

Ask Me No Questions And I'll Tell You No Lies: Hiring Right

By
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With so many out of work these days, the subject of interviewing is on everyone's mind. Today we'll be talking about how to interview—not as the job applicant but as the hiring or qualifying interviewer.

There are literally hundreds of pages of advice online on how to interview. You can find help on everything from how to craft questions to how to listen. That's not what we're going to be talking about today.

If you're a regular to my articles, then you know I spent twenty years plus or minus on the other side of the desk as an HR executive so I really know about interviewing from the candidate's point of view. In other words, what makes a great candidate for someone like me in that role. But what is more interesting and more relevant to today's topic is my experience working with business owners and managers when they are recruiting. There are a number of common mistakes those individuals make and I want to tell you about them so you can avoid the angst that almost always occurs after the hiring decision has been made.

Let's start with Barbara. Barbara is a small business owner. She has a pretty stable workforce but every once in a while she has to either replace or add a new employee. And even after all the hours we have spent undoing her hiring mistakes, she still does what I bet you have done at least once when hiring a new worker. She jumps past the resume, even past some red flags in the interview (we'll get to those in a minute) and decides, based on how the person looks or what their background looks like on paper or even the great story the person tells that this candidate is right for the job. Everything else in the interview goes out the window. Barbara has already made up her mind. This is the perfect candidate and don't try to talk her out of it. So what's wrong with that strategy, you might be thinking—at least those of you who have never had that kind of hire go terribly wrong. What's wrong is about to unfold. Here's a classic example.

Barbara “fell in love” with an experienced sales professional. That individual knew a lot of the same people, had connections in a related industry, made all sorts of assertions about her qualifications and drive to help Barbara's business grow and thrive. One little tiny issue, not really worth exploring, but did I mention this candidate had a secret dream to be a radio personality? Oh, and there were the two other businesses she was trying to launch “on her own time.” Let's overlook that, Barbara thought. “I'm sure she will be perfect.” Fast forward six months later. How many sales do you think this employee made? How many times did she show up for staff meetings completely unprepared.? And that “spare time” thing? Turns out she was using that to copy Barbara's database which she promptly put to use starting her own business in direct competition after Barbara finally fired her.

So how did this hire go so wrong and how could Barbara (and YOU) avoid this kind of mistake? What's interesting is that everything about this candidate was right there on the table before an offer was made. For example, her numerous interests especially those around starting a business should have sent up huge red flags. How long would she be satisfied working for someone else? Her interest in becoming a radio personality probably meant that she needed to be the star. Not good when you work for someone else, especially the owner of the business who is always the star and should be in the eyes of the people who work for that individual. That was a huge clue that a major conflict of interest was about to emerge. There were other clues, too. Her appearance and values were not a match with Barbara's business. I observed that firsthand at an industry event where this individual's idea of working the room was working every good-looking guy she could cut out of the herd. One more personal interest Barbara missed in the interview process?

OK. Let's get serious.

Can you guess what really happened? I mean what really, really happened? If you said, "Barbara didn't have a good idea of the job she was trying to fill and the type of candidate that would be a good fit" then you're right. I see this happen all the time with small business owners and with hiring managers too when there's no new hire process in place. This whole problem started because Barbara hadn't taken the time to think through what the job involved and what kind of background, skills and value set would be the best fit. That leads me to the central theme of interviewing. It's like driving from Atlanta to Savannah. Without a good idea of how to get there, you probably never will. So, what I'm really saying is that interviewing is simply route confirmation. If you know what you want and what it will take to achieve it, your role as an interviewer is to follow your curiosity to uncover whether this individual is the best investment you can make to hit that target. Here are a few other tips to keep you on course.

1. **Know what you are looking for and what you want to accomplish.** That's your roadmap for the interview process. Take the time to create a detailed job description with measurable performance criteria built in. You can't get a great hire if you don't know what you want.
2. **Know yourself and your organization.** That includes your company's culture and values and look for candidates that mirror that. I had a client tell me recently that the reason she worked alone was that she rarely found people who could meet her expectations. Having very high standards is part of her company's culture and extremely important when seeking new employees.
3. **Don't expect people to change just because now they are working for you.** The past is prologue. What people have done in the past is likely what they will do now and in the future.
4. **Resist the temptation to make a snap decision.** Enough said on that subject!
5. **Follow your curiosity.** If something comes up in the interview that surprises you, go deeper to uncover more information.
6. **Learn how to be a great interviewer.** Learn how to craft good questions, shut up and listen. This is huge. Next to not really knowing what they are looking for, the other big mistake I see business owners make is talking through the whole interview

and then believing the candidate was brilliant when, in fact, the candidate never actually got the chance to say anything.

7. **Follow up with references and go deep with your questions.** Describe the position and culture. Ask the reference to comment on the candidate's abilities to perform in that environment executing those tasks. Leave plenty of room in your questions for the reference to go beyond a canned response.
8. **Set up measurable criteria.** What do you want this individual to do in his or her first 90 days? If you don't know, go back and re-think the position. BTW, that's always an indicator that the interviewer doesn't have a clear grasp on the job, which a savvy candidate can use to his or her advantage.
9. **Don't paint a rosy scenario.** Tell candidates the truth about what it's like to work there. I used to tell candidates for the small entrepreneurial company I was recruiting for at one time that if they were used to a big company with standards and procedures and a regimented pace, the rollercoaster ride this company would offer might not be a good fit.
10. **Don't wait to fix your mistakes.** If you made a bad call on the hire, get it over with and let that person go sooner than later. The longer the person is in place, the more likely they are to believe that everything is working out and the harder it will be to tell them that its not.

That's it for this edition. Next time we'll be talking about interviewing from the candidate's point of view.

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