CONDUCTING A MORE SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

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I have never received higher praise than being told I conduct a superior interview, by a successful recruiter who presented candidates for my client, and took a back seat during the initial joint interviews. I pride myself on having developed my technique through hard work and tons of experience. After all, people are an essential element of success in most companies. Law firms are no exception. So this was an essential skill to master.

Successful interviews are about screening for talent and experience, but also about finding the person who is best suited to the unique culture and personalities at the firm. The right "fit" will often have equal or more impact on length of tenure than the right experience. In addition, a high level of emotional intelligence ("EQ") is the strongest indicator for the candidate's success. In fact, EQ is more important than quantifiable factors such as grade point average, years of experience, and other factors which are usually heavily weighted in making hiring decisions.

The most successful interviewers ask open-ended questions which serve to provide some insights into someone's work ethic and style. They also ask questions which serve to provide clues as to a candidate's EQ. These are questions which cannot be answered by a simple response, or yes or no.

The interviewer should at all times maintain a "neutral" pose in response to the answers; not providing any indication as to whether they agree or disagree with the answers. Accomplishing this requires an awareness of one's body language and facial expressions. The role of the interviewer is to appear interested; to nod and encourage additional details as much as possible, and make simple notes during or immediately after to memorialize the essence of the answers.

There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to these questions, (except for the ethics questions). There will be answers which indicate whether the candidate will fit in with the culture and philosophy of the firm. There will be answers which indicate whether candidates have low EQ —the next 600 lb. gorilla or prima donna— or high EQ —the next peacemaker or group leader. Finally, there will be answers which clearly demonstrate mastery of subject matter, or lack thereof. It's important to ask all three types of questions.

Successful interviewers are careful not to give away too much information about their culture, current problems, or opinions up front, or to present their questions in a way which will provide clues to the applicant of the “right” or “desired” answer. A savvy applicant will try to elicit such information as early and often as possible in the interview process, so as to couch their answers in the most favorable way to the interviewer. Therefore, successful interviewers will frequently need to redirect the focus of the interview back onto the applicant, rather than discuss or answer questions regarding the firm and the desired qualities of the applicant.

I always explain at the onset that the interview will be conducted in two parts. Part one is dedicated to getting to know the candidate as thoroughly as possible. Part two will allow the candidate to know the firm as thoroughly as possible, and provide an opportunity to ask any questions about the position or firm. With this groundwork laid, it is easy to deflect questions which might give the candidate advance insight into how to craft their answers, by responding politely “I promise you’ll be able to ask that in part two, and receive a full answer.” Or, say something like “That’s an excellent question, and I promise to answer it before you leave.”

When training people to conduct interviews, I make it easy to remember the two parts. Part one is about the candidate revealing why they may or may not be the right person for the job. Part two is about the firm convincing the candidate that they want to work at the firm, and revealing sufficient information about the firm culture and the specific job requirements to help the candidate determine if the position is what they’re seeking, and one they are willing and capable of filling.

I have a few remaining success tips that are important to share before I run out of space.

1. Be prepared. Too many people try to “wing it” through an interview.

2. Build rapport. Only in a relationship of mutual trust and comfort – a relationship largely free of anxiety – will a candidate talk freely. Start the interview with an easy conversation opener. Avoid stressful group interviews for a first round.

3. Challenge specific details. Remember, as much as 30 – 40% of resumes contain false or misleading information. Ask insightful questions to check for honesty, and elicit additional, more detailed information.

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4. Conduct multiple interviews. Most candidates can project a different persona during a first interview. Usually they reveal their real self by a second or third round. Assuming your candidate might still be available, have them come back for at least a second interview.

5. Coordinate with other interviewers. Most firms have candidates interview with multiple interviewers. Coordinate in advance which questions each will ask, so that there is no repetition, and you get the most comprehensive set of answers in all three categories you need to explore. By the same token, only one or two interviewers should conduct part two, so that your message about the firm is consistent.

It takes more time and attention to detail to conduct really successful interviews. PBA members may contact me for actual sample interview questions for various staff positions, associates, lateral partners, and firm administrator. [Email lawpractice@pabar.org or call 1-800-932-0311 x2228. Please include your member number.] I promise you will find terrific questions for all three areas: skills & experience, workstyle, and EQ. Non-members can locate sample questions on the internet, although finding good questions for workstyle and EQ can take some effort.

A version of this article originally appeared in the January 22, 2018 issue of the Pennsylvania Bar News.