



# The Art of Interview

Experience can be the best teacher in learning how to be comfortable with a complete stranger. But the art of interviewing can be boiled down to practical, pragmatic, objective steps that make the process easier and produce better results.

## Simple Steps to Improve Your Hiring Batting Average

BY RAINY YELICH AND GARRIE MCCANDLISH



**I**

he definition of an *interview*, according to Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, is "a meeting at which information is obtained from a person."

After more than 10,000 interviews in eight different countries, we'd define an *interview* as "a situation where you schedule time with a complete stranger for the need to collect extremely relevant, work- and skills-related information, while filtering through all the candidate's comments that are presented in a way they presume you want to hear it (or to hide the truth)—so you can make a decision that usually has tens of thousands of dollars hanging in the balance of the right decision."

An interview sounds much easier when described by Webster's!

Experience can be the best teacher in learning how to be comfortable with a complete stranger. But the art of interviewing can be boiled down to practical, pragmatic, objective steps that when followed, make the process easier and produces better results. Starting out with the right perspective is critical.

How would you answer the following quiz that we've given to hundreds of managers?

The purpose of a good interview is to:

- a. Hire the best candidate
- b. Determine if the candidate can do the job
- c. Decide if you like the candidate
- d. Determine if you trust the candidate
- e. Evaluate how well the candidate interviews
- f. Determine if you can manage the candidate

While each of these answers has resulted in compelling arguments from hiring managers as to why their particular pick is the right one, all of them are secondary to

- b. Determine if the candidate can do the job.**

It's okay to like a candidate or know that he or she is a good interviewer, but unless the candidate can actually do the job, it makes no business sense to hire someone simply because you like the person. Although we are at risk of stating the obvious, a hiring manager's need to like someone may unintentionally take precedence over the real task at hand of making sure the person is not just qualified for the job but can actually do the job you are looking to fill, in the way it needs to be done.

This means interviewing someone for a job is more than just asking the right questions. Asking all the right questions increases your odds of selecting the best candidate. But if you don't use good interviewing skills and

techniques, you may end up offering a job to someone who is a poor fit for the job or the company.

You must be a good, objective listener who can reframe or redirect a conversation. In addition, it is important to distinguish between people who want the job and the perfect candidate for the job. This is a subtle distinction, perhaps, but a powerful difference when you consider the costs to your business, schedule, and reputation when you do it wrong.

In an attempt to simplify this process down to key points, here are 10 simple steps that can help you beat the odds.

### Do Your Homework

Make sure you have a job description or at least an understanding of the key work-related job duties and competencies of what “good” looks like from someone in the job you’re looking to fill.

Several years ago, we met with a manager who needed to replace someone who was just fired. In our typical human resource fashion, we innocently asked if there was an updated job description for this position. The response was clear: “I don’t have time for any of this HR nonsense.” And the manager then proceeded to tell us everything the fired worker had done wrong in the job. As he was talking, we were writing. When he was done with his tirade, we read back to him everything he told us—except with a twist: We took all his negative comments and converted them to positive statements. His comment about the employee never keeping notes became “need to keep all transaction logs up-to-date on a daily basis.” Miraculously, a job description became easier to create, starting from this point forward, and his interviews for a replacement worker were significantly improved with more targeted questions.

Spend more than a minute reviewing a candidate’s resume or curriculum vitae prior to the interview. Make sure you’re clear on key points in the candidate’s work experience and how they relate or may relate to the position you’re looking to fill. Don’t forget that the candidate is checking you out at the same time you’re checking him or her out. Being unprepared and not doing your homework can come across as rude or signal to the candidate that you’re disorganized and poorly prepared.

### Get All Your Questions Prepared and Written Down in Advance

It is very important to ask open-ended questions as well as those that require detailed responses. A series of questions that continue to drill into someone’s work experience as well as the way they work with coworkers can give you a good sense of their strengths and weaknesses.

Be prepared, however, to break from your script and follow the candidate’s order of answering what you’re looking to discover when questions not yet asked are answered—or answered out of your prepared order.

It’s also important to ask the same questions of each candidate. The same questions being asked of—or answered by—each candidate helps you stick to the goal of determining if the stranger you’re talking to can do the job! This will also help you evaluate each candidate’s skills, abilities, and experience consistently and thoroughly, rather than be swayed by first impressions or one candidate or the other.

Feel free to phrase the same question to a candidate several different ways. Not everyone speaks and thinks the same way you do, and it helps with your understanding of a candidate and their skills when you see what perspective they respond to when answering.

As a basic, initial list of questions that help provide insight into the candidate, we would recommend the following:

1. **Tell me about the job you’re here interviewing for today. How would you describe the duties and expectations of the job?**  
This tells you if the candidate did any homework and if they have the right perspective.
2. **Tell me about yourself.**  
We leave this one open-ended with no additional comments to see how the candidate presents himself or herself.
3. **Why are you the best candidate? What talents do you bring to the table that no other candidate has?**  
Here’s where the candidate has a clear shot to put their best foot forward.
4. **What measurements of success do you think apply to this job? What will you do that you think will contribute to a successful first performance review?**  
And this is where the rubber meets the road!

### Don’t Interrogate

Be yourself and start a conversation. While you and the candidate may be sifting through first impressions during the first few minutes of a conversation, both of you are also getting up to speed on how each other talks. Thank the candidate for coming to the interview; explain the interview procedure and time-frame set aside for the interview; then follow the format as closely as you can while creating a comfortable environment for the flow of information.

Most people are willing to share information when having a conversation in a relaxed setting.

We recently interviewed candidates in Dublin, Ireland, and worked with a consultant at a local search firm to help us with the process. After each interview, we wanted the consultant to meet with each candidate to get their impressions of us, the job, and the interview. This information was all part of the process that would help us get the most rounded view of each candidate. In meeting with the consultant, one candidate was confused and wondered when the interview was going to take place! It was too conversational! He was so used to being interrogated instead of being interviewed; he complained that he never got his best, memorized points across that were guaranteed to make us see him as the best candidate ever! Sadly, he didn't realize how much he already had shown us in the interview about himself, his previous experience, and his current abilities—or the lack of.

### Stay On Course

Manage your time and stick to your schedule, but be prepared to jump straight to the conclusion if the candidate is not qualified.

It's not uncommon in an interview that a candidate will talk nonstop for 15 to 30 minutes when asked the first question, regardless of what the question is! This is when your listening skills are most critical. You can pick up answers to questions not yet asked, but you need to pay attention so you don't miss some or all of the answer. You can also ask clarifying questions if you're not sure of what you heard.

Give time for the candidate to ask questions, too. Hopefully they have some good questions for you that provide additional insight into what the candidate has already told you.

The toughest question we were ever asked by a candidate was "can you tell me what skills and abilities the top candidate would have for this job...and how would you rate mine?" But now that this question is in print, you can't use it!

### Beware of Your Gut Instinct

Good performers are not always good interviewers. As you assess the value of the information coming out of the candidate during the interview, make sure any of your personal biases are not clouding your analysis of the candidate's ability to do the job. When in doubt, pose more pointed questions.

One manager told us that he likes to look a candidate in the eye in the first minute to see if he can really trust the person. Our response was, "Fine. After you've seen if you can trust them or not, ask all your other questions

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to see if they can also do the job!” It’s nice to hire people you trust. But we’d have problems hiring a trustworthy, unskilled brain surgeon!

### Don’t Worry About Being a Bobble-Head

The old adage of “Silence is Golden” is powerful in an interview. Most candidates have been interviewed before. They know the general questions that are most likely to be asked, so their answers might be practiced and prepared. Most often, a long pause or moment of silence,

*It's nice to hire people you trust. But we'd have problems hiring a trustworthy, unskilled brain surgeon!*

strategically placed by an interviewer who is just sitting there, nodding his or her head and looking the candidate in the eye is uncomfortable enough to get the candidate to talk first and reveal some information you might not have gotten otherwise.

Even if you’ve read this article, you’ll still want to fill in the blanks during an interview where there’s a painful pause! It’s hard for just about everyone to keep silent. If you’re the interviewer, don’t talk first. If you’re the interviewee, be prepared! And to go one step further, after getting good tidbits out of the candidate after a moment of silence, ask, “Anything else?”

### It’s a Two-Way Street

In the constant battle for talent, candidates are checking you out at the same time you’re checking them out. Unemployment may be high at the moment, but there’s always a demand for talented workers—and they know it. Be aware of the need to make a positive impression on the candidate. They may not be a top candidate for the position you’re looking to fill now, but referrals remain a top source for qualified candidates—and every employer wants a good referral.

### Four or Six Eyes Are Better Than Two

We can’t stress enough the importance of setting up several private interviews for each candidate with various key members of your team. Perhaps you could include

the hiring manager, a team leader or technical specialist, and a key coworker. Although you or others on your team may view this as a weakness in your ability to interview or make a decision about a candidate, the buy-in that this creates from your staff and the impact on the candidate can be priceless. Invariably, one member of the panel interview process will also find a nugget of value that the other interviewers missed.

### Keep Track of Your Candidates and Who Says What

No one remembers everything accurately! Take notes so your memory will be triggered as to which candidate said what—especially if you have multiple interviews for one job or the interview schedule is spread out over time.

### To Offer or Not to Offer

What do you do if, after all your preparation, homework, multiple interviews, and feedback from others who participated in the interview process, you still can’t decide to extend an offer? Here’s where doing a good reference check can help you make the decision to hire—or start over. Think about the one key, job-related issue you have that’s keeping you on the fence from saying “yes” or “no.” Then call the candidate’s references. Ask that key question. Evaluate the answer. Then decide to extend an offer...or start over! Don’t settle for second fiddle!

We find interviewing to be fun, frustrating, difficult, rewarding, and incredibly pragmatic when the right preparation goes into it. Even if you only interview occasionally or sporadically, we hope these tips will help you improve your art of interviewing. 🗣️

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