

13 Reasons

MANAGERS ARE "UNLUCKY"
WHEN MAKING HIRING DECISIONS

Nelson Scott

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Introduction

Shirley was disappointed and angry. The newest employee in her department was not working out the way she thought he would. Within Harold's first weeks on the job, Shirley sensed something wasn't right.

This was not the person she had interviewed and hired. During the interview, Harold seemed to share Shirley's views on customer service, teamwork and the importance of time management and organization. However, his job performance told a different story.

Harold was often late and his work area was a disaster. Shirley had first-hand evidence of his indifference and occasional rudeness towards customers. Co-workers seemed to go out of their way to avoid contact with their new colleague.

What had happened? How had a seemingly perfect hire gone so wrong? In conversation with other managers Shirley concluded that she "was just unlucky." They understood. "You can't be lucky every time you hire. You'll have better luck next time," they assured her.

Maybe, maybe not. Shirley and her colleagues are typical of many managers who mistakenly believe that successful hiring is a matter of luck. It turns out that luck doesn't have much to do with it. There are reasons—13 of them—why managers are "unlucky" when hiring. Hiring success depends on more than wishing for better luck the next time a manager rolls the dice. Better luck comes to those who understand the common mistakes managers make when hiring and act to avoid them.

“

“By and large, executives make poor promotional and staffing decisions. By all accounts...at most one-third of such decisions turn out all right; one-third are minimally effective; and one-third are outright failures.”

**— Peter F. Drucker,
management guru**

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1: Hasty Hiring

The pressure that a manager feels to fill a vacant position can be intense. But acting quickly to alleviate the short-term pain of having a vacancy can be replaced by the long-term pain of having the wrong person in place.

The pressure to fill the vacancy can come from customers who feel service suffers during times of staff shortages, from staff who need to take on extra tasks to compensate for the missing staff member, and from the bottom line, which suffers from the requirement to pay overtime to those employees who work extra hours to complete tasks that would otherwise go undone.

Some managers also feel internal pressure to hire quickly. They feel there is nothing worse than having a vacant position. The sooner it's filled, the better. Having someone in the position—anyone—is better than having a gap in the staff lineup.

Finding a new staff member is another task on a long to-do list, another task to be crossed off as soon as possible. There are other, more important tasks that require the manager's attention. Former Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca would disagree. "The most important thing any manager can do is hire the right new people."

Finding the right person to replace an employee who has left, or to fill a newly created position, can take weeks or months. The hiring process



should never be driven by a to-do list, but by a desire to hire the right person—no matter how long it takes.

Many business gurus counsel the managers to “hire slowly.” Hasty hiring can lead to poor hiring decisions. Hiring the wrong person can create several problems that can be more damaging than leaving a position vacant. A new employee with poor customer service skills can upset customers, driving them and their money elsewhere. The wrong person can have a negative impact on the workplace, which may reduce morale and engagement, and cause some staff members to follow customers out the door.

Underperforming employees require more supervision and coaching, another demand on a busy manager’s time. If efforts to get the underperformer up to speed are unsuccessful, there is a need to terminate that individual. This is not without its own costs—termination takes time, there may be severance payments, and the process of firing someone is fraught with emotional costs that can be felt by managers and other staff, in addition to the individual receiving the pink slip.

Better to avoid all this by hiring the right person, even if this takes more time. The long-term benefits are worth the wait. The right person will be more productive, increase customer satisfaction and contribute to a positive work environment. Hire the right persons and within a few months no one will remember how long it took—just how well it turned out.

2: Not Understanding What Makes Employees Successful

Are there people on your staff you would like to clone? Top performers? Who are the best people with whom you have ever worked?

What do these top performers do that makes them successful? What skills and attitudes do they bring to work? How do they handle common workplace situations?

Knowing the answers to these questions will help you understand what you are looking for when hiring. You can gather this information in several ways. Observe the behaviour of top performers. Ask other managers to describe what top performers do that makes them successful. And because no supervisors will ever see everything staff members do, ask top performers themselves. What do they do that makes a difference?

“I know that Mrs. Jones was upset when she came in today, but she appeared happy when she left. What did you say or do that seemed to make the difference?” Follow up by asking, “Is this something you have done to calm upset customers in the past? Has it worked with other customers?”

“

“Hiring right means carefully defining the job to be filled. What characteristics are possessed by people who are successful in that job? Are you systematically trying to find people with similar characteristics to add to your staff? As elementary as that might seem, it is seldom practised.”

**—Betsy Sanders,
Fabled Service**

”

“I have been looking at how well your students do on exams. What do you feel you do that makes the difference?”

“The turnover in your department is quite low. To what do you attribute this? What do you do that seems to cause them to stay?”

Use what you learn from your research to identify themes to be explored during the selection process. Search resumes and application forms for evidence of strengths related to these themes, to identify people to invite to be interviewed. During interviews, ask questions that will lead to information that will enable you to assess how well the candidates have performed in situations that your top performers have mastered.

In addition to looking at top performers, you could examine what poor performers do. What behaviours contribute to their lack of success? What can we learn from these observations that will help identify warning signs when reviewing resumes and interviewing candidates?

Managers who know what they are looking for when hiring new staff are more likely to find the right new people for their organization—people who help move the organization forward by doing the right things in the right way and don't repeat the behaviours associated with underperformers.

- What do they read? There is no value in advertising in newspapers if the people who you are trying to recruit don't read the local newspaper.
- How tech savvy are they? Are they likely to visit sites such as Monster.com or Educationcanada? Are they on Facebook or LinkedIn?
- Are the people you wish to recruit actively searching for new positions?

Whatever approach you take, there are ways to make your recruitment efforts more successful:

- Ensure that yours is a workplace where people want to be. This means paying people fairly and creating an environment where people want to be—a fun place to work where people are told regularly that they are valued for who they are and appreciated for how they contribute and what they achieve. People will stay where they are appreciated, which will reduce the need to recruit. Word will get out about your workplace. When people hear about your environment of appreciation, it is where they will want to be.
- When it is time to advertise, be creative. So many job ads look just like any other job ad. They describe wages and benefits, rather than how much fun the workplace is. Instead of screaming the benefits of working for the organization, they seemingly mumble, “Come work for us! We are just as boring as the next guy.”

Read more about
employment advertising at:
[www.seaconsultingonline.com/
Articles/Recruitment/
recruit_13.htm](http://www.seaconsultingonline.com/Articles/Recruitment/recruit_13.htm)

- Not all potential candidates for your position even know that they want to find a new job. Consider how you can reach those who aren't looking to change jobs. This is where notices posted where customers will see them become a useful technique. Signs on the street in front of a business work for some (one business estimates that this is the source of more than 75 per cent of its applicants).
- Networking, whether through social media or face-to-face, can be an effective way to source candidates. In the business of recruiting, it's not "who you know," but "who you know who knows someone who is looking for a job." Don't overlook current employees as a valuable source within your "network" for referring potential employees. Who do they know who is looking—or could be looking—for a new job? Is there someone they would recommend? Be proactive. Don't wait for current staff to step forward with names. Let them know you are looking for people. Ask them to suggest that their friends or acquaintances apply. Often the people they know will have similar attitudes and work habits as your current employees do. In light of this, it would be wise to consider people recommended by your top performers first, before those suggested by average or underperformers.
- Never stop recruiting, even when all your positions are filled. You are never sure what tomorrow will bring. Always accept resumes and meet with people who look promising. Let them know that you aren't hiring

now, but may be in the future. Ask, “May we keep you in mind and contact you when a suitable position becomes available?” Notice how different this sounds than the more dismissive “We’ll keep you in mind in case a position opens up.”

Avoid posting a message that, “We are not currently accepting resumes,” unless:

- You are planning on going out of business and won’t need any staff
- You are a one-person operation and don’t plan on growing your business
- You are such an optimist that you believe that none of your current staff will ever quit, retire or die

Maintaining a list of people with the right qualifications, attitudes and work skills who you would like to hire when the opportunity presents itself will reduce the amount of scrambling you have to do when a vacancy does occur. It will take less time to hire the right new person. This is good news for managers who like to cross tasks off their to-do lists.

Faced with the myriad of recruitment options, the challenge is to select approaches that will get the best results—lots of interest from people with the right qualifications, the right attitude and the right skills—just what you already find among your top performers.

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“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.”

– Advertisement reportedly placed by Ernest Shackleton to recruit men to accompany him to Antarctica, 1913

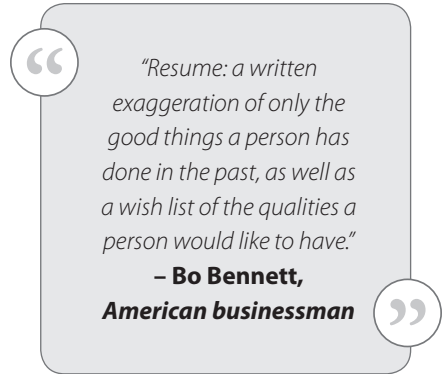
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4: Too Little Attention Paid to Resumes

If only managers and supervisors paid more attention to the information contained on resumes, there would be fewer circumstances of the wrong people being invited to interviews and people with the right training and experience being missed. In many cases, resumes receive only a cursory glance before a decision is made to continue considering the applicant or to relegate the resume to the rejection pile.

Job-seekers carefully craft attractive resumes. They choose just the right words to show themselves in the best light. Managers should take as much care when reviewing resumes before deciding whom to interview. They need to look for evidence that the person behind the resume has the same attitudes and skills as their best employees. They must avoid being impressed by the latest buzzwords.

Depending on the position that is to be filled, there are different pieces of information to look for. Does the candidate meet the minimum education requirements? Has he the right credentials? The skills and attitudes? What about experience? This is not about time served but about what they did in previous work situations. What tasks was she assigned? What skills did she use that would be relevant in your vacant position? In other words, has she



“Resume: a written exaggeration of only the good things a person has done in the past, as well as a wish list of the qualities a person would like to have.”

**– Bo Bennett,
American businessman**

done the right things? Has the applicant been given progressively greater responsibility in previous positions?

A review of the resume may raise red flags, such as gaps in employment or frequent job changes. These should not necessarily be barriers to consideration, but a note should be made to seek explanations during the interview. The applicant may have spent time travelling, have been recovering from illness or injury, or caring for young children or an elderly parent. Job changes may have been the result of economic factors beyond the applicant's control.

The interviewer should schedule time at the beginning of the interview for inquiries related to employment gaps or job changes. This time can also be used to ask about terms the candidate used in preparing his resume with which the interviewer is unfamiliar. Sometimes, if interviewers feel they should be aware of these terms, they may be reluctant to ask.

Possible embarrassment is no reason to fail to ask. A little embarrassment during the interview is preferable to the greater embarrassment of hiring the wrong person, who it turns out, also didn't understand the term used on the resume. He thought the words sounded good and would impress the interviewer.

Managers can learn a lot about applicants from cover letters. By writing one, an applicant demonstrates that he is interested enough in the position to write a cover letter. Better yet, the letter may contain evidence that

the applicant has researched the organization. The candidate may also use the cover letter to respond directly to information contained in the advertising of the vacancy. The applicant can show how her knowledge and experience match what the advertising asks for. How well does what she's done in the past correspond with your expectations for the person you will hire?

Resumes and application forms are an important component of the process to fill vacant positions. This is when managers and supervisors have the greatest number of potential employees from which to choose. Choose carefully, because those who are rejected at this stage are usually lost forever.

5.: Decisions Based on First Impressions

Image consultants tell us that first impressions are important. People who we meet size us up within seconds. This is no different from what can happen during interviews. Some managers decide early in an interview whether to hire or not. They allow first impressions to become lasting ones.

When this happens, interviewers stop listening for new information on which to base their hiring decision and listen only for evidence that will support a decision that is already made—reasons to hire based on a positive impression, or not to hire if the first impression was negative. If the early decision is to hire, the interview can change from an opportunity to find out as much as possible about the candidate and his ability to do the job to an effort to sell the candidate on coming to work for the interviewer's organization.

Effective interviewers suspend judgment. They understand that how an interview begins is not always indicative of how it will end. Some candidates will get off to a strong start, but falter as time passes. Others begin poorly, but the quality of the answers improves as the candidate warms to the process.

Interviewers can get past first impressions by understanding that shyness or nervousness may prevent candidates from being at their best as the interview begins. The candidate may be unfamiliar with the interview

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“In less than three seconds you make a first impression. If it's positive, you create a halo affect where everything about you is perceived to be exceptional. You make a bad one and you have to work twice as hard to prove your credentials.”

– Joanne Blake,
Personal Image Expert,
www.styleforsuccess.com

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process. It may be her first interview or it may be a long time since she last applied for a job. As the interview progresses, interviewers may hear more of what is needed to make a quality hiring decision, if they are still listening.

Occasionally, an early hiring decision is appropriate—usually when the candidate says something that disqualifies him from consideration. He may say that he is looking for short-term employment to earn some money before he returns to school or moves to Australia, when the goal of your recruitment process is to fill a permanent position. Or he may confess that he is not qualified to work in Canada, or that his criminal record will prevent him from becoming bonded, a requirement for the position. There is nothing the candidate could say in the rest of the interview that would reduce the impact of this information on your hiring decision. At this point, the interviewer should look for a tactful way of ending the interview early. There is no reason to invest time in a process than cannot possibly lead to a decision to hire.

6: Biases Get in the Way

Intentionally or not, some supervisors and managers make hiring decisions based on factors unrelated to job performance. They allow biases—something most of us have—to influence the hiring decision.

Many of these are based on grounds that are protected by human rights legislation. Ignoring for a moment the human rights laws that these decisions violate, managers need to think about how the talent pool shrinks when they eliminate candidates based on their age, gender, race, religion, family status and sexual orientation.

Other biases, while not in violation of human rights legislation, can be just as damaging to the hiring process. Just because someone attended the right university, belongs to the same service club as the interviewer, or worked for a specific employer previously that does not make him any more or less qualified for the position than other candidates. What is important is what he has done in the past, and how well that fits with your expectations of the new employee.

Websites for Canada's Human Commissions

Alberta: www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca

British Columbia: www.bchrt.bc.ca

Manitoba: www.gov.mb.ca/hrc

New Brunswick: www.gnb.ca/hrc-cdp/index-e.asp

Newfoundland & Labrador: www.gov.nl.ca/hrc

Northwest Territories: www.nwthumanrights.ca

Nova Scotia: www.gov.ns.ca/humanrights

Ontario: www.ohrc.on.ca

Prince Edward Island: www.gov.pe.ca/humanrights

Quebec: www.cdpedj.qc.ca

Saskatchewan: www.shrc.gov.sk.ca

Yukon: www.yhrc.yk.ca

Canadian Human Rights Commission:

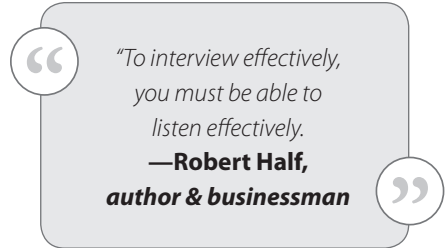
www.chrc-ccdp.ca

7: Talking Too Much

Interviews are a time for managers to get to know as much as possible about potential employees, not for the candidate to learn what a great person the interviewer is. Successful interviewers ask brief, well-designed questions and then listen to the answers. As a general rule, interviewers should not talk more than 20 per cent of the time scheduled for the interview, and most of those words should be spoken to either introduce the interview process and when wrapping things up.

In between, the KISS (Keep It Short and Simple) rule should apply. Interviewers should ask brief questions, then shut up and listen to the candidate's response. An interviewer always has the option to ask supplementary questions to clarify what the candidate said, or to seek addition information.

When interviewers ask longer questions, they may impose limits on the candidate's response. When the interviewer does this he risks inadvertently sending a signal that a perceptive candidate will pick up on about the response the interviewer is seeking.



Another danger of questions that go on too long is that they are more difficult for the candidate to understand. The candidate may provide responses based on a misunderstanding of what was asked. Or he may seek clarification from the interviewer, whose spontaneous response may inadvertently contain clues as to how the candidate should respond. The subsequent answer may better reflect what the interviewer thinks than the true beliefs of the candidate.

Interviewers who talk too much may do so because they are uncomfortable with silence. When a candidate hesitates before answering, the interviewer feels the need to fill this gap by suggesting ways in which the candidate might wish to answer or elements she might consider in her response.

Silence can become a tool that either the interviewer or candidate can use effectively. In any conversation, including during an interview, silence creates a vacuum that can draw words out of participants. Effective interviewers understand this, empowering themselves to use this tool to their advantage. They are patient. They wait for the candidate to speak. They also realize that many candidates understand the power of silence. So they resist the temptation to speak first, to offer suggestions of how to respond to questions.

They are prepared if the silence lasts too long with non-leading phrases that nonetheless prod the candidate to speak:

“Would you like me to repeat the question?”

“I know that it can be difficult to come up examples, but you need to provide me with one so I am able to compare you with other candidates.”

“Don’t worry if you can’t come up with a big example. Often a small example is enough.”

Some candidates are prepared in case they encounter a talkative interviewer. They assume the role of listeners. They listen for opportunities to agree with something the interviewer says, whether this reflects the candidate’s beliefs or not. These candidates only interrupt to agree with the points the interviewer makes. They understand that talkative interviewers often end up interviewing and hiring themselves. This is good news for the candidate. When this happens, the candidate gets the job—and the paycheck that goes with it.

8: Asking the Wrong Questions

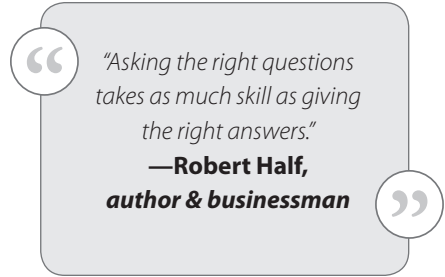
Most interviews are short. They only run about 45 to 60 minutes, including time for introductions, opening comments and concluding remarks. That's not much time for the interviewer to get to know the candidate. Given these constraints, you would think that interviewers would want to make good use of the time by asking questions that will yield relevant information that isn't available elsewhere.

Surprisingly, a great deal of interview time is wasted by interviewers asking the wrong questions—questions that yield little new information that will be useful when it is time to make the hiring decision.

Time-wasting questions fall into four categories:

Questions that yield information you all ready have. Why ask about schools and work experience when this information is already available from the candidate's resume?

Questions that the candidate will likely anticipate and for which they have well-rehearsed answers. Why ask candidates to describe their strengths or goals for the next five years? Hundreds of books and seminars prepare candidates to describe their strengths, weaknesses and future plans.



These answers will provide little information that the manager can use to make a hiring decision.

Questions any candidate could answer appropriately without lying.

Typically, these questions begin, “What would you do if..” before describing a scenario that the candidate might encounter on the job if hired. The candidate can respond by describing what he thinks he would do, what the textbooks say he should do, or what he believes this potential employer would want him to do. None of these responses is a lie, but there is no proof that the candidate can do what he says he would if he encountered the scenario the interviewer described.

Questions that are just plain ridiculous. “How many ways can you come up with to use a paperclip in one minute, beginning now?” “What is your favourite time of day?” “If you were a tree/animal/food, what type of tree/animal/food would you be?” Some will argue that these questions test the candidate’s creativity, which may be true. But will they use their creativity on the job, and if so, how? Have they ever used their creativity on the job? If you want to know about their creativity, ask them to describe ways in which they have applied creativity to solving workplace problems.

When selecting questions to ask during interviews, keep your purpose in mind: to obtain high-quality data on which to base your hiring decisions. Avoid asking questions just because other people ask them, or using questions that you were asked before you were hired (even though, as we all know, that hiring decision worked out well). While there are books and articles that promise the “101 Best Interview Questions Ever,” this doesn’t mean that these are the best questions for you to ask. Before selecting the questions you will ask, consider how you will use the information you will gather. How will it help you decide who to hire and who to pass on?

Questions asked during interviews should always yield information that is not already available and that you can use to make your hiring decision—to hire the right person.

9: Not Asking the Right Questions

Making hiring decisions requires managers and supervisors to predict the future. The best way to do this is to find out about the candidate's previous work experience and how they have performed in situations and circumstances similar to what they will encounter in your workplace.

Intuitively, we have always known that past performance is the best predictor of future performance and applied it to many aspects of our lives. We look at past performance and use this information when purchasing mutual funds. We check repair records and talk to current owners before deciding which vehicle or appliances to purchase. In professional sports, general managers look at an athlete's past performance on the field or ice before deciding who to draft or which free agents to sign. We consider the previous performances of actors before deciding if we will purchase a ticket to their latest movie.

Why wouldn't we take the same approach before purchasing the services of a new employee? Ask candidates about previous work experience. Ask questions to gather evidence of what the candidate can do, because she has done it. How a person dealt with situations in another job shows how he will likely deal with similar situations in the future.



This approach, known as behaviour description interviewing (BDI), track-record questioning or performance-based interviewing, requires interviewers to ask questions in the past tense, using phrases such as, “Give us an example of how you...” or “Describe a time when...”

Select topics for your question by focusing on the behaviour of your top performers. What makes them successful? How do they respond to situations they encounter on the job?”

Besides asking questions in the past tense, interviewers must ensure that candidates describe past experience in their responses. Tense creep happens. Candidates, consciously or not, will shift the focus to the future—after all, that’s where the job being discussed exists. The intention of this approach to interviewing is to gather evidence from the past, which members of the interview panel will use to predict how the candidate will perform in the future.

Compare how the candidate has dealt with typical on-the-job situations to how your top performers have dealt with similar situations. If what the candidate has done is in line with their behaviour, make a job offer. If it isn’t, keep looking.

10: Settling for Well-rehearsed Answers

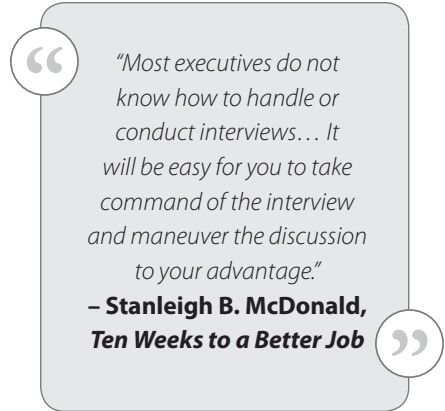
An inconvenient truth is that many candidates will be better prepared for an interview than the manager or supervisors asking the questions.

This is hardly surprising. For the candidate this is personal. It's the candidate's future that's on the line. The candidate knows that at the end of the day, she is the one being judged. She will either be hired and start collecting a paycheque, or will continue the search for a new job while living with her parents, or off her line of credit.

Some interviewers fail to understand that it's also about their future. A manager or supervisor's reputation is on the line every time a hiring decision is made. They need to find the people who will contribute to the organization's success. Hiring too many of the wrong people may put a manager or supervisor's continued employment in jeopardy.

Job-seekers are not on their own when preparing to be interviewed. Everywhere the job-seekers turn there is help to help them prepare: career counsellors; courses and seminars; books that promise a strategy to get a job within 30, 45 or 90 days, or that focus on a single aspect of the job search.

It is evident from a visit to any library or bookstore who is buying, borrowing and—one assumes—reading books about job searches and interviews. It's not managers and supervisors. For every book on recruiting



staff and conducting interviews, there are likely 10 other titles intended to guide the job-seeker through the process: preparing resumes, writing cover letters, preparing for the interview and the interview itself.

A common feature of the advice dispensed by career counsellors, courses and books is a focus on how to answer the questions that the candidates are most likely to be asked. There's information on what the interviewer is looking for when she asks the question and advice on what not to say. There are even scripts for the job-seeker to memorize and rehearse in anticipation of the question the interviewer will ask. Even if these questions are not part of the interview, candidates will look for ways to insert what they have rehearsed into the conversations.

It was likely easier in the past to suggest answers to questions that were common such as, "What are your career goals?" "What do you see yourself doing in five years?" or "Why is teamwork important?" Preparing candidates for questions that ask them about their previous work experience may be more difficult than for traditional questions, but as BDI-type interviews have become more common, so has the advice on how to respond.

Well-coached candidates will be prepared with well-rehearsed examples to be used when responding to the themes that interviewers frequently explore during interviews, such as teamwork, time management, customer service and dealing with conflict.

What does this mean? Should interviewers abandon these common themes in favour of more obscure questions that the candidate are less likely to expect? Not if teamwork and dealing with conflict are key to on-the-job success. Interviewers need to learn if potential employees are team players or have strategies to deal with conflict.

Interviewers must expect candidates to arrive with prepared responses and be ready to probe beyond the veneer of well-rehearsed responses. Dig deeper into the candidate's experience. Ask the candidate to tell you more. Challenge him to come up with another example.

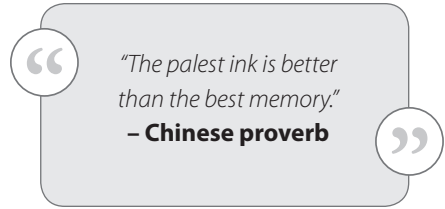
11: No Notes

Some managers and supervisors believe it is unnecessary to take notes during interviews. After all, they have great memories. Just like elephants, they never forget. Their minds are steel traps. Until it's time to recall what was said, and by whom, during the five interviews they conducted today. Prying that steel trap open at the end of the day can prove difficult.

“Who said that? Was it the guy wearing the red tie or the woman in the blue dress? I wish I could remember.”

The challenge is amplified when the interviews are spread out over two or three days, which is common due to the difficulty of scheduling interview time into a manager's already busy schedule. Every time the manager steps away from the interview process to deal with other tasks between interviews, each of these tasks create other memories that interfere with the manager's ability to recall what the various candidates said.

The quality of your hiring decision depends on the quality of the information you have available when it is time to make your decision. If you can't recall what was said during the interviews, or can't remember who said what, you will be making a decision that is critical to your organization's long-term success based on limited data. The time you invested in scheduling and conducting interviews was wasted. And the hiring decision that you make may not be as good as it might have been.



The solution is simple: take good interview notes. Having good notes means that when you come to making your hiring decisions you will have access to all the information you gathered through the interview process.

When taking notes during the interview, record only what the candidate says, not your assessment of the candidate or her response. The time to make your judgments is after the interview has concluded. When interviewers allow themselves to judge the candidate during the interview it interferes with their ability to listen. Start recording judgments and you will stop listening for new information that can be used when it's time to decide whether to hire or to wish the candidate success in his future job search—elsewhere.

When taking notes, it is also important to avoid recording thoughts that might be seen as discriminatory, such as, “big black guy” or “older Jewish divorced woman.” Clearly, the observations have nothing to do with the job, and could be used to demonstrate discrimination against a candidate based on grounds protected by human rights legislation.

There is no one best way to take notes during interviews. Managers and supervisors need to develop a system that works for them. Some will capture every word the candidates say, while others will be able to reconstruct the interview using key words or phrases. Interviewers need to record enough of what the candidate says so they are able to use their notes to recall what was said during each interview.



There is also the option—with the candidate’s permission—of videoing or recording the interview. While this will create an accurate record of what was said (investigators do this regularly when gathering evidence that will be presented in court) few managers have time to listen to five 60-minute interviews before making a hiring decision.

12: Wasted Reference Checks

Reference checks are easy to dismiss. They are often conducted in a cursory manner, more to satisfy a requirement that managers check reference before hiring than as a way to gather additional information that will contribute to making good hiring decisions. After all, you would never expect to hear anything bad from reference hand-picked by the candidate.

It is understandable that managers feel this way and there are indeed reasons to proceed with caution. However, reference checks should not be skipped or done poorly. References, even those from people we don't know, can provide valuable information that contributes to making the best possible hiring decisions, if questions are asked properly.

Avoid asking references for their opinions about the applicant who provided you with a list of references. This would be like inviting a complete stranger to decide who you should hire. Why ask if they would hire his person again without knowing the criteria they use to judge employees' performance? The information managers learn when they ask about the candidate's strengths and work habits is not much better. After all, the candidate carefully selected these people in anticipation that they would only describe them in glowing terms.

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“I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”

**– Tennessee Williams,
American dramatist**

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Generally, the time to conduct reference check is after you have met and interviewed the candidate—and then, only for candidates who you have tentatively selected. The questions you ask during reference checks should explore some of the same themes as were discussed during the interview. Ask how the candidate dealt with a specific situation in the past, or seek confirmation of what the candidate said during the interview she had with you.

Traditionally, reference check were conducted before deciding who to invite to be interviewed and some could argue that this approach is still a good way to assemble a short list of candidates to interview from a longer list of potential interviewees. Conducting a larger number of pre-interview reference checks will take more time, but may help you avoid inviting unsuitable candidates to be interviewed, which may save both time and expenses. It will also extend the time between identifying a vacancy and filling it, which means that better candidates may be lost to more nimble recruiters.

When conducting pre-interview reference checks, the same caution applies as for post-interview reference checks: avoid asking for the reference's assessment of the candidate. Ask about the themes you intend to explore during the interview. What you hear may influence how you phrase questions during the interview.

Don't be limited by the list of references provided by a candidate. At the conclusion of the interview, accept the list offered by the candidate before asking, "Could you provide us with the names of three other people who are familiar with your work who we could contact? We have found that it can be difficult to contact people because they are so busy. This will give us more people we can attempt to contact."

Another way to assemble a longer list of people who are familiar with the candidate's work is to follow up some of the candidate's responses with a supplementary question: "Is there someone who we could contact who could tell us more about how you handled this situation?" Making this request early in the interview will signal to the candidate that you plan to check her stories—a warning against exaggeration or fabrication when responding to other questions.

Having collected this supplementary list of references, contact these people before contacting those whose names were on the candidate's original list. They will likely be less well-coached on how to answer questions if approached for a reference check.

13: Gut Feelings

Surprisingly, some managers and supervisors invest time in reviewing resumes, conducting interviews and even checking reference and then decide who to hire based on how they feel about the candidate. A “good feeling” about a candidate leads to a job offer. If pressed, they search for evidence in their interview and reference-check notes to justify this decision based on a gut feeling.

Effective interviewers follow their heads, not their hearts. They assess candidates based on how well they meet the job’s success criteria. These assessments precede any hiring decisions.

This doesn’t mean that paying attention to gut feelings has no place in decision making. But attention to feelings should follow, not lead the decision-making process. Effective interviewers look at the facts first and base the hiring decision on this information. Before an offer is made, the managers and supervisors involved in the selection of the best candidate to fill a vacancy may pause and ask themselves, “Is there anything about this decision that doesn’t feel right?”

If the answer is, “Yes,” those who were involved in the interview and decision making should cautiously analyze why one or more of them would feel this way. Is there any evidence in what was said or seen during the

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“You know my problem with gut feelings? Once you have them, the only evidence you see is the evidence that reinforces your gut feeling. Human nature.”

**– Keifer Sutherland,
The Sentinel (2006)**

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interview that would “confirm” the feelings that this decision to hire is not right? Is there anything more than a gut feeling that should cause them to reject the candidate?

When the reasons for feeling ill-at-ease about the hiring can be identified, gathering information related to the concern can become a focus when checking references. It may also be appropriate to invite the candidate for a second interview.

With the additional information gathered from the reference checks and the second interview, those making the decision will have additional evidence to substantiate or alleviate their concerns before making their hiring decision.

Bonus Reason:
Failing to Make Expectations Clear

Sometimes, it appears that the orientation of new employees consists of the newcomers being handed forms to be filled-in, given a lesson on how to run the cash register and an instruction to provide “good customer service.” After that, everything else comes from the new employee making assumptions about what needs to be done, being told what to do by co-workers, or being yelled at for doing something wrong.

The orientation of new staff must include a description of expectations and instructions on how to meet them. By communicating clearly what is expected, managers will shorten the new employee’s learning curve. She will get up to speed more quickly and will make fewer mistakes. She is less likely to develop bad work practices that will need to be unlearned.

Many new employees begin their new jobs unsure of why they were hired, what they are expected to do and how they are to do it. Having answers to these questions is important to the employee’s commitment to the organization and on-the-job success. Providing the information the newcomers want and need should not be left to chance. There should be a deliberate approach to welcoming and orienting new staff.

Begin by providing feedback on the interview. Why was she hired? What did you see on the resume or hear during the interview that caused them to be hired?

Without this feedback, the newcomer may assume that he was hired because he possessed one set of skills, when in fact the interviewers based their decision on what they perceived to be other skills that the organization needed. By providing feedback, the manager will identify the skills the newcomer should use which will benefit the organization.

By talking about the selection process, the manager creates an opportunity to provide positive feedback—what the interviewer liked about what was heard during the interview. The manager can also identify where the candidate still needs to grow and make a commitment to provide support and training to make this growth possible. Both feedback and commitment to the new employee's learning provide the basis for building a relationship with the new employee and will lead to creating engagement and building loyalty.

A new employee to whom expectations have been clearly stated can reasonably be held accountable for how she does her job. It is not simply a matter of stating expectations once, and that is it. Once is seldom enough. Expectations need to be repeated and reinforced.

Having a common understanding of expectations provides a basis on which to provide performance feedback, which should occur

frequently during a new employee's first weeks and months on the job. Providing feedback creates opportunity to reinforce good work, clear up confusion, correct inappropriate behaviour and remind the new employee of expectations.

Day One Fears

Most people approach a new job with some trepidation. Often these fears express themselves as questions:

- What kind of first impression will I make on my co-workers? What if it is bad?
- Will anyone – my boss or co-workers – like me? Will anyone care about me?
- What's my job really going to be like? What will be expected of me?
- Can I do the work? What if I make a mistake?
- What if I discover that I can't do the job?
- What if I ask stupid questions?
- Will I be able to find my way around my new workplace? What if I get lost?
- Will I be able to remember everyone's name? Will they remember mine?
- Will I be told not to come back? Will they fire me?
- Have I made the wrong decision? Should I have stayed at my last job?

Understanding and addressing these concerns will ease new employees' transition.

Conclusion

Was Shirley unlucky? Is that why she ended up with the underperforming Harold on her staff?

Well, luck may have been part of it. Hiring is always a bit of a game of chance, but by avoiding the common mistakes that interviewers make, Shirley could have improved her odds of winning.

Eliminating the reasons that many hiring decisions turn out to be “unlucky” isn’t easy. It requires a commitment to the process and taking the time and making the effort to fulfil that commitment.

The time and hard work is worth it. There is no management task more important than hiring the right new people. It is a task that deserves nothing less than managers’ and supervisors’ full attention.

Having good people is the key to success for any organization, whether that’s a small business with only two or three workers or a corporation that employs thousands.

New people with the right fit in terms of skills and attitudes will be more engaged, more productive and more likely to stay—all conditions associated with a successful organization.

All managers and supervisors—and especially Shirley—should commit to sharpening their interview skills so they will avoid common hiring mistakes. Their success, and that of their organizations, depends on them making good hiring decisions.

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“I am a great believer in luck, and I find that the harder I work the more I have it.”

**—Stephen Leacock,
Canadian humorist**

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About the Author

Nelson Scott has conducted more than 3,000 interviews, hired hundreds of people and made more hiring mistakes than he cares to admit. He has trained thousands of managers and supervisors from a variety of public, private and not-for-profit sector organizations to use interviews to gather the information necessary to select the right new people. He also works with clients to develop interview questions, to prepare them to conduct interviews, and to manage the selection process on their behalf.

Before he became a full-time consultant, speaker and trainer in 1995, Nelson was a teacher, principal and assistant superintendent. He also worked as a newspaper reporter and taught business administration courses at a college. He is a former president of the Edmonton chapter of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a member of the International Association of Facilitators and Recognition Professionals International.

Nelson is the author of *Thanks! GREAT Job! Improve Retention, Boost Morale and Increase Engagement with High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition*.

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SELECTED BOOKS RELATED TO INTERVIEWING

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