medical attention.

7. Homework: I have used this technique to understand the certain facts about the candidate as well as understand the job necessity. Give a short assignment to the candidate to check facts in the market or do some small research and revert back to you.

Continued to page 2



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Continued from page 1

8. Reference checks: This is an important step in recruitment, but generally ignored. These are useful to crosscheck information from candidate and often help in assessing important factors which are outside the purview of an interview. Do the references check before selecting the candidate and not later, as in many organisations.

9. Stress test: Decide appropriateness of subjecting candidates to severe stress tests. Some of these could be to make a conditional or unreasonable job offer more to test the candidates' character, presence of mind, integrity etc. However, stress tests such as group discussions do not always throw up conclusive evidences. Sometimes, these can be counter productive too. Once I found seemingly good candidates missing from the venue, the moment a we announced a GD.

10. Body language: The importance of non verbal commu-

nication including body language cannot be overemphasised. For example, it's very easy to read if the candidate is lying.

Human resources situation is very competitive and it's not easy to get the right candidates. The following is a checklist to follow in the interview process.

- Ensure waiting area is clean, comfortable and not accessible to employees.

- Ensure no phones and other interruptions in the interview process.

- Remember, you need to make an impression on the candidate, as every candidate could be a potential customer too.

- Ask questions and listen. Don't get carried away by expert candidates to flatter and woo you and get into long self boasting monologues.

- Don't ask unethical, illegal or discriminatory questions.

- Develop a sense of humour and use it appropriately. Interviewing doesn't mean grilling the candidate with continuous stress tests.

- Answer honestly and don't make unrealistic promises. Remember 'under promise' and 'over delivery' goes a long way in retention too.

- Maintain continuous eye contact

- Conduct the interview professionally

- End the interview on a positive note, irrespective of your decision.

As an employer, be aware of the skills and attitudes required and be competent to test the same. In the midst of pressures to find human resources don't ignore the basics. We need to be as canny without compromising the basics. The process of interviewing including package negotiation must be an enjoyable and a learning experience.

The art of interviewing therefore is something that comes with experience and training.

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