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WHETHER YOU'RE THE employer conducting the interview, or the potential employee vying for the job, there are probably a lot of things you would rather be doing. In a recent column, we spoke about interviewing outside of the box (*LD+A*, August 2003). This month, I'd like to offer some tips to interviewing managers; things that you might want to think about before you interview your next candidate.

First off, let's talk style. The best and most productive interviews are actually quite conversational. The more you can move away from stilted interviews, the more it will benefit you, as a hiring manager. Getting a candidate comfortable during the process will encourage him to open up, which does a couple of things: One, you get a better sense of the applicant's personality. If she is a "loose cannon," or someone who speaks before she thinks, you stand a better chance of observing this early on in the process, saving you valuable time as well as a costly hiring mistake. Second, you will get an overall feel of the candidate's personality and style, which is very important in determining how well the candidate will fit into your department and company's culture. (A more complete series of tips can be seen on our website at pompeo.com under "Employer Services.")

Phone Interviews

Some employers dread phone interviews, believing they don't let you get a feeling for the person anywhere near as well as a face-to-face meeting. Also, they don't allow interviewers to get a sense of the candidate's appearance and/or presentation skills (which can be very important in sales management or sales positions). All true, to varying degrees, but the fact is, more and more employers and potential job candidates are in different cities, so logistically and cost-wise it only makes sense to conduct phone meetings if you're in a different locale from your candidates.

There are some general guidelines to get the most out of a phone interview. It seems obvious, but the first thing to do is schedule a time

with the candidate for the phone meeting. Do not call because you have "a free moment." Calling the candidate without him being aware of the specific date and time of the call does a couple of things—it shows a lack of consideration for the candidate's time (which a good candidate will pick up and note), but also doesn't give you a real insight to the candidate. Are you catching her/him in the middle of dinner, or in the midst of something else? They may not tell you, but they may come across as unfriendly or uninvolved. You won't know the reason why and may bypass your perfect candidate. Treat the candidate the way you would want to be treated. If a candidate were to call you at home without notifying you, would you necessarily be in the right mood or place to effectively conduct a phone meeting and get the candidate excited about your opportunity?

A word of caution: There are very few instances where a telephone conference call can be productive. Once you get three or more people on a speakerphone conference call, getting a sense of the person's style, or the chemistry between the parties involved, can be very difficult. It creates a very unnatural, stilted scenario, where participants often can't even clearly hear what others are saying. It's not a great way to identify your potential employees, and it's also difficult for candidates to get a feel for you or your personality to see if the opportunity is a fit for them, as well.

Resumes

Interviews are for meeting potential candidates, not for catching up on your reading, so put the resume aside. The more you are looking things up in the resume while the candidate speaks with you, the more you are missing important points the candidate might be sharing to help you determine whether he will move forward! We recommend not even making notes on the resume, but on a separate piece of paper. Studies show that if you're reading something (even if a related subject) while someone is talking to

you, you're less likely to be able to take away as much as if you were listening with undivided attention. One business philosophy refers to this as "Be here now." You'll learn a lot more from candidates if you listen to what they say and how they say it, than by reading their resumes. It's not uncommon to find candidates whose resume doesn't do them justice. On the other hand, it's not unusual to review a great resume and then end up wondering after the interview who put it together.

General Tips

Sketch out ahead of time a group of questions you wish to ask candidates. Make sure many of them are as open-ended as possible. After greeting the candidate, it doesn't hurt to start off with a brief, one-to-five minute overview of the position and what you are looking for. Hiring managers are often surprised to find out that some of the subtle pieces of information needed in order to find the right candidate are not really touched on in human resources' "boiler-plate" job description.

This also is a great opportunity to let the candidate relax and get more comfortable. The old school of thought on this was to put candidates in almost an adversarial-type of position, to see how they responded to pressure. Unless the job is a very unusual one where candidates would constantly be in an uncomfortable situation, this creates more barriers than it does reveal any major insights.

For the most part, ask the same questions of each candidate. There may be a couple of questions that may vary based on the candidate's background, but keeping the same group of questions for each helps create a level playing field, allowing you to really compare the candidates by their answers to the same questions. This will help you determine even more clearly who the right candidate is for you.

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