

Interviewing for the Right Staff

By John Vamos

Someone once said you can do anything with good people and can achieve almost nothing without them. Finding the right staff is a real challenge for small business owners, few of whom have specialist HR qualifications. So here are some tips I have learned the hard way – of which a few of the points are also included in the *BCS How-to Guide - Guide to Staff Recruitment.pdf*

Do Your Homework

Before you embark on the difficult process of finding a new staff member, look internally. I believe I have failed as a manager if I have not seen that a staff member, who has already proven his or her worth to my organisation, might be well suited for new challenges. My staff gets the first chance at anything they want to do, and if they don't have the skills to perform that role, we sponsor them to learn.

But there are many times you need to introduce a new person into your business. It is much easier to find the best person for a position if you have a very clear idea of what the job entails. Familiarise yourself with the job description for the position to be filled (refer to the BTS How-to Guide - *Preparing a Job Description.pdf*). Allow ample time to review a candidate's resume before the interview. I devote 30 to 60 minutes to reading and preparing questions from the CV. Look for anomalies, look for questions and challenges.

The Interview

Have on hand the job description, an organisational chart, the candidate's resume and key objectives from the business plan that the individual will have to support. I don't put a time limit on an interview. It takes as long as it takes. Experience has shown me that if you interview less than three candidates, you are kidding yourself. This makes the interviewing process a significant time commitment but remember: your business will only grow as fast as the capability of your people will allow it.

My interview agenda is:

1. Understanding the CV

Ensure the candidate is comfortable by offering refreshments and putting him or her at ease. Ask questions about the CV such as "Tell me about" or "I notice..." This allows you to start to build rapport early in the interview. Tell the interviewee what you are thinking. For example, if you have noticed from the CV that the person moves around a lot, don't just ask "Why did you move from this job to that job", rather say "Gee you move around a lot. Why is that?"

2. Background on the company

Discuss the work environment you want to promote and the characteristics of the people the candidate would work with in your organisation. Over the years I have observed that people have different working styles. I know a lot of successful people who remain distant from their work mates but I prefer to be friends with my colleagues. So, for me, an interview is an exploration of the style of the person and whether or not they will respond positively to the work culture I am promoting. Refer to the organisational structure chart you have on hand and talk about the people in the work group.

3. Overview of the job description

Explain the job and what the key performance indicators (KPIs) for the role are. More importantly, ask them why they are confident they can meet those KPIs. Sometimes I give the candidate the KPIs and ask them to rank them. This can be a very revealing exercise. It is always useful to ask them how their previous experience makes them confident they could do the job effectively.

Where possible I believe a job description should reflect not just the tasks involved in performing the role today, but also where that role might develop. I use statements such as "In the next twelve months our company hopes to achieve this. How do you see yourself contributing to this?"



Ask experiential questions. Giving them a difficult scenario and getting a feel for their likely response is a good way to assess their level of self-motivation. If a candidate says he or she would come to you with a potential problem and the job requires them to gain approval before making decisions, then their response is a positive. However, if you need someone who is decisive and a self-starter, it is a negative.

When formulating questions be aware of the legal restrictions that come into play in an interview situation. They are there to help ensure that people's selections are based on the right criteria. The last question I ask is about salary expectations. And unless I am seriously considering the candidate, I don't raise it.

At the conclusion of the interview, do your summary notes straight away. For a one hour interview I devote half an hour to prepare and half an hour to debrief.

Too Many Candidates or Not Enough?

Once I advertised a vacant position and was inundated with responses. My first step was to put into the "no" pile those people to whom I believed I would be doing a disservice by granting an interview. For example, their job experience or capabilities were inappropriate for the job. There were still far too many candidates to see, so I conducted a seminar and told candidates that if they attended and liked the sound of the company they could reapply and would be guaranteed a first interview.

It meant that people self-selected and I only interviewed the candidates who were serious about working for my company. Sometimes there is no one who meets your selection criteria perfectly. In an ideal world you could keep looking indefinitely but the realities of small business preclude this. Often the compromise for a small business owner is to hire the best candidate you have found.

Further Testing

Sometimes I will give people some written work to help me assess their capabilities. This would usually take the form of problem solving. I present a situation and ask them which course they would take to solve it and why. If I have a candidate that I think is the right person and there is an opportunity to introduce them into my organisation in some way, I grab it. What better way to see them interact with the team.

I have a colleague who takes this idea even further. He does all the interviewing, selects the best candidate and then they have lunch with the whole staff. After the lunch the staff vote on whether the person should be hired and the business owner abides by that decision. I am not recommending this for everyone, but it suits my colleague's style. I always have a trial period with a minimum probation of three months.

Trust Your Gut Feeling

When choosing staff, I believe you have to trust your instincts. If someone sounds good for the role but you just don't think he or she is right, you are probably reacting to all the non-verbal and sometimes unconscious messages being sent. But the interviewer must always remember that the interviewee is working to create the impression he or she thinks you want!

Good Luck!

