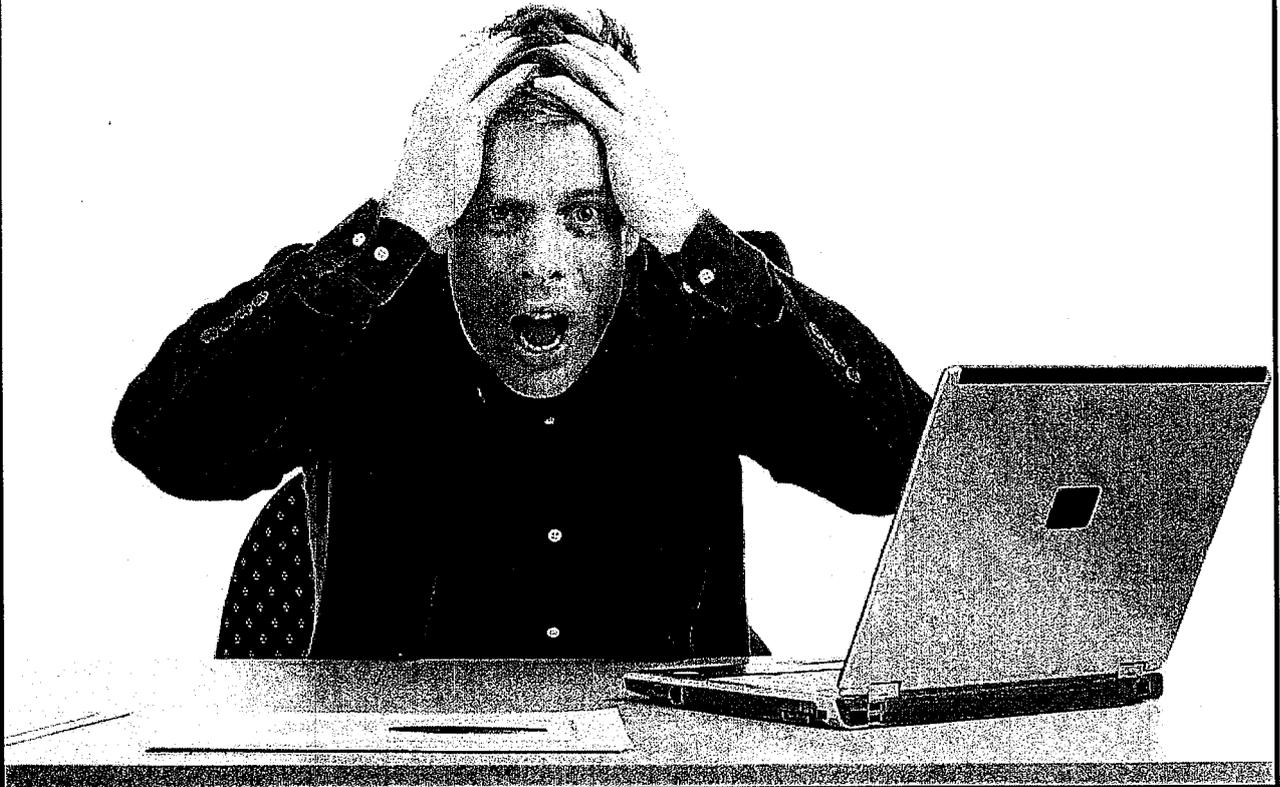


Interviewing: Weed Out Slackers, Stupid People and Bad Fits

A SPECIAL REPORT FOR EXECUTIVES



Interviewing: Weed Out Slackers, Stupid People and Bad Fits

PBP Executive Reports are straightforward, fast-read reports designed for time-pressed executives, managers and supervisors. PBP Executive Reports excel at cutting the fluff, eliminating jargon and providing just the information today's executives need to improve their organizations' performance.

This PBP Executive Report was compiled, written and edited by the veteran editorial staff of Progressive Business Publications, a leading information source for busy business executives. It provides the latest thinking on interviewing and hiring job applicants at all levels, and gives clear direction on how to help your organization succeed by creating the best staff possible.

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Executive Summary

High-performance organizations can point to many reasons for their success: a leader who makes good, tough choices; an on-target business model; a training program that gives people the right tools.

You probably could list some of your own reasons as well.

One thing's certain: An organization can have the best leader, the best business model, the best training, and still fail for one overriding reason: It didn't have the best people working in the organization.

Too many poor performers squeaked through the hiring process. Even when an occasional top performer happened to get hired, that person didn't last because of the discouraging atmosphere created by the waves of incompetent co-workers.

And usually the problem started at one crucial point: the hiring interview. It's a problem that can't be overcome by a great leader, a great business model or even great training.

This report will help managers and recruiters make certain that their organizations get the right raw materials – the right people – so that when the right leader, business model and training are in place, success is likely to follow.

Included in this Executive Report:

- **Why the interview is the most important part.** More hiring mistakes are made because of poor interviewing techniques than because of any other part of the process. The main reason: The interview is the area in which the employer has the least control – unless the right steps are taken to exert control.
- **How the interviewer can gain control to get meaningful information.** Control doesn't equal domination. Instead, the effective interviewer should assume the same role as an effective chairperson, directing the agenda while eliciting information and ideas that lead to results – in this case, a strong hire.
- **How to develop the setup and intro for a successful interview.** Start right at the beginning. Instead of engaging in small talk, the effective interviewer can use the early parts of the meeting to set the stage for learning more about the candidate and allowing the candidate to learn more about the organization.

- **How to develop the best questions.** Questions are the heart and soul of the interview. Yet so many interviewers stick with stock questions or never really develop good questions. The solution: “8 Great Questions (and Answers)” that can be used for almost any interview and which get to the meat of the matter – whether the candidate is the type of person you want in your organization. Focused questions take you to another level and determine whether the candidate is suited for a particular position.
- **How to pick up on nonverbal cues.** Interviews of course are more than just questions and answers. Many candidates send off signals that they’re right or wrong for the job. Having trouble sizing up a candidate? Look for the proven cues and gain insight into whether you’re face-to-face with the right person.
- **What’s legal? What’s not?** Four benchmark legal cases, and the decisions, guide the interviewer on the types of techniques that have been challenged in court, and which challenges stood up and which didn’t. Sometimes, it’s the smallest of details that matter the most. That’s information almost any interviewer must have, since lawsuits on hiring decisions are becoming more common.
- **How to reach the goal.** In the end, the goal of any interview is to hire the best possible person for the job. Several steps can get you there, and several stand in your way. Learn to push aside extraneous information and use what really matters.
- **How to set the timeline for an interview.** Interviews that drag on are the classic case of more being less. Effective interviewers know how to run a tight, compact session that works to the benefit of the candidate and the employer.
- **How to do a post-interview.** After all the info and data are in, it’s decision time. Does your organization put off the decision and encourage everyone to sleep on it? A change in thinking can lead to hiring decisions that are quick and good. Included is a handy form that interviewers can use as a tool to guide them.
- **Summary.** Have a picture – experience, skills, abilities, attitudes – of what you consider to be the ideal candidate. Go into the process committed to making a quick, confident decision, and learn from past mistakes.

The Executive Report

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How many times – especially after someone’s performance failure or termination – have you asked yourself, “How did that person ever get hired in the first place?”?

There could be a lot of answers to that question. But there is one point in the process that nearly always plays a part in a bad hire – the interview.

That’s because the interview is the component with the most wiggle room – the area that’s most ripe for misinterpretation, misunderstanding and just plain missing the mark. Think about it. Just about every other piece of the hiring process has fairly narrow boundaries and focus.

For instance:

The cover letter: It’s rare that you’d rely on the content of a cover letter to make your hiring decision. All you’re looking for is the candidate’s basic goals and any outstanding qualities that jump out. Remember, no one ever said, “Gee, we made a mistake in hiring him because of his cover letter.”

The application: With some variations, it’s usually pretty straightforward “name, rank and serial number” type of stuff. Few answers are open to interpretation. If they are, then you probably need to develop a new application form.

The resume: Yes, there’s fluff and sometimes even misrepresentation of credentials. Still, you can go over the information and figure out whether

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the applicant has the basics of what you're looking for. And the fluff and misrepresentation can be easily filtered out with some background checking and a few pointed questions. In fact, some experienced interviewers don't even look at the resume, to avoid being influenced by what the *candidate wants the interviewer to know*, rather than what the *interviewer wants to know*.

You're the chairperson

The interview is where the train can go off the track pretty quickly, with disastrous results for the prospective employer and employee.

So let's cover how you should run an interview to keep everyone on track and ensure that you and your company get the best possible hire out of the process.

Begin by thinking of yourself as the chairperson of a meeting. As such it's up to you to set the agenda and keep it moving in the right direction. You can do that, after the formal introductions and greetings, by giving the applicant a summary of what's to be accomplished:

- Describe your role in the company and the position for which the candidate is being interviewed.
- Outline the parts of the meeting. For example, you could say, "We have a good opportunity for the right individual. I'd like to spend the first part of our meeting by telling you a little bit about our company. Then we'll discuss your background and I'll give you a chance to ask questions."

Nobody said it was easy

Statistics from the federal government and independent researchers show what hiring managers face when trying to find and select just the right employees:

- The U.S. Department of Justice says 33% of all hires will steal from their employers.
- A leading national background-checking firm reports that 25% of all resumes have major omissions, lies and misrepresentations.
- The U.S. Department of Labor reports 50% of all new employees are gone within the first six months on the job.

And that's what managers have to deal with even *before* deciding whether the applicant is qualified!

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Describing the organization

We should take a minute or two to talk about your description of the company. It's an important and often overlooked part of the interview.

First, realize that interviewing is a two-way street. The candidate is interviewing you while you're interviewing the candidate. That means you should be selling your company as the type of place where the candidate wants to work.

Now, an interviewer may be thinking, "Well, the candidate is the one who wants the job. Why should I have to act as if our company is under the microscope?"

The answer is simple: Mediocre or poor candidates really won't care about the company, its goals, its successes. Those candidates just want a job, any job. Strong candidates, however, are looking for a top-notch, high-performance place to build a career. If you don't portray your company as that kind of place, you'll end up attracting and hiring a lot of mediocre types, or worse. So let's talk about how you create the interview environment that attracts high-performance people.

Generally, after the introductions and welcoming formalities, you'll want to kick off the interview with a brief rundown of:

- Your company's significant strengths and recent accomplishments and successes, including whether the company has been featured in the news or an industry setting in a positive way
- The strategies for growth – long term and short term – and how a good hire would fit into those strategies
- What makes your company different from others in the industry or region, and
- Success stories of recent hires – people who've been rewarded for hard work and top performance.

3 'don'ts'

A few "don'ts" about this part of the interview:

Don't oversell by trying to depict your company as perfect. There are good employers, but there are no perfect employers – and smart candidates know that. Emphasize your company's strengths, not its perfection.

Don't try to lift your company's rep by bad-mouthing a competitor. Negative campaigning attracts negative people.

Don't make promises. For instance, when discussing how others have succeeded, some interviewers are tempted to say, "And you'll probably get a good raise after your first year."

The interview is a bad time to make that kind of guarantee, and doing so could put the interviewer on shaky legal ground if the guarantee isn't met.

The red flag

OK, you've set the stage and explained why the candidate would want to work for your company.

Before we move on to the part about questions, let's talk about what to do when a candidate sends up a red flag by saying or doing something that lets you know right away that this isn't the person for the job.

For instance, one interviewer we know

Legal case No. 1: 'But she wasn't pregnant'

Consider the facts of this real-life lawsuit that grew out of an interview, and see if you can guess the outcome. (*Answer on next page*):

- During an employment interview, when asked about gaps in her work history, an applicant volunteered that she'd had several complicated pregnancies that required her to leave previous jobs. She also said that she was not pregnant at the time of the interview.
- The supervisor who was holding the interview mentioned that regular attendance was a crucial part of the job and followed up with, "Since pregnancy is risky for you, do you anticipate getting pregnant in the future?"
- The applicant didn't get the job and later sued for pregnancy discrimination, noting the supervisor's comment as part of the evidence for her suit.

The supervisor said there could be no pregnancy discrimination because the woman wasn't pregnant. Who won the case?

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was evaluating candidates for a customer-service position. And one candidate asked, "If a customer starts to use foul language, is it OK if I curse at him, too?"

What then?

Don't feel obligated to give this person the same amount of time and in-depth interview that you would give to an apparently good candidate. Have a response ready for such instances, one that lets you easily close out the interview, and be sure to make a note to yourself of why you chose to do so.

You probably don't want to end the interview immediately after the red flag. You can ask a few questions, and then ease into your prepared close-out statement. For example: "OK, thanks. I think we have all the information we need for now. We'll be in touch. Let me show you out."

Key questions

Assume you have a viable candidate sitting across the table, and you want to learn as much as you can to make an informed decision. We'll begin there.

You should have a written list of questions strictly related to the position – questions that get to the heart of whether the candidate has the basic skills and knowledge for the job.

Often, the nature of those questions will depend on several factors, including the type and level of the position.

In other words, you probably wouldn't ask the same questions of someone just out of school as you would someone who has 10 years of experience.

Case No. 1: Answer

This case went through several costly appeals before the company finally won.

In the end, the company was able to show this candidate was less qualified than the person it hired.

You are probably aware that federal law prohibits employers from taking an adverse action against someone, such as not hiring a person, because that person might be pregnant or might become pregnant in the future.

In this real-life case, because of one comment by an interviewer, the company was tied up in court for months and spent thousands for legal bills.

Cite: *Kocak v. Community Health, Inc.*

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Why the same questions?

Some interviewers object to using the same questions for all candidates. The common reason is: "I prefer a free-flowing, back and forth interview, and don't want to be boxed in with the same questions."

Certainly, there's room for variation and flexibility in interviews, depending often on how the candidate responds. Variation and flexibility are OK. Still, there are at least two good reasons for using the same questions as the foundation of the interview – besides drawing good information out of the candidate:

1. *You'll have a tested set of questions you can rely on.* From experience, you know they'll work (and know which ones don't work and should be dropped). To make sure you have confidence in those questions, you can review them with your HR manager to spot any holes or inconsistencies.
2. *They'll help protect you against charges of discrimination.* Using different questions or methods can be dangerous, because some candidates might perceive that they didn't get a fair chance – or didn't get the same chance as another candidate who ended up getting the job.

If the rejected candidate can cite different treatment and is a member of what's called a "protected" group – because of race, gender, religion or other traits – you could end up having to explain your choice to a lawyer.

Case No. 2: Answer

The company won when a judge dismissed the suit.

The ruling rested on the fact that the supervisor's comments – and rejection of the candidate – related strictly to the person's ability, or inability, to perform one of the main functions of the job: Communicating with people from outside the company.

Note: Be aware that written comments can be called into evidence in a lawsuit. That's why it's best to only write down things that are strictly related to the candidate's qualifications and suitability for the job – or don't write any notes at all.

Cite: *Lochard v. Provena St. Joseph Medical Center*

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Focused questions

The use of so-called “focus” interview questions is an option dependent on where you are in the search process and what type of job you’re looking to fill.

Typically, focused questions are designed to learn more about the candidate’s suitability for a specific job, rather than general suitability as a fit for the organization or general work habits, attitudes, and so on.

Also, typically, focused questions are used at a more advanced stage in the process – generally at the second or third interview. That doesn’t mean you can’t use focused questions at an initial interview. Whether you do or don’t depends on the specific process your organization uses to recruit and hire. For instance, some organizations choose a likely candidate early in the process, and in such organizations, focused questions might be used early on.

The key point isn’t *when* you use them; it’s *how* you use them.

Probably the best way to explain the use of focused questions is by example. So let’s say a company is interviewing for the position of sales manager. A thorough interviewer would ask all the types of question we’ve described so far, and then get to the focused questions. For the sales manager position example, those questions might be:

- *What are your biggest accomplishments in the area of sales or sales management so far in your career?* You want to learn whether the person has reached the level of expectation for the particular position. Listen carefully to the answer. It’s not enough for the person to say, “I increased sales 50%.” What you want to know is how the person did it, and whether those methods will translate to your organization – or maybe even improve upon what your organization is doing now.
- *What were your biggest mistakes in the area of sales or sales management, and what did you learn from them?* Every job has its bumps. The general questions described earlier should give you a picture about the person’s general attitude when encountering bumps. This focused question, and its response, gives you a sharper picture of how the person handles setbacks and mistakes in the specific position.

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Those are two examples. The universe of focused questions is almost unlimited, depending on the interviewer and position in question. Some interviewers will learn all they need from just one focused question. Other interviewers may want to ask several.

Picking up on cues

If interviews were just about questions and answers, we could just write down the questions and ask candidates to respond in writing.

Of course interviews are about much more than just questions and answers. A lot of what you get from candidates lies in how they answer – their language, mannerisms and expressions, for instance. Or in what you might call the parenthetical statements they make.

Let's not make the mistake of believing we can use mannerisms as a crystal ball to tell, for instance, if a candidate is lying. We can't. Still, we can study some typical traits and what they generally reveal about a candidate. For example:

- **Complaints about current job or boss.** That's a sign the candidate thinks "it's everyone else's fault," and an indicator of questionable loyalty.
- **Speaking quickly before processing a question, or cutting off your question.** If the answer's on-target, maybe that's

Legal case No. 3: 'I was only trying to help'

Consider the facts of this real-life lawsuit that grew out of an interview, and see if you can guess the outcome. (*Answer on next page.*)

- During a series of hiring interviews, a supervisor asks essentially the same questions to each candidate.
- To determine the effectiveness and fairness of the questions, the supervisor makes notes about the answers and labels each set of answers according to the candidates race or gender.
- Then the supervisor analyzes the answers to be sure everyone had a fair shot.
- When a white male is picked for the position, some of the minority candidates challenge the choice in a lawsuit, and the company is forced to produce the selection documentation, including the supervisor's notes on race and gender.

Who won the case?

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fine. You might have a quick thinker in front of you. Otherwise, though, the person may be a careless worker who lacks preparation.

- **Pretending to know all about your organization.** Someone who studies the company beforehand is a candidate worth considering. But you'll know when the person crosses the line and professes to know more than you do. That's a danger sign of conceit.
- **Criticizing, lacking respect for or poking fun at junior staff, support people or others in lesser positions.** You're probably dealing with an inconsiderate bully.
- **Showing poor manners.** Smart candidates pick up the expected manners and culture of a prospective employer. Ignoring the manners and culture is a sign that someone's oblivious to what's appropriate and what's inappropriate.

Answering questions

At this point, the candidate may have already asked questions. That's fine, but be sure to invite more questions. You can do that by saying, "I think I've told you everything you need to know for now about our company and what we're looking for. Now, do you have questions or observations you'd like me to address?"

Answer any questions as briefly as possible. Try to avoid long answers, and leave it to the candidate to ask follow-up questions.

Close all interviews on a positive note. Thank the candidates for their time and interest, and let them know what to expect next. Say, for example, you'll be interviewing in this first round for the next two weeks. And add: "We'll let you know by the end of next week as to whether and when we

Case No. 3: Answer

A judge denied the company's request to dismiss the case and instead allowed it to proceed to trial as a class-action lawsuit – the type that's usually the most expensive for the company.

The judge said any note-taking that identified candidates by race or gender was suspect on its face and could be interpreted as part of a system that is discriminatory.

Cite: Modtland v. Mills Farms, Inc.

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might meet again.” If the person seems like a prime candidate, be encouraging and mention that you look forward to the next meeting.

The goal

Let’s consider what you’re looking for at the end of the hiring process. In other words, what type of candidate do you want to emerge?

Certainly, in general terms, you want the best possible person for the job. But what else should you expect out of the interview?

The person should have displayed:

- A mastery of the skills and abilities required to do the job. The person has what it takes.
- An ability to learn the job by expanding on existing skills and abilities. The person has shown an aptitude for the position or for reaching a higher position.
- Fitness for the culture of your workplace. In dress, mannerisms, and personality, the person has shown an ability to blend with your company. That doesn’t mean an interviewer should seek to hire look-alike, act-alike robots. It means an interviewer should have an understanding of the type of person whose makeup matches the organization and its needs.

What you don’t want

Bad hires usually result from setting the wrong goals or wrong expectations for an interview. When mistakes like that are made, interviewers get someone:

- They “liked.” The interviewer followed the misleading adage to hire someone with whom you wouldn’t mind being stuck in an elevator. In other words, the interviewer hired a friend, not a worker.
- They enjoyed interviewing. The interviewer probably had a friendly chat with the candidate and they discussed mutual interests, rather than the job. In other words, the interviewer hired himself or herself.

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- **They settled for.** Interviewing is time-consuming work. There's a temptation to close the process by hiring someone, anyone. That someone often ends up being a poor performer or terminated.

Let's end at the beginning of the process. Know what you want. When you begin interviewing, have a clear picture of the type of person you want – the perfect employee. And then gear your questions and choices based on that picture.

The time line

The last thing we'll describe about the actual interview is the time line for the process. You should have a sense of how long each section of the interview should last, and in that way know about how long the whole interview should take.

Of course, you're not tied to strict timing. Some interviews will run longer than others because, for instance, some candidates will ask more questions or give more detailed answers. Still, you want to make sure you have some sense about the time.

Here's a rough guideline of the time required for each section:

- Formal introductions and greetings: 2 minutes
- Setting the agenda: 5 minutes
- Questions to the candidate: 15 minutes
- Answering candidate questions: 5 minutes
- Closing: 3 minutes

That means you should be able to wrap up an interview in about 30 minutes. If you find you're running much more or less than that, take a look at which sections seem to be throwing you off schedule, and adjust accordingly.

We'll cover more on why timing and timeliness are important for the post-interview process in the next section, but for now let's focus on why shorter is better for the actual interview.

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Interviews reach a point of diminishing returns once the meeting goes past about 30 minutes. One problem is that a lengthy interview tends to pack too much information together, causing overload. Another is that the longer you go on, the less you tend to remember.

Many successful high-level executives put a 30-minute deadline on meetings – even ones held to make major decisions. Those executives know that at some point you're getting more information, but it's probably not better information. The same holds true for interviews.

The post-interview

A company's post-interview process can vary, but the first rule about it is:

Do it quickly.

Some companies use an effective system in which, right after the meeting with the candidate has concluded, the interviewer sits down and writes a paragraph or two describing the candidate, including all the positives and negatives, and concluding with a "hire" or "no hire" designation. Deadline for completion: 20 minutes.

Why so quick? Because if you put it off or drag it out:

- **The mind gets distracted by other tasks and other priorities.** It gets difficult to articulate your impressions of a candidate after you've immersed yourself in, for instance, a budget meeting, solving an employee problem or even putting together a grocery list.
- **Procrastination rarely leads to clarity.** "Sleep on it" is the creed of someone who's avoiding a decision.
- **Time is the enemy of memory.** Just ask any trial lawyer who's trying to win a case. The more time that passes between the events and the witnesses' depiction of the events, the less accurate the depictions tend to be.

And why so decisive about "hire" or "no hire"?

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The answer boils down to a simple equation, assuming you've implemented an effective interviewing process:

If your immediate impressions of the candidate don't lead you to firmly and confidently put the "hire" label" on a candidate, then the only other choice is "no hire."

Remember what we said earlier about the mistake of "settling" for someone who didn't really make the cut? Settling more often happens when an interviewer puts off the evaluation and decision.

The post-interview form

As mentioned earlier, some good companies use an evaluation process involving the writing of a few paragraphs about the candidate. That's an effective way, but not the only effective way.

Others might prefer a set evaluation form.

The typical post-interview form follows the format that some companies use when doing performance evaluations on employees. The form is divided into several similar parts, one each for the skill or ability you deem important for the job.

So, for instance, if one of the skills involves the ability to supervise others, one part of the form would look something like this:

Ability to supervise others

(check one)

Exceeds what we're looking for in an ideal candidate

Meets what we're looking for in an ideal candidate

Less than what we're looking for in an ideal candidate

Doesn't meet the requirements

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You could have a similar page for each of the skills, abilities and qualities you're looking for in a candidate: "technical skills," "ability to communicate," "experience" and so on.

The form isn't designed to replace decision making; it's designed to help decision making. It's a tool that helps an interviewer organize and visualize thoughts and impressions about a candidate.

Summary

Some ideas to keep in mind when preparing for or doing the interview:

- **Have a picture – experience, skills, abilities, attitudes, etc. – of what you consider to be the ideal candidate.** As the saying goes, "If you don't know where you're headed, how will you know how to get there?" Many interviewing sessions end badly, and with poor candidates, because the interviewer was uncertain about the goal. You may not end up with the perfect candidate, but you'll at least know one when you see one, or someone who's close to what you consider perfect.
- **Go into the process committed to making a quick, confident decision.** That approach isn't designed to just save time; it's also designed to make certain the interviewer is focused on getting the vital information needed to make a good choice. An interviewer who goes into the situation thinking, "I have plenty of time" or "I can always get more information later" is one who'll almost certainly conduct an ineffective interview.
- **Learn from mistakes – yours and others'.** Every organization makes a bad hire from time to time. Do an audit of your interviewing process from time to time – enlisting the help of your Human Resources group, if possible – to see where mistakes were made when you ended up with a poor performer. Did you ask the right questions? Did someone fail to pick up on clear cues that the person would cause problems? Did members of the hiring team confer and exchange enough information?