

Modernizing the Interview Process

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Emphasizing Preparation and Insight

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In an era where the workforce is more competitive and dynamic than ever, sticking to traditional interview methods should no longer be the norm. The ever-evolving nature of industries and the shifting work landscape demand a reevaluation of how companies approach the hiring process. Staying current means reinventing interview techniques to match the pace of change.

With a tenure in hiring management that dates back to 1996, I have witnessed firsthand the transformation of interviewing methodologies. The conventional approach of my early days involved a direct line of unstructured questioning with the expectation of immediate responses from the candidate. Now, nearly three decades later, it is startling to see many organizations still entrenched in these antiquated, and ineffective practices. Contemporary job roles seldom hinge on the ability to rapidly produce answers. Rather, they typically require a methodical and reflective approach to work, emphasizing thorough preparation and strategic problem-solving.

A pivotal shift in my own perspective came when I experienced the advantage of receiving interview questions in advance. This shift not only allowed me to leverage my professional preparation skills but also highlighted the value of forethought and deliberation. Integrating this experience into my hiring practices, I began to afford candidates the same opportunity to prepare—a minimum of two full days. This preparation mirrors the expectations of today's workplace, where employees are tasked with clear objectives and given timelines to achieve them.

Employing this forward-thinking interview style has been transformative. It serves as an immediate barometer of a candidate's readiness and dedication. A superficial engagement with the preparatory material often signals a lack of commitment, while a robust and researched response signals a strong potential for alignment with the role's demands.

This evolved approach requires crafting nuanced questions that are job-specific and capture the full spectrum of workplace dynamics and individual responsibilities. Since implementing this strategy, the quality of my hiring decisions has improved significantly, yielding a consistent influx of exceptional talent.

While the conventional interview model may retain some utility in certain specific fields, it is time for a broader transition. We must look beyond quick thinking and assess a candidate's holistic approach to work, including their capacity for thoughtful analysis and problem-solving.

The march of progress in the workplace mandates a corresponding evolution in how we evaluate potential hires. In the post-COVID world, where skilled candidates have numerous job opportunities, the interview process must be a bi-directional engagement. It's not just about companies evaluating candidates, but also about candidates assessing the companies. A modern, organized, and respectful interview process provides comprehensive insights into the candidate's abilities and simultaneously exhibits a company culture that is contemporary and competitive. This approach underscores the mutual evaluation that now defines the recruitment landscape, demonstrating that the right fit is crucial for both the employer and the prospective employee.

In this evolving professional landscape, the future of hiring is already unfolding. It is characterized by a deeper, more thoughtful engagement with candidates, ensuring that the hiring process not only measures up to contemporary standards but sets the stage for the success of both employees and organizations.

Enhancing Candidate Performance through Pre-Interview Preparation

A pivotal element of a modern interview process is the advanced sharing of questions, which substantively enhances the interaction quality between candidates and interviewers. This practice provides a multitude of benefits:

- **Facilitating In-depth Preparation:** Providing questions beforehand allows candidates to reflect and engage deeply with the content, aligning their responses with their experiences and professional ethos. This not only helps them articulate their capabilities genuinely but also promotes equity, giving every candidate, irrespective of their background, an equal opportunity to demonstrate their suitability.
- **Showcasing Key Competencies:** This preparation time enables candidates to demonstrate the skills and knowledge pertinent to the job's requirements more effectively. It shifts the focus from on-the-spot thinking to a more comprehensive demonstration of their qualifications and professional acumen.

- **Reducing Interview Anxiety:** Knowing the questions in advance reduces stress, allowing candidates to present their qualifications confidently and engage more genuinely. A relaxed candidate is more likely to have a composed and focused disposition, leading to a clearer demonstration of their true potential.
- **Encouraging Insightful Dialogue:** Prepared candidates can provide thoughtful responses, leading to richer discussions. This not only improves the interview's quality but also allows for a more informed assessment by the interviewers, ensuring a thorough evaluation of the candidate's analytical abilities and decision-making process.
- **Fostering an Atmosphere of Professionalism:** The act of sharing questions in advance signals the organization's commitment to a respectful, professional hiring process. It reflects the company's values and sets the stage for a work environment that prioritizes thoroughness and consideration.
- **Allowing for Personalization and Cultural Fit:** Candidates can tailor their responses to align with the company's culture and values, demonstrating not just job suitability but also how they would integrate into the organizational ethos.
- **Facilitating a Two-Way Assessment:** With advance preparation, candidates can also formulate meaningful questions for the interviewers, reflecting their keen interest in the role and their intention to engage with the company's vision and goals.
- **Increasing Engagement and Interaction:** Well-prepared candidates tend to be more engaged, leading to dynamic interviews. This engagement allows both the candidate and the interviewer to better assess the potential for a successful partnership.
- **Cultivating a Positive Candidate Experience:** A considerate and preparation-focused interview process enhances the candidate's experience, positively influencing their perception of the company and making it more attractive as a potential employer in the competitive job market.

The advance sharing of interview questions not only benefits candidates by allowing them to showcase their best selves but also assists interviewers in making more holistic and equitable hiring decisions. By setting the stage for a detailed and respectful evaluation process, organizations can foster a positive impression, attract top talent, and ensure alignment with their strategic objectives.

The Art of Crafting Interview Questions

The development of interview questions is a meticulous process that demands time and thought, but the investment is well worth it. The aim is to devise questions that accurately gauge a candidate's fit for the role—not just in terms of technical skill but also their behavioral competencies and how they might align with the company's culture and values.

In crafting these questions, I find it beneficial to employ a mix of behavioral and technical inquiries. Behavioral questions are designed to reveal insights into a candidate's past experiences and how they've navigated specific situations. These types of questions often provide a window into the candidate's character, work ethic, and interpersonal skills.

For instance, a question intended to assess adaptability might be structured as follows: "Describe a time when your team or company was undergoing some change. How did that impact you, and how did you adapt?" This question is multifaceted—it requires candidates to recall a specific instance (1), reflect on its personal impact (2), and explain their adaptive response (3). The layered nature of the question serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it elicits examples of the candidate's past behavior, which can be predictive of future performance. Secondly, it tests the candidate's ability to comprehend and address a complex question, providing insight into their critical thinking and attention to detail.

Prepared candidates are likely to recognize the compound nature of the question and will offer a structured response that addresses each element distinctly. In contrast, those less prepared may overlook one or more components, potentially indicating a gap in their attention or reflective abilities.

However, simply asking the right questions isn't enough. It's also crucial to listen for nuances in the responses. Does the candidate provide a thorough and thoughtful answer to each part of the question, or do they focus on one aspect to the detriment of others? The way a candidate structures their response can be just as telling as the content of the answer itself.

The technical questions, on the other hand, aim to assess the candidate's specific knowledge and expertise required for the role. These questions should be directly related to the tasks they would be expected to perform if hired. For example, for a software development role, a technical question might involve a coding challenge or a problem-solving scenario that they would likely encounter in the job.

It's important to balance these two types of questions within an interview to get a holistic view of the candidate's abilities. While technical questions assess hard skills, behavioral questions explore soft skills that are increasingly recognized as critical for long-term success in a role. This balanced approach allows interviewers to evaluate not only what the candidates know but also how they apply their knowledge and interact with others in a work environment.

In essence, the questions we ask in an interview are the keys that unlock the true potential of candidates. They allow us to delve beyond the surface-level qualifications and understand the individual's professional persona, thought processes, and problem-solving capabilities. As such, question writing is not just a task—it's a strategic endeavor that can significantly influence the success of the hiring process.

Securing Genuine Responses with Strategic Follow-Up Inquiries

The interview process is not only about assessing how well candidates can prepare but also about evaluating their authentic selves. To ensure that we get a genuine representation of a candidate's abilities, follow-up questions play a pivotal role.

After candidates have had the opportunity to prepare for the main set of questions, our interview panel engages them with a series of strategic follow-up inquiries. These are not disclosed beforehand, thus providing a balance between rehearsed responses and spontaneous interaction. By design, these questions delve deeper into the candidates' initial answers, probing their communication abilities and depth of understanding in real-time.

The essence of these follow-up questions is to observe how candidates think on their feet. Do they communicate clearly under pressure? Can they expand on their initial thoughts with further clarity and insight? How do they handle the unexpected? This phase of the interview is crucial for assessing these dynamic aspects of a candidate's professional profile.

Furthermore, unscripted questions often reveal much more than just knowledge—they can demonstrate a candidate's critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving skills. For instance, if a candidate describes a challenging project they led, a follow-up might be, "Can you walk us through a particularly tough decision you made on this project and how you navigated its consequences?" Such questions compel candidates to provide more than textbook responses; they must draw from their experiences and articulate their thought processes candidly.

These unshared follow-up inquiries serve a dual purpose: they validate the authenticity of the prepared responses and illuminate a candidate's ability to articulate and expand upon their ideas in an unstructured environment. The way candidates react to these inquiries can offer profound insights into their suitability for the role, revealing traits that prepared answers might not show.

While preparation is essential, authenticity cannot be overlooked. It's in the unscripted moments that we often find the most revealing insights into a candidate's true potential. Therefore, structured yet unshared follow-up questions are an indispensable part of our interview arsenal, ensuring we capture the full spectrum of a candidate's capabilities.

Enhancing Candidate Assessment with Practical Task Simulations

A pivotal element of my comprehensive evaluation process is the inclusion of practical in-box or job-task exercises. These simulations are not just supplementary tests; they are essential in providing a real-world context to the candidates' theoretical knowledge and interview responses.

Practical task simulations bridge the gap between a candidate's theoretical knowledge and their practical application skills. By transitioning from abstract questioning to concrete tasks, we gain a clearer understanding of how a candidate's skills and knowledge translate into real-world scenarios.

Upon completion of the traditional interview, candidates are requested to present their completed task assignment. The task assigned is reflective of the daily challenges they might encounter in the role. Providing this assignment well in advance respects the candidate's need for preparation—mirroring the realistic deadlines they would face within the role. The nature of the task varies with the job description and can range from drafting strategic documents, such as memos or reports, to performing technical assessments, like debugging software or creating presentations.

This experiential component demands that candidates apply their theoretical knowledge to practical, tangible outcomes. It's an opportunity for them to exhibit how they tackle real-world problems, prioritize tasks, and execute with precision. Furthermore, by presenting their work at the interview's conclusion, candidates also showcase their communication and presentation skills—vital attributes that are often indicative of how they will perform in client-facing or internal team meetings.

Integrating task simulations aligns with a more holistic approach to candidate evaluation, ensuring that the hiring process not only tests knowledge but also practical application. This method provides a clearer picture of the candidate's potential for success within the company and contributes significantly to a more effective selection process.

Utilizing a Standardized Evaluation Rubric

While interviewing and evaluating candidates, it's essential to employ a tool that provides objectivity and consistency. This is where a standardized evaluation rubric comes into play—a rubric is a scoring guide used to evaluate performance, a product, or a project. It consists of a set of criteria and standards linked to learning objectives that are used to assess a candidate's performance across various domains.

During the interview process, each member of the hiring panel uses a rubric to score each candidate. This approach ensures a fair assessment by standardizing the evaluation across different interviewers. The rubric is typically divided into several areas or competencies that are crucial for the role in question, and each is scored on a 5-point scale. On this scale, a score of 1 indicates that the candidate needs improvement or has failed to meet the standard, while a score of 5 signifies an exceptional level of proficiency.

For example, if a job description lists a Master's Degree or five years of work experience in a related field as preferred qualifications, these criteria would be included in the rubric. An exceptionally qualified candidate with a Ph.D. and 10 years of experience might receive a score of 5, while a new university graduate with a bachelor's degree and no experience might score a 1 or 2.

Also, each interview question is designed to assess certain competencies and is assigned a specific domain and range within the rubric. A behavioral question intended to evaluate a candidate's integrity and ethics might be: "Describe a time at work when someone asked you to perform a task you thought was unethical. How did you respond?" The interviewers would then use the rubric to score the candidate's response, considering not only whether they answered all parts of the question but also whether their answer demonstrated ethical decision-making and an understanding of the implications of their actions.

After all interviewers have scored the candidates, the final step involves tabulation and analysis. This requires a predetermined formula for calculating the final score, which may give different weights to various sections of the rubric or to certain questions, reflecting their relative importance for the position. For instance, if the role requires a strong ethical compass, the integrity and ethics questions may carry more weight in the final score.

The weighting within the rubric's formula, typically not disclosed to the interview panel, is designed to ensure a balanced evaluation of both prepared and spontaneous

responses. It allows the panel to account for a candidate's performance in areas of immediate response as well as their ability to prepare and present planned material. This dual focus is crucial in creating a comprehensive profile of each candidate's strengths and potential areas for growth.

Utilizing a rubric not only streamlines the assessment process but also helps mitigate unconscious biases by providing a clear, measurable framework for evaluation. It fosters fairness and equity in hiring by ensuring that all candidates are measured against the same standards, which is essential in the pursuit of diverse and competent talent pools. Rubrics bring structure, objectivity, and clarity to the decision-making process, enabling hiring teams to make more informed and equitable decisions. By thoroughly assessing each candidate against a set of clearly defined criteria, organizations can ensure that their hiring practices align with their strategic goals and values, ultimately leading to a stronger, more effective workforce.

Incorporating Job Shadowing into the Candidate Evaluation Process

Upon concluding the formal interview process and identifying the top candidate, another dimension of my recruitment strategy has proven to be remarkably effective: the integration of a job shadowing experience. This opportunity for the candidate to engage in an unstructured day within the company premises offers a genuine glimpse into the everyday operations and workplace environment.

Allowing the top candidate to job shadow effectively bridges the gap between theoretical assessment and practical workplace dynamics. Job shadowing acts as a critical link, allowing candidates to translate their interview responses into real-world contexts. It's here that the abstract qualities discussed in the interview room—such as teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving—are observed in action.

Assuming that the company maintains a physical office space and the necessary confidentiality agreements are established, job shadowing stands as a unique phase of the hiring process. It transcends the boundaries of traditional assessments and allows the candidate to immerse themselves in the organizational ecosystem. They can interact with potential colleagues, observe workflows in action, and absorb the nuances of the company culture firsthand.

This immersive experience provides invaluable insights for both the candidate and the hiring team. From the candidate's perspective, it's a chance to visualize themselves in the role, understand the dynamics of the team they'll be joining, and ascertain the alignment of their values with the company's culture. For the hiring team, job shadowing offers a lens through which to view the candidate's adaptability, interpersonal skills, and potential to thrive within the company.

Moreover, job shadowing can significantly contribute to a candidate's decision-making process. Experiencing a day in the life at the company can be a decisive factor in accepting a job offer, ensuring they feel confident and excited about the prospect of joining the team. In today's job market, where candidates often weigh multiple offers, providing a job shadowing experience can differentiate an employer from the competition. It demonstrates a commitment to transparency and candidate fit that goes beyond the norm, positioning the company as an engaging and thoughtful place to work.

Incorporating job shadowing into the interview process is not just an evaluative tool but also a strategic move towards building a committed and informed workforce. It is an investment in the candidate's onboarding experience before their first official day, setting the stage for a successful and harmonious integration into the company.

Conclusion

The proactive measure of providing interview questions in advance signifies a transformative step in the recruitment arena. This practice heralds a new era of talent acquisition, one that emphasizes depth and insight over superficial assessments. It engenders a richer comprehension of a candidate's true potential and compatibility with the organizational ethos and demands of the role.

When this method is synergistically combined with spontaneous follow-up inquiries and hands-on task simulations, the result is a multi-dimensional evaluation process. This comprehensive approach transcends traditional interviews, offering a robust assessment of a candidate's readiness, strategic preparation, and their capacity to adapt to unforeseen challenges.

In the modern workplace, where the ability to prepare effectively is an invaluable asset, such forward-thinking recruitment strategies are not merely advantageous—they are imperative. By adopting this nuanced and enlightened approach to hiring, companies can ensure they are not only choosing candidates who can excel in the present but also those who possess the foresight and adaptability to navigate the future.

Note: Please note that the interview strategies and practices discussed in this article are based on the author's personal experiences and perspectives. They are intended to provide insight into modernizing the interview process and are not to be taken as definitive hiring or legal advice. Organizations are advised to conduct interviews and hiring processes under the guidance of their Human Resources specialists and legal advisors. It is essential to ensure that all practices comply with applicable laws, regulations, and organizational policies. The nuances of legal and human resources considerations can vary significantly by location and type of organization, making professional guidance crucial in these matters. This article is intended for informational purposes only and should not substitute for professional advice in the areas of human resources, legal matters, or organizational management.

About the Author

Donnie Woodyard Jr., MAML, NRP, with a 30-year career in Emergency Medical Services (EMS), is the author of "EMS in the United States: Fragmented Past, Future of Opportunity." His EMS journey began in high school as a volunteer EMT in Virginia, leading him to become a Paramedic at 19. Donnie holds degrees from Sinclair Community College, Indiana University, and a Master's in Management and Leadership from Liberty University. He's pursuing a Doctorate in Public Administration. During his career, he's held multiple senior EMS leadership roles, including EMS Chief, Paramedic Program Director, and CEO of a multinational healthcare company. He has served as the State EMS Director in Louisiana and Colorado. As the National Registry of EMTs' Chief Operating Officer, he spearheaded significant technological advances and organizational growth. Donnie has notably contributed to the EMS Compact, serving as Colorado's Commissioner, the Chair of the Executive Committee Chair, and as the Executive Director of the Interstate Commission for EMS Personnel Practice. Internationally, he's recognized for developing Sri Lanka's modern EMS System and advising on EMS designs in South Asia. Donnie has authored EMS textbooks in multiple languages. Besides EMS, he's a Scuba Dive Master, airplane pilot, and Squadron Commander with the U.S. Air Force Auxiliary - Civil Air Patrol, participating in various humanitarian missions worldwide.

