

Strategic Sales Staffing - Interviewing “Best Practices”

In our last article we listed the minimum steps and processes needed to source candidates internally (without the use of a professional recruiting firm). There were some key aspects that we didn't delve into fully; this article will do that.

Recall that once you get a candidate engaged in the selection process, we recommend the following base steps: resume screen, phone screen, and face-to-face interview screen.

The key point to remember is this: you are interviewing to eliminate, not select! This mindset is critical to reducing hiring mistakes. If you are interviewing to eliminate you are much more objective than if you are interviewing to select; you are less subject to your “gut feelings” about a candidate and less likely to make poor rationalizations. As I reflect on my hiring mistakes over my years as a manager or VP of sales, those mistakes were a result of me hiring to fill a position rather than hiring because I found a candidate matching all my prescribed requirements and – here's the key – ***one that I would have hired even if I didn't have an open position!***

With that in mind, let's identify some best practices relative to resume screens, phone screens, and face-to-face interviews.

Resume Screens

Develop a list of “got to haves” and “have nots” and stick to them! Examples might include:

- a. Education level;
- b. Objectives that align with your posting;
- c. Number of years of relevant experience (industry or position);
- d. Too much job hopping (or too long in one company or position);
- e. Unexplainable gaps in resume; and
- f. Odd moves (position or company).

Immediately discard any candidates not matching your list. Do not keep these around “just in case.” Do not tempt yourself into settling!

Phone Screens

Develop a list of questions to “confirm” or “deny” any questions you have with respect to your requirements and your candidate's resume. That is the primary focus of the phone screen (that and making sure, if your position requires phone skills or strong verbal communication skills, that you eliminate candidates who don't fulfill this requirement).

- a. Confirm that what the candidate wrote on his/her resume matches what the candidate tells you during your conversation.
- b. Delve into any weak answers or inconsistencies.

- c. Pay attention to how and why the candidate transitioned from one job or position to another and make sure that it makes sense to you.
- d. Have the candidate provide specific examples of each skill listed on his/her resume in each position held and make sure there are no inconsistencies here either.
- e. If you like the candidate, allow for and pay attention to the questions he/she asks after your screen. If the candidate does not “close you” on the next step in the interview process, grade him/her down appropriately. If you’re hiring for a sales position and the candidate doesn’t close you – discard the candidate immediately!
- f. Take copious notes (to reference later if you move the candidate forward).

Face-to-Face Interviews

Develop a face-to-face interview guide using behavior based or STAR interviewing questions that directly match the skills, traits, and abilities you identified earlier when you put together your candidate profile and roles and responsibilities documentation:

- a. Make sure that you ask and compare the candidate’s answers to:
 - 1. Your initial resume screen;
 - 2. Your phone screen; and
 - 3. His/her application.
- b. Pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues.
- c. If your candidate does not answer your questions completely, do not aid him/her.
- d. Search for reasons to *NOT* hire the candidate, based on his/her answers.
- e. Have several people in your firm conduct the interviews and compare answers.
- f. Consider group interviewing tactics (especially for salespeople).
- g. Stick to your “grading scale” for each required skill and trait (not just an overall grade – which is subject to justification).
- h. Schedule “interviewing days” vs. spreading your interviews over many days. This will help you in your compare/contrast and assessments.
- i. Take copious notes to refer to later.
- j. Do not make your decisions on which candidates you are going to move to the next stage until you have had a chance to review and reflect on all the data.
- k. Allow for a longer question and answer sequence at the end of face-to-face interviews.
- l. Have all candidates you decide to move forward return for additional face-to-face interviews (just about anyone can fake one face-to-face interview).
- m. Do not drag your process out too long – good candidates will get snatched up quickly!

Time Parameters – Best Practices

A typical resume screen should take approximately 5 minutes or less.

A typical phone screen should take approximately 15-30 minutes.

A typical face to face interview should take approximately 1-1.5 hours.

Tool Development – Best Practices

As we discussed in our previous article, it is critical that you are prepared to execute a sound interviewing strategy. You should have separate questionnaires for each step in the screening process: resume screen, phone screen, and face-to-face interviews. The resume and phone screens should be skill- and trait-based “got to haves.” The face-to-face interview questions should be behavior-based. This allows you to get both the “nature” and the “nurture” (how they are hardwired vs. how they have been brought up) components of the psychological makeup and abilities of each candidate.

If after reading this article you find that you have been cutting corners or missing steps in the interview process, or you lack the time to implement these strategies, you may want to consider hiring a professional recruiting firm. The right hire will always cost you less in the long run than a wrong hire.

Our next article will address reference checks and testing, two important aspects of the selection process.

Until then. . .

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