

People Matters: Interviewers from hell

How to Conduct a Successful Interview



Are you 'The Interviewer from hell'? Recruiting is no easy task, and when you are interviewing new staff, what impression are you making to the applicant?

You may have read in the press* recently that nose-picking, breaking wind, swearing, flirting and sexual innuendo are just some of the habits of prospective employers that put job-hunters off. Horror of horrors to be sat in front of such a moron at an interview. While the applicants are on their best behaviour, are you?

Interview faux pas – the worst offences

- Hanging around – candidates frequently kept waiting for up to three hours without explanation.
- Bad presentation – scruffy interviewers were a major turn off.
- Unread CVs – a lack of basic preparation infuriated jobseekers.
- Inappropriate flirting – innuendoes not appreciated.
- Bad language – bosses swore at staff.
- Taking calls – people left the interview for phone calls.

You can do it better

Interviewing techniques are skills that can be learned, but there are definite no-go areas, especially in this day of equality and political correctness. Don't ask if someone is married, single, divorced, has a life partner (same sex or otherwise), is pregnant, how many children do they have, their age (the applicant's or the children's), what is their religion or ethnic origin. If you do, and you fail to offer the job, then you could end up in court defending a discrimination charge. None of these is relevant to the person's ability to do the job. Always show respect to the applicant and don't disappear halfway through the interview for a quick fag and a pint or to walk the dog – it has been known to happen.

Interviews are stressful for everyone – the interviewer and the applicant alike – and everything should be done to put people at their ease without detracting from the interview itself. Here are some guidelines on how to conduct a successful interview.

First of all, what is an interview?

An interview is a meeting – a conversation with a purpose. The interviewer is responsible for managing the conversation and achieving the required objective which is: *to recruit the right person for the job.*

At the interview you should:

- Combine your knowledge and professionalism.
- Avoid expensive mistakes through inadequate interviewing and preparation.
- Not discriminate.

It is so very important that the selection interview is conducted in a thoroughly professional manner for the following reasons:

- Choosing the right candidate depends largely on how well you have carried out the interview.
- Things said at the interview about terms and conditions of employment can form part of the contract.
- Ethnic and other minority candidates who do not feel they have been given a fair opportunity to impress selectors may interpret the interviewers' failings as discrimination.

Preparation is vital

- Prepare a job description which describes the job in terms of the range of tasks which you want your employee to undertake.
- Write down what your expectations are from the person you are recruiting – ability, qualifications, experience.
- Know what the salary range is and what benefits are available to the applicant.
- Use this as the basis for drawing up an objective person specification.
- Decide who will conduct the interview. Preferably there should be more than one but generally not more than three interviewers. Make sure that each interviewer is:
 - i. Clear about the main selection criteria.
 - ii. Assigned a definite area of questioning and discusses prepared questions with fellow interviewers.
 - iii. Briefed on responses to any likely questions raised by interviewees.
 - iv. Made aware of the dangers of discriminating, even indirectly, during an interview.

Give each interviewer

- A copy of the job description and person specification.
- A copy of the application form and C.V.
- Notepad/pens for interview assessment and comments.
- Make sure that the same interviewers are available for every interview for the same post.

Interviewing Tips

- Make sure the candidates are greeted as they enter your premises, are escorted to the interview room and are escorted off your premises following their interview.
- Greet each candidate as s/he enters the room. Remember to introduce the interviewers by name and job function.
- Avoid interruptions.
- Are there provisions for wheelchair access or dogs?
- Try to make the candidate feel comfortable from the outset by asking general questions unconnected to the job itself, e.g. questions about their journey or comments on the weather.
- Explain the job to the candidate.
- Explain your company's main terms and conditions of employment to the candidate – things like hours of work, holidays, pay days and pay reviews, etc.
- Aggressive questioning at any time during the interview is not recommended.
- Questions should focus upon information given in the application form or CV. Particular emphasis should be placed on the applicant's present job, previous experience in detail and how this relates to the job vacancy for which s/he is applying.
- Open questions encourage candidates to express themselves freely. An open question is one which cannot be answered by a 'yes' or 'no'. Questions which begin with 'how' 'what' 'why' 'when' 'where' 'who'.
- Specific or closed questions make sure that all the facts are drawn out.
- Behavioural questions clarify how the individual solved problems, dealt with difficulties or applied principles.
- Prepare hypothetical questions to test how the individual would think through and approach a problem which could arise in your organisation. This will also help to test their knowledge.
- Hypothetical and behavioural questions are more appropriate in the 'middle' of the interview.
- Probing questions can obtain further details. You should never accept a partial answer or one that dodges a question. If you are suspicious of an answer probe by either rephrasing the question or asking further questions to find out more.
- Don't ask discriminatory questions.
- Don't ask a person from an ethnic minority whether his/her English is 'up to the job'. You may ask all candidates for proof of their ability in writing English (GCSE/'A'level, degree or equivalent standard gained in another country) providing it is needed for the job.
- You cannot ask some candidates about arrangements for taking care of their children. However, you may ask all candidates 'Do the hours of work pose any problems for you?'
- You cannot ask a disabled candidate if s/he can cope with the job. You may ask all candidates 'Would you be physically able to do the job?'
- Listen carefully to pick up inconsistencies and assimilate information. Interviewing is about listening carefully to what the candidates are saying and watching how they are saying it. The skilled interviewer who can read body language may find this 'says' more about the candidate than words can.
- Take brief notes because they are essential but try not to distract the candidate.
- Make sure that you allow time at the end of the interview for the candidate to ask questions and invite him or her to do so.
- Thank the candidate for attending and tell him or her what will happen next and when a decision will be made.

After the Interview

You are now faced with the final decision so you must:

- Evaluate and assess the performance of each candidate solely on the basis of pre-determined criteria for the post as set down in the job and person specification.
- Discount judgements based solely on how personable the candidate was and whether one actually warmed to him or her. Make allowances for slight nervousness. You can consider whether you feel that the candidate is a good 'fit' in terms of their personality and general impression provided you use this objectively and not as a means of discrimination.
- Compare job interview assessments or remarks with those of your fellow interviewers and try to agree on the person to be appointed. If you cannot then it may be necessary to second interview those who are equally impressive or alternatively consider not appointing at all.
- Record why those unsuccessful candidates were rejected.
- Retain forms for 12 months.
- Notify the successful candidate. Remember that a verbal offer of a job can constitute a contract, so be certain that you are making the right decision.
- Make it clear to the successful candidate that the job offer is made subject to receiving satisfactory references. You could be in breach of contract if you fail to make this clear and then subsequently withdraw the offer because of an unsatisfactory reference.

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*Taken from an article appearing in the Daily Express (15th March 2004) and a survey by Reed Recruitment – www.reed.co.uk

Useful publications:

Interviewing: Liz Edwards published by The Industrial Society

How to Recruit: Iain Maitland published by Gower Publishing

Diane Mark Consultancy London – The People Business

Diane Mark has written this for *The Food Club* and she is a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development with over 25 years experience dealing with all types of HR and employment issues. These range from the preparation and implementation of recruitment strategies; ensuring good practice and procedures are in place; employee relations; dealing with sensitive personnel issues through to terminating the contract, including managing redundancy.