



How to Hire the Best Candidates

Hiring the best employee means a whole lot more than marking off items on a checklist. It takes planning, prioritizing and the ability to spot potential.

BY JOHN WEST HADLEY

Actuarial professionals are rarely trained in best practices for interviewing candidates. As highly trained, technical professionals, we tend to approach the process logically, trying to evaluate all of a candidate's technical skills and abilities and his or her fit to a particular job description. More often than not, this isn't the best way to evaluate most candidates.

Think of how much time you spend with your employees and in how many different contexts—at staff meetings, in your office poring over reports or projects, at lunch, in meetings with your peers and superiors, just to name a few instances. This candidate is someone you are potentially going to work with very closely, and chemistry is very important, in fact, essential. You don't want to find yourself looking for the exit



every time that person approaches. That said, don't restrict yourself to a one-hour interview. Perhaps more importantly, don't approach that initial meeting with a clipboard and pen in hand ready to check off items on a worksheet.

Prepare for the Interview

Just as the best candidates should prepare extensively for their interviews, you as the hiring manager should do the same. Before you bring in the first candidate or present the opening to any recruiters, spend some time determining exactly what would be the profile of the ideal candidate. Make sure to include in that checklist the set of qualities that would make a candidate the best fit for your operation, and what set of skills would add the most to your capabilities as an organization. Prioritize the list, thinking carefully about the relative importance of each quality, skill or area of expertise, and make special note of the deal-breakers. When prioritizing, remember that skills and areas of expertise can be improved through training and on-the-job experience.

Some companies use personality profiles or other assessment tools to determine how closely prospective candidates fit their ideal profile. While there's nothing wrong with

using assessments as an initial guide to build your interview questions, remember that the strongest teams include diversity of skills, personality types and approaches. If you already have outstanding technicians, maybe it's time to add someone with higher management and leadership capabilities, or a person who excels at presenting complex ideas in simple ways. If you have several dominant Type A personalities, maybe it's time for someone who is more of a facilitator, and who is skilled at applying diverse techniques to motivate teams to get the job done.

Question the Recruiters

When a recruiter is involved, be sure to explore with the recruiter exactly why he or she is recommending a particular candidate. Ask about both strengths and areas that need development—



good recruiters will have already interviewed any candidate they present, and will be willing to give an assessment of pros and cons as they see them. If not, then reconsider whether you want to allow that recruiter to present candidates to you!

A Variety of Interviewers is Key

Set up an interview schedule that includes a variety of interviewers with different styles and perspectives, and at different levels within the organization. Prepare your interviewers with specific things/qualities you want them to evaluate. Include different contexts in the interviews wherever possible—one-on-one meetings, social settings (breakfast, lunch or coffee), and even group settings. At my first company, any prospective actuarial student interview included a tour with a current

student. This often caused candidates to relax and reveal a side of themselves that wouldn't otherwise have emerged.

After the interview, don't just debrief those interviewers one-on-one—get them together for a few minutes to discuss the candidate. It is often surprising—and valuable in the long run—how differently two interviewers will perceive qualities in a candidate! Plus, hearing one person's thoughts often prompts another to remember something he or she hadn't initially thought to contribute. Sometimes you will uncover that a candidate gave conflicting answers to similar questions from multiple interviewers, giving you good reason to question whether the candidate was just saying what he or she thought the interviewer wanted to hear. Be sure to include all people who met the candidate in at least part of the discussion—how a candidate treated the administrative assistant or receptionist is a strong indication of how he or she would treat people at various levels throughout the company. Off-the-cuff remarks made to an actuarial student perceived as a peer can be quite revealing.

Don't Give Away the Right Answers

Interviewers are often tempted to start an interview with a description of how they like to operate, the company or its

history, the organization and its goals and the job and expectations. Resist! This gives the candidate too much insight into what you are seeking, in effect, giving them hints as to the right answers to questions you will be asking.

Instead, tell the candidate what you expect up front. Here's an example:

"I know you probably have a lot of questions about our operation, and are here to find out as much as you can about us. We are equally interested to learn about your experience, skill sets and what assets you have that will benefit our company. I promise I will answer all of your questions this afternoon, but for the morning, we plan to focus on you."

"Remember to **review** the candidate's **materials** carefully **before** the **interview**. Note all **positive points** first. **Look** for any **inconsistencies**. ..."

This way you can get answers that haven't already been shaped by the clues you might otherwise have given away.

Review All Materials Carefully

Remember to review the candidate's materials carefully before the interview. Note all positive points first. Look for any inconsistencies, gaps or other possible concerns you will want to probe during the interview as well. Is the cover letter well written and engaging? This will tell you a lot more about the candidate's written communication skills than any statement about their outstanding communication skills in the résumé.

Take a Good Look at the Résumé

Look at how the résumé is put together—does it have a strong professional appearance? Are bullet points and indentations perfectly aligned? Is it neat, easily readable and well-written? Does it open with a clear summary of the package the candidate brings to the table, and the types of results he or she can produce?

A résumé is a barometer for the type of work product a candidate is capable of producing, his or her attention to detail and the care with which they approach their work. It also gives some idea of their written communication skills, and whether or not they have a marketing bent. Finally, it can give insight into how well candidates understand the broader implications of their work. If they struggle to express the results their work produces for their employer in their résumé, it stands to reason that it isn't second nature for

them to think of their work in that way. Perhaps they don't really understand fully why their specific tasks and projects have been important to their company's or unit's results. Wouldn't you rather have someone on your team who directly links his or her work to results, and therefore may be more likely to put in whatever extra effort is needed to produce those results?

The Actual Interview

Now we get to the interview itself. Ask many questions, but also give the candidate openings to ask their own—see if they know how to turn the interview into a mutually comfortable conversation. If not, find a point in the interview to throw out some open-ended softball questions that get the candidate to open up, to get beyond pre-prepared

answers so you can really get to know him or her on a more relaxed level. An example would be, "Tell me about a project you are

really proud of," followed by an indication of interest on your part and a request to expand on some aspect of it.

Many interviewers like to ask behavioral questions, where you set up a situation and ask the candidate what they would do. These can help you get away from the prepared answers, since it is difficult to pre-prepare an answer for a random scenario. But don't neglect to ask some of the standard questions, which can also be revealing, like:

- Tell me about yourself.
- When did you decide to become an actuary, and why?
- What are your greatest strengths?
- Are there areas in which you feel you need more experience or training?
- What do you consider your greatest achievement to date?
- Tell me about a project you felt didn't yield optimum results, and what you learned from it.
- Where do you want to be in five years?
- How would you go about (pricing a new product; developing the appropriate valuation assumptions for a new product/product line; etc.)
- What are your salary expectations? (And why do you feel you deserve that salary?)

At certain points in the interview, simply be silent for five to 10 seconds after a candidate's answer, and see what happens. Most will find it very difficult not to fill the void, and



then you can get the unguarded or unintentional answers that can tell you a lot about the candidate, both good and perhaps information that raises a red flag.

Check References

Be sure to get references, and call them. In some cases, you may find that the references aren't willing to share much information because of their company's concern about lawsuits if you make an unfavorable decision based on their feedback, or if you end up firing someone for whom they gave a particularly glowing review. So don't take a lack of feedback as a negative reflection of a candidate.

Remember that smart candidates will only provide references who they feel will give uniformly positive feedback, so you need to probe a bit rather than taking what the reference says at face value. You might want to take a close look at where the references are coming from, and see if it seems like the candidate is specifically avoiding any from recent jobs, or certain high-profile projects/areas, etc., and even talk frankly with the candidate about why you are seeing that pattern.

Be Flexible

Finally, be flexible. You aren't looking for the perfect set of experiences and skills—if a candidate had all of those, why would they take the job or stay with it for very long? A candidate who already has every required skill and experience to do the job well may not feel that the job is enough of a challenge. You might even wonder if there is some reason why that person is under-selling him/herself.

And if a great candidate comes along who doesn't fit the profile you had in mind, you should think about whether there is a way to restructure the job or even the operation to make room for that person. Remember that the quality of your team is paramount—as Jim Collins concluded in his excellent book “Good to Great,” one of the keys that separated great companies from good ones was the CEO's determination to first get “the right people on the bus.” ■

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