A NOTE ON A STANDARDIZED APPROACH TO HIRING DECISIONS

There is something rarer than ability. It is the ability to recognize ability.
— Elbert Hubbard, American author

INTRODUCTION

The most important job of a manager is to hire great people—yet in the United States, one-third of all outside hires do not meet expectations. That’s an “out of control” failure rate. However, most of us accept that hiring is an art instead of a science, and tend to accept this high failure rate as okay.

But, consider how little effort most companies take in reducing this error rate:

1. Companies rarely train managers on how to excel at hiring (e.g., formal interview training).

2. Most interviewing takes place privately, leaving a hiring manager with little to no feedback from supervisors on his or her interviewing skills.

3. Companies seldom review hiring failures to evaluate what went wrong.

If honest, most interviewers would admit that they “wing it” going into most interviews, take few notes, and spend fewer than three minutes reviewing the candidate’s resume in advance of the interview.

David Dodson, Lecturer in Strategic Management, prepared this note as the basis for class discussion.

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A Better Tactic

A company’s success rate in hiring new employees can increase significantly by following best practices crafted by experts. This document takes proven ideas and packages them into a hiring program that teams and companies can implement. This program has a number of essential elements:

1. Hiring using a data-based approach—and not relying on the interviewer’s intuition
2. Implementing a uniform program across all company hires
3. Utilizing a team approach when interviewing
4. Preparing before the interview
5. Using an established interview format
6. Focusing on past performance versus personality
7. Spending sufficient time on reference checking

We all know that hiring better employees saves time and improves company performance in the long run. However, when facing a daunting to-do list, managers may find it easy to cut corners in the hiring process. Yet consider the potential time lost in a poor hiring decision:

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Rationale for a Systematic Approach

Internal moves have an 85 percent success rate while external hires have a 65 percent success rate. Why the enormous disparity? It’s not because the internal candidate has more experience. More often than not, an internal candidate lacks a great deal of direct experience in the department or function for which they are being considered. Similarly, most internal moves are promotions, implying that the candidate is being asked to “step up” in responsibility.
Given these two facts, why are internal candidates more successful? It’s because promoting an internal candidate lets hiring managers accurately review the candidate’s past performance. When we hire from the outside, we rely on past experience. We substitute academics and job titles (experience) for actual accomplishments (performance). Consider how infrequently hiring managers refer to an internal employee’s academic record or past job titles when making a promotion decision—the answer is probably never.

A big reason for this mistake is the notion of “likeability.” We allow ourselves to be swayed early in the process by likeability. If we get along well in the initial interview, it can be easy to look past the candidate’s weaknesses while amplifying his or her strengths. In explaining an external hiring decision, how many times does an interviewer say, “I really like this candidate”?

In contrast, how often have you justified an internal move because you “liked” them—again, probably never. Yet, to be candid, we often hire based on the likability of that person, not their capabilities. We use how much we “like” the individual as a crutch for doing the hard work of collecting and sifting through the available data. Personality is only important to the extent that the person has used those personality traits effectively in his or her job.

The best indicator of future performance is past performance. By understanding how the candidate performed in his or her previous jobs, hiring managers can vastly improve their ability to hire the right people. This requires looking at objective data while minimizing likability as a hiring factor.

A Poker Analogy

In hiring a new employee, it’s important to maximize the odds of success. Think of it like a game of Texas hold ’em poker: if handed an ace and a king, your odds of winning increase—but there’s still no guarantee you’ll win the hand. If dealt a three and a six, the odds drop considerably. You may pull a four, five, and seven, and win the hand with a straight—it’s just very unlikely.

If it were poker, you’d stay in the hand with the ace and king but fold with the low hand. The same concept is true with hiring. For example, if a candidate has changed jobs every two years and has been looking for work for three months, you just got handed a couple of “Low Cards.” Forget about whether you “like” the candidate or not—the odds are not favorable that this candidate will work out, unless there are a lot of other “High Cards” in his or her favor. If not, you’re taking an unacceptable risk in hiring the person.

Likewise, if you find someone that ranked in the top of his or her class at a top school, followed by a terrific military career, you just got handed a High Card. Even if you two don’t “click” in the interview, the odds are stacking in your favor. This is a candidate that warrants further consideration.

People who place poker bets based on “instinct” or “feel” lose over the long run. There are no exceptions to this rule—good poker players dispassionately evaluate the facts before them and make reasoned decisions about what to do next. Contrary to what Hollywood tells us, there’s no emotion in poker.
The same is true with hiring decisions. People who rely on gut instinct are choosing to weigh luck over facts—they, too, will lose over the long run. They will consistently hire people who are good interviewers instead of people that are good employers.

A Uniform Hiring Process

There are many correct ways to conduct an evaluation of a potential hire. There are also an equal or greater number of incorrect ways. But one thing is for certain: a company is better off choosing one correct way and standardizing it across the organization.

First, by standardizing a correct approach, companies immediately eliminate the risk that the hiring manager will undertake an incorrect approach.

Second, standardizing allows the organization to learn and improve. If every hiring manager was on their own personal journey toward hiring success, we’d never get the benefit of institutional growth—one manager sharing success with the organization and taking the entire organization to a higher level.

Third, standardizing provides a loop-back mechanism to review hiring successes and failures. If each manager had a unique style, we would lose the ability to meet months later and review “what went wrong” with our process.

In practice, this means that every interview is conducted in a standard way company wide, not a “modified standard way.” There should be one uniform way to hire: what questions to ask, how to ask them, how long the interview should last, how many interviews are necessary, etc. Managers may resist, but it’s unlikely they will have a compelling reason for their resistance.

At this stage, an important clarification should be made: while there should be a uniform approach to collect data on candidates, your team should interpret that information using their own judgment and experience. That’s where they apply their unique skills—not in the data collection.

A Team Approach

The hiring process should be done in a team format. Here’s why:

- **Common set of data**—Many companies conduct interviews one-on-one with group consultation afterwards. For example, Mike and Candice both interview Larry separately, and then compare results. The problem with this approach is that Mike and Candice are evaluating the candidate using separate sets of data. Mike didn’t hear what Candice heard, and vice versa. Thus, they are comparing the conclusions made by each of them as opposed to working over (shared) raw data, an approach that will yield a superior conclusion.
- **Saves time in the process**—Rather than having three managers each interview an individual for 1.5 hours (for a total of 4.5 hours over three sessions), the three of them can interview the candidate together.
• **Better listening**—When interviewing a candidate by yourself, a portion of your attention is wrapped up in crafting your next question. During a team interview, while one colleague questions the candidate, the others can focus solely on listening to what that prospect is saying.

• **Two heads are better than one**—Better decisions are made when more than one manager is involved in the process.

From a practical standpoint, here’s how the team approach works:

1. There should be a consistent team throughout the entire hiring process. It’s useless to bring in co-worker A to interview Fred and co-worker B to interview Alice. How can you compare the data if co-worker A never met Alice? Thus, it is important to assemble your team before you begin the interview process.

2. In each interview, one person (the “Primary”) assumes the role of the primary questioner. The Primary asks 80-100 percent of the questions. The others ask questions only to clarify something said by the candidate.

3. At the end of the interview, the Primary asks each of the other interviewers if they have any questions. These interviewers should *hold their questions until the end*—it’s important not to “jump in” on the Primary’s questions and upset the pace of the interview. Interjected questions should be asked only if clarification is vital at that time. The team will have an opportunity to caucus near the end of the interview. Afterwards, they can ask the Primary to delve into areas he or she missed, or request some time to probe a particular area.

**Preparation before the Interview**

We all know that interviews require preparation, yet this is a step that is seldom done thoroughly. Given the investment about to be made in the interview, the tradeoff in terms of preparation is straightforward. Taking 30 minutes prior to the interview reduces by 30 minutes the time necessary during the interview. Here are the steps that should be taken:

• Read the resume, job application, cover letter, and any other information provided by the candidate.

• Determine who will be the Primary.

• Note down on the candidate’s resume anything that requires clarification (e.g., a gap in employment, confusion over reporting responsibilities) and share those issues with the Primary.
The resume itself is of marginal value as a tool to evaluate the candidate. A resume only “sets the table” for the interview, allowing you to ask the right questions during the interview itself. Here is a recommended approach to reading the resume:

1. Read it back to front (chronologically). This makes it easier to step through the progress of the candidate’s life.

2. Answer the questions on the Resume Checklist (see Exhibit A).

3. Make sure you understand the individual’s titles and job description for every position listed on the resume.

When reading the resume, look for the following:

1. Does the candidate show upward trajectory at every stage of his or her career, or are some moves lateral or downward?

2. Do the moves from job to job make sense, and has the person managed his or her career well?

3. Does this position enhance the candidate’s career, or is he or she making a move downward? Remember, high-quality candidates may take a step down in terms of scope (e.g., number of employees to supervise) in order to work for a start-up or other exciting opportunity.

4. If there are gaps in the resume, make a notation.

Finally, don’t forget the logistics:

- Reserve a conference room.
- Make sure the office looks neat (you are also making a first impression).
- Turn all cell phones off.
- Distribute copies of the resume to team members.
- Confirm times and places with team and candidate.

**INTERVIEW FORMAT (FIRST INTERVIEW)**

Before going into specific steps for the first interview, here’s a rule that is absolutely crucial:

*Do not form an opinion on the candidate during the first 45 minutes.*
First impressions are often wrong, and first impressions are typically based on “chemistry” as opposed to facts. Once you begin to form an opinion, human nature will bias you toward facts that support your conclusion. Once you decide you like the candidate, you will begin to discount the Low Cards and emphasize High Cards.

Although this process is a natural human tendency, it is possible and important to defend against that tendency by staying open minded about potential hires.

For management candidates, the first portion of the interview (prior to the team caucus) should last 90 to 105 minutes. The entire interview (including the caucus) should be two hours or less. For administrative and some non-exempt functions, the first portion of the interview (prior to the caucus) should last between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. The entire interview should be 90 minutes or less.

As a reminder, the Primary will do the questioning, with the other team members saving any clarifying questions until the end.

**Step 1: Introduction**

Begin the first interview by telling the candidate what to expect in terms of the schedule. Let him or her know that there will be an opportunity to ask questions both at the beginning and end of the interview. Also inform him or her about the caucus; explain that the team will have a caucus near the end of the interview in order to review the meeting and ensure nothing was forgotten.

After the introduction, field any questions the candidate has at that time.

**Step 2: Clarifying the Resume/Application**

Beginning as early as the candidate’s high school record, walk through the candidate’s life in chronological order, making sure to take good notes on the following topics:

1. *Resume gaps*—Look for any gaps in the resume and make sure they are explained. In order to do this, you will need to ask for the month for each job change. If they do not know the month, ask directly, “How many months separated your departure from Company Y until you started with Company X?” To the extent that you identify gaps, try to figure out what happened during those gaps. It’s likely the candidate will say something along the lines of: “I just wanted to take some time off and spend time with my family.” This may be true, but it’s also an answer you’d hear if the person was dismissed suddenly and had a difficult time finding a new position. Resume gaps are Low Cards.

2. *High school record*—Especially for management candidates, look for early signs of ambition, goal setting, and energy (High Cards). These come in the form of after-school jobs, extracurricular activities, sports, student government, awards, high GPA, etc. While there are certainly exceptions, most energetic and competitive people show those tendencies from high school.
3. **Compensation**—Get salary or wage information, going back as far as possible. There should be a clear pattern of compensation growth (most achievers find their income increasing as opposed to stagnant or flat; also, compensation is easy to verify with past employers). If you see a flat or downward pattern, be sure to ask for clarification. If you don’t ask, you may miss exceptions to this rule, such as a candidate taking a compensation cut to move closer to a specialty hospital for an ill child, or accepting a drop in salary for an equity position or a chance to participate in a management training program (High Cards). Likewise, you may find the seeds of a Low Card—through your questioning you may discover that a candidate was terminated and took a lower-paying job out of an urgent economic need.

4. **Organization chart**—Draw the organization chart for the candidate’s current position and, if applicable, his or her previous position as well. Make sure you get names of all the candidate’s supervisors and subordinates, as this will help you with your eventual reference checks. Also, note the number of employees at each level (e.g., seven A/P clerks reported to the candidate) as well as the revenue or budget of the candidate’s departments. This provides context for later questions and a better idea of the candidate’s scope of responsibility.

5. **Clarify the boasting**—To the extent that the candidate references accomplishments, flesh those out. For example, if the resume says the candidate:

   *Increased revenue by 108 percent of plan*

   The next question to ask is: “I was impressed with the way you grew revenue in excess of plan. Tell me specifically what you did to accomplish this.” Keep asking clarifying questions until you are satisfied that you have discovered the facts. This is the only way to figure out whether this is a High Card or Low Card.

6. **Look for a pattern of success**—Visualize a line graph of the person’s career. Would the graph show a steady and upward progression of responsibility, or would it instead reveal flat (or downward) growth? In the case of a management candidate, you want to look for increases in compensation, budget size, department size, organizational complexity, and other similar factors. In order to do this, you’ll need to collect the facts diligently at each point in the person’s career—it will not be possible to compare growth in department size if you never ask the candidate empirical details. And, as a reminder, be sure to ask for clarification for apparent downward moves—perhaps the candidate took a job with a start-up (which, in the case of your company, might be viewed as a High Card).

### Step 3: Begin the Process of Deepening and Narrowing

Many candidates mask facts with adjectives and unsupported claims. Note the applicant’s responses in a typical exchange:

Q: What’s your greatest strength?

A: I’m very good at motivating people to reach their highest potential.
Now consider the added depth of the question if you follow up with specifics:

Q: That’s great. Can you give me an example of when you motivated a particular person and those actions increased that person’s potential?

With each response, probe even deeper into the candidate’s example. With this line of questioning, it will be evident if the candidate is a good match for the demands of the new position.

Remember, interviewing is not about coming up with clever questions. Instead, it is a tedious endeavor to acquire facts for later consideration. With that in mind, below are useful questions to ask during the first interview.

Begin this section with some explanation for the candidate:

We’d now like to go into some specific examples of your work. We’re looking for very detailed examples, so to the extent you can be specific, not general, that will help.

1. You strike me as a competitive person. Can you give me an example of where you used your competitiveness to the company’s advantage?

2. Can you give me an example of when you were criticized for something and that criticism was justified?

3. How about an example of when you were criticized unfairly for something you did at work?

4. What are the words that best describe your personality? Can you give me an instance where [aspect of their personality] helped you in your work? Can you give me an example where [aspect of their personality] hurt your work?

5. Describe a situation where you failed to reach a goal.

6. What is the reason you’re planning on leaving your current company?

7. What kind of people do you like to work with?

8. What do you feel is the easiest type of person to deal with? The most difficult?

In each of these cases, the initial question is only the beginning of a fact-finding mission to identify High Cards and Low Cards. Each question should lead to approximately 10 minutes of description and follow-up questions. Each question simply identifies a specific example in the person’s life so that you can go deeper into the particulars of the example. This questioning is only useful if you probe into names, dates, and specifics. For instance:
Q: You strike me as a competitive person. Can you give me an example of where you used your competitiveness to the company’s advantage?

A: I always fight to hit my quarterly numbers. I’m as competitive as any person about reaching my targets and I hate it when someone beats me.

So far the candidate’s answer is useless, as it does not provide any specifics. Further questions can help draw out detailed information:

Q: That’s terrific. Now tell me about a specific quarter where you were very close to missing plan and what you did about that?

A: Three quarters ago we were close, and I had this wager with my west Pennsylvania counterpart. So I got the troops really rallied, held some contests, and sure enough we made the numbers.

This answer is closer, but it’s still hard to figure out exactly what the candidate did. The next tactic might look like this:

Q: Interesting, what contests did you hold in that quarter that you did not hold in the prior quarter?

A: (Low Card) Well, we just ran the basic company contest, but in this case I got everyone really excited about hitting the numbers.

A: (High Card) I decided to do something different. I paired each technician against another technician and told them that based on individual number of calls per day the “winner” of each pairing would be eligible for a $50 gift certificate (which I paid for myself), then I…

This is the level of detail you want to discuss with the candidate.

Sometimes it is helpful to use your own experience as an example of how you would like a question answered. It also can set the candidate more at ease with difficult questions. Here is what an interviewer could ask for Question 1 (competitiveness):

>You strike me as a competitive person. Can you give me an example of where you used your competitiveness to the company’s advantage? For example, I recently was given a project to re-design the on-call procedures for the company. Since I knew that my peers would view the results when I presented them at a Staff Meeting, I wanted to do an especially good job. I ended up creating a PowerPoint presentation which... [use a real life example, don’t make one up].

Once the interview reaches 105 minutes or the end of the initial questions, the Primary should tell the candidate the team needs to adjourn in order to determine if there are any questions that have not yet been covered.
Step 4: Caucus and Discuss the Candidate

Since you have left the individual alone and in a somewhat awkward position, get right down to business to minimize the time he or she is left alone.

1. Review issues 1 through 6 of Step 2. Identify missing data or attempt to reach a conclusion among the group. (Do not poll the group on “whether they like the candidate or not”).

2. Discuss your thoughts regarding Step 3 and what each of you learned in the process. Begin to identify areas that require further questioning or probing. (Do not poll the group on “whether they like the candidate or not.”) As a format for the discussion, consider the following qualities:
   a. Drive
   b. Basic skills
   c. Demonstrated “winner”
   d. Fit within the organization
   e. Personality
   f. Energy level (do not confuse a bubbly personality for energy; the type of energy we care about shows itself through specific work examples)

3. Go around to each team member and review key High Cards and Low Cards on the candidate.

4. Now, for the first time, apply your judgment against the facts and make a decision. You are not making a hiring decision at this point—you are simply making a decision on whether or not to invest company resources into a second interview. With all of the facts in front of you, it is important to use your head instead of your gut.

5. Determine if there are additional questions that need to be asked at that meeting, and either resolve differences in perspective or document them for the next meeting.

6. Return within 10 minutes out of courtesy to the prospective employee.

Step 5: Conclude the First Interview

1. After asking any additional questions, offer to answer any questions the candidate may have.

2. To the extent that some questions were answered unsatisfactorily (if you want to see the candidate again), ask him or her to give additional thought to that particular question. For example:

   *I know you had a difficult time coming up with an example of where your personality got in the way of your work. Can you give some additional thought to this and next time we meet we can return to this question*
3. Close the meeting:

   We’re seeing a number of fine candidates, and we truly enjoyed the chance to meet with you. We also appreciate the time you took to come to our offices. We need a few days to pull together our thoughts, and one of us will get back with you on next steps.

**INTERVIEW FORMAT (SECOND INTERVIEW)**

The second interview continues the process of deepening and narrowing the information gathering, provides a fresh look at the candidate to see if your previous image still holds, and allows a chance to look for consistency in his or her answers from the first interview.

**Step 1: Invitation**

When you call a candidate back for a second interview, tell him or her to allot the same amount of time for the second interview as the first (90 to 120 minutes for management and half that for non-management candidates). Then, provide the following questions for him or her to think about in advance of the interview:

1. Describe for me a time when you were totally committed to a task.
2. If you could, what would you change about your current position?
3. What did you do in the last year that makes you the proudest?
4. If you could, what would you change about this position?
5. We’d like to accomplish [name an objective] during the next year. Tell me about your most significant accomplishment that might relate to this goal.
6. [To the extent that he or she struggled with any answers in the first interview, ask the candidate to consider the question and be prepared to provide a more specific answer at this meeting].

We tend to think too much of interviewing as thinking on your feet. While this is important, for some questions, it is better for the candidate to prepare a more thoughtful reply.

**Step 2: Preparation**

It is critical that the Primary review the notes from the first interview. It is often longer than a week between interviews, which makes it very easy to forget significant information without careful notes. This is why note taking is crucial. Review the list of areas where the group wanted further clarification. From here, choose questions that help you shore up those areas. We believe you get a 5:1 benefit in terms of time savings from preparation—for every minute you prepare, you save five minutes in interviewing time by avoiding unnecessary questions or wasting time with untargeted fact finding.
Step 3: Introduction

Just like the first interview, begin the second interview by telling the candidate what to expect in terms of the schedule. Let the candidate know that he/she will be given an opportunity to ask questions both at the beginning and end of the interview. Also remind him or her that towards the end of the interview, the team will have a caucus in order to review the meeting and make sure nothing was forgotten.

Answer any questions the candidate has at this time.

Step 4: Going Deep and Narrow

Begin with a reminder on the need to focus on specific examples:

*I’m sure you remember last week how specific examples over generalities are far more useful. I’d like to jump right in with that same type of questioning, and thank you for being concrete in your answers.*

Then, focus on turning generalities into specifics through targeted follow-up questions and continue to search for examples. Useful starting questions include the following:

1. Describe the steps in your hiring process. (We are looking to see the rigor in which the candidate hires subordinates. The answer should highlight how many interviews he or she conducts per candidate, any testing required, and qualities he/she looks for).

2. You said that you look for [leadership qualities] in a candidate. Can you tell me specifically what questions you ask a candidate in order to identify those qualities?

3. How would you discover [leadership qualities] by asking that question?

4. What would be a good example of an answer to that question that indicates strong [leadership qualities]?

5. Repeat questions 2-4 with another quality (good or bad) that the candidate mentioned (e.g., integrity, work ethic, adherence to customer service, intelligence).

6. About how many people were you directly involved in hiring each year?

7. How many of those “work out”? (If he or she gives you a nearly 100 percent success rate, ask: “Of those, what percent are A’s and what percent are B’s?”)

8. Please describe what went wrong with one of your recent hiring mistakes? (If he or she had none that did not “work out,” ask about the B’s).

9. What, if anything, are you doing differently—please be specific—based on that hiring mistake?
10. Have you ever had to fire someone? Please describe the circumstances of your most recent termination [if it is too straightforward, continue until you find a quality example].

11. (Prepared Answer) We’d like to accomplish [objective] during the next year. Tell me about your most significant related accomplishment.

12. How did you rank among your peer group (e.g., number 2 out of 13 districts for sales, number 1 technician for add-on sales, rated “5” at last review)?

13. (Prepared Answer) Describe a time when you were totally committed to a task.

14. Give an example of where your personality negatively affected your work performance.

15. As we both know, in an annual review it’s essential that the manager identify developmental opportunities for the employee to focus on in order to improve. I assume when you review a candidate, you’re thoughtful in identifying areas that the candidate can act upon—actionably coaching. [Candidate will say yes]. So let’s assume you’re reviewing yourself. What would be your two most important developmental needs?

16. [Assuming the candidate offers up a legitimate developmental need, probe deeper, looking for examples.]

17. [If the candidate provides a vague response:] I’m not sure how you, as the employee, can truly act upon that developmental suggestion. Since feedback and coaching are an important part of the job, can you please provide a developmental need you have that is actionable?

18. (Prepared Answer) If you could, what would you change about your current position?

19. What do you like most about this position?

20. (Prepared Answer) If you could, what would you change about this position?

21. (Prepared Answer) What did you do over the last year that makes you proudest?

**Step 5: Caucus and Discuss the Candidate**

Since you’ve left the individual alone and in a somewhat awkward position, get right down to business to minimize the time he or she is left alone.

In this meeting, you are on the edge of making a hiring decision, so it is important to make sure the discussion is based on facts alone; set aside your personal likes or dislikes for the candidate.

Go through the same review of High Cards and Low Cards, and then ask yourself one question:

*If I was hiring in advance of need instead of filling a vacancy, would I hire this person or would I wait and see more candidates?*
When thinking about the candidate, avoid these four classic hiring mistakes:

1. Making a decision based on personality and first impressions.

2. Assessing only a narrow list of traits and not reviewing a broad range of attributes (e.g., “This guy is really driven, that’s exactly what we need for this position”). We have a tendency to believe that people who are superior in one area are competent at everything.

3. Relying too heavily on experience and skills instead of work habits and traits.

4. Confusing the candidate’s ability to get the job with the ability to do the job.

Do not be afraid to hire someone that is making a stretch in responsibility. To quote from Lou Adler, a proponent of performance-based hiring:

*To me, the worst is to hire people with the same type of experience in the same type of job in the same industry [this goes for management as well as technicians]. While this is easy to do and logically comfortable, you’ll continually under hire. People who are willing to do the same old things over and over again are just cruising along. They aren’t top performers.*

If the candidate is someone you would like to hire, conclude the interview and begin checking references. If you are not sure, take one of two paths:

1. Invest time into reference checking, and then reassess the candidate.

2. Invite the candidate back for a third interview and ask more questions from the First or Second Interview list (for example, ask for a second or third example of a hiring mistake).

Do not give up on a candidate solely because you are on the fence. You are on the fence because you need more data, and it is a better use of your time to see more cards than to fold and start from scratch.

**Step 6: Conclude the Second Interview**

1. After asking any additional questions, offer to answer any questions the candidate may have.

2. If applicable, schedule a third interview or get a list of references (you will need to reach out to at least two references).

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3. To the extent that some questions were answered unsatisfactorily (if you want to see the candidate again), ask him or her to give additional thought to that particular question. For example:

I know you had a difficult time coming up with an example of where your personality got in the way of your work. Can you give some additional thought to this and next time we meet we can return to this question?

4. Close the meeting (if you do not plan to hire the candidate):

Once again we enjoyed the chance to meet with you and we appreciate the time you took to come to our offices. We need a few days to pull together our thoughts and one of us will get back with you on next steps. As you know, this process is as much about “fit” as it is anything else, and our challenge with you is not so much whether you can do the job as it is whether this is the best fit for both parties. We’ll talk soon.

5. If you continue to have interest in the candidate, move into “sell-mode.” Good candidates frequently have multiple options to choose among, and at this point you do not want to lose the candidate. Here are some questions to ask in order to better understand where you stand with the individual:

   a. “We don’t like to make offers only to have people sell themselves to the highest bidder. We’re really looking for people who want to make a career with us. How would your employer react if you told them you had accepted an offer with us?”

   b. “How would you react if you gave notice to your current employer, and they subsequently offered you more money?”

   c. “Are you conducting a full-scale job hunt or being selective and opportunistic?”

   d. “What other offers do you have in-hand or are anticipating?”

   e. “How does this position compare to those?”

**REFERENCE CHECKING**

You cannot make a good hiring decision without checking references, and you cannot delegate this to an outside recruiter.

Some people find reference checking the richest part of evaluating a candidate, while others find it useful only to confirm previous conclusions. One weakness of reference checking is that it generally occurs toward the end of the hiring process. At this stage, because you have invested so much time in the candidate, you desperately hope the High Card candidate “checks out.” To quote again from *Hire with Your Head*:
You can get any answer you want from a reference check. If you don’t have an open mind and are not willing to change your opinion, it’s a waste of time even to contact the reference. It’s hard and always embarrassing to admit you’ve made a mistake in judgment and eliminate a candidate at the last moment. It’s a much bigger mistake to go forward.2

Do not let the reference off the hook without providing examples. While you may need to be more diplomatic, generalities from a reference are no more useful than generalities from the candidate.

Here are the basic questions to ask the reference:

*Needless to say we’re enthusiastic about [candidate], so what I’m hoping to explore with you is more a question of “fit” versus capability. We think [candidate] is more than capable of doing a terrific job. Neither of us would be doing him/her a favor by steering him/her into a new career that did not work out. On a confidential basis, can I ask you some questions?*

1. What role did you play in the organization, and how did the two of you interact?
2. How did [candidate] rank among his/her peers?
3. What did he/she do differently than his/her peers in order to achieve that ranking?
4. Can you offer an example of him/her doing that?
5. In an annual review it’s essential that the manager identify developmental opportunities for the employee so that the employee can improve. Let’s assume you’re reviewing [candidate]. What would be the two most important developmental needs for him/her?
6. Can you give me an example of how this developmental need affected his/her performance?
7. Why do you think [candidate] is looking for a new position?
8. What types of work environments does the candidate work best in? For example, I do best [fill in].
9. How would you rank this person among other people you know at this level? What criteria do you use for that ranking?
10. What keeps this candidate from being at the very top? [After he/she provides an answer] Can you give an example?

2 Ibid.
As a final remark, there will always be an element of “art” in the hiring process. However, by using more “science”, managers will experience a much higher rate of success in this crucial task.
Exhibit A
Resume Checklist

When reviewing the resume with the candidate, be sure to take the following steps:

1. Review back to front
2. Review gaps (pay attention to the months)
3. Talk about every job change. Do these changes make sense?
4. Ask about high school
5. Discuss beginning and ending compensation
6. Draw organization charts with names
7. Clarify the boasting (e.g., grew the division to $100 million in revenue)
8. Look for a pattern of success/trajectory
9. Get school or company rankings where available
10. Ask details of military experience

Source: David Dodson.