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The Science of Telephone Screening

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Telephoning Tips

It's hard to break through the candidate's interview personae and get to the real person behind. This is even truer for telephone interviewing since you can't observe the employee's facial expressions and other body language.

Here are some tips to listen for:

Calling All Candidates

As the type of consulting services I provide seems to come in waves, recently I've been helping several clients with their hiring needs: conducting interviews, creating interview questionnaires and helping them with selection.



One of the things I realized years ago in my consultant role is that I can save the client lots of time (and money) if I pre-screen the candidates by telephone rather than taking the time to conduct screening interviews in person. Many of you may already take advantage of this method, but if you don't, it's time to consider a new approach.

▶ Listen to the candidate's voice message. Job hunters frequently forget that we're screening for all sorts of things and one of the first things we hear is their voice message. Even though we may be calling them at home or on their cell, their message needs to match what we're looking for in a candidate. I've heard children's messages, monotonic messages, and inappropriate messages.

▶ How does the candidate answer the phone? Politely, bored, with enthusiasm? Most of the positions I'm hiring for require effective communication skills. So when the person answers the phone with a one syllable word, my radar is already up.

▶ When you're playing telephone tag, what

After identifying the top 4-8 candidates (if we're lucky enough to have a large applicant pool), I script a 10-15 question telephone interview and start dialing. I briefly describe the position and organization and start asking questions. What are you attracted to this position? Why are you in the job market? What are you looking for in your next position?

Then the zinger! What are your salary requirements? Typically, there's a brief silence on the other line. I might get, "It's negotiable." But I don't let them off the hook so easily. You see, if they want \$20 an hour and my client is paying \$10, I don't want to waste anyone's time – mine, the client's or the candidate's. I've known people who don't ask this question until the very end of the interview process. Ooooh. I can't imagine discovering after multiple interviews and all that time invested (or lost) that we're not in sync on pay.

What are the other tough questions you need to discover? How about work hours? I conducted a telephone interview the other evening with a candidate. As soon as I mentioned the job required 30-35 hours per week, which was my first or second sentence, the candidate started talking me out of hiring her. "Well, I really want to work only three days and I can't work any evenings or weekends, and I

kind of message do they leave you? This week I received the most professional response. The candidate clearly gave her name, stated the day and date and the reason for her call. She gave her telephone number and several times for me to reach her. Then she repeated her name and telephone number, ending with a positive comment. Her voice was clear, professional, and interested. Considering this opening was for a customer service / telephone type of position, I knew I had a strong candidate.

▶ When you're on the phone, what kind of distractions will the candidate tolerate? We all know that as soon as the phone rings, the kids start crying or demanding the parent's attention. But I ignore that. I don't ignore how the

have to be flexible for my two-year old, and..."

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Some Candidates Really Don't Want The Job

A friend of mine recently shared the philosophy that, "Employees terminate themselves." I think we all know these individuals whose performance, attitude or behavior is consistently poor. They know that the next step is termination, but they continue doing whatever doesn't work in the organization. They basically terminate themselves.

Well, I think many of our applicants do the same – consciously and unconsciously. They talk the interviewers out of hiring them before we even ask them the hard questions. In this case, all I mentioned was the work hours (which were stated in the header of in the employment ad) and yet she started back-pedaling.

The benefits of telephone interviews are extensive. I'd rather spend 5 minutes on the phone with someone who self-screens out of the process, then have to spend 30 minutes with them in person. You can't end a live interview in the first 5 minutes when you discover the person isn't a good fit to the job or the organization. Well, I guess you can – but most of

don't ignore how the candidate handles the noisy child or me during the call. Interestingly, few candidates have actually put me on hold while they deal with the kids.

▶ One of the most important things I listen for is how effectively the person communicates – from the speaking and listening perspectives. I've had people control the conversation and not answer my questions. They don't get a second chance. I've heard people with serious grammatical errors. I've had people talk over me, go off on tangents, get real angry about previous jobs or tell me about the details of their illnesses. They forget it's an interview. And I forget they're a candidate.

▶ I'm listening for the usual, intelligence, interest, personality,

us don't. And few of us have lots of time to waste.

If the candidates pass the wage test in the telephone interview, then I start to ask about their job skills and add behavioral questions. I try to stay away from true fluff questions. Instead, I ask questions that begin with describe, give me an example of, how have you... The more open-ended and thought provoking the question, the better your chance of getting a real answer as opposed to a planned answer.

One of my primary interview objectives is to try to get the candidate to tell me something he or she didn't mean to say. It could be relaxing them enough to show their real sense of humor, or how bad their previous boss was, or their attitude about coworkers or customers, or their real opinion on _____. I give them the chance to really open up, knowing the more real and personable I am, the more real and open they'll be.

If you're not already using telephone screening to your advantage, it may be time to start. If your current telephone interviewing practices aren't working, try deepening the questions or lengthening the call to get the information and insight you really need to determine whether the candidate is qualified enough to come in for an interview.

JOB SKILLS and knowledge. But they also must pass the Arlene Sense of Humor Test. If they can laugh with me and make me laugh, then I know I have someone who's comfortable with themselves and most likely more comfortable on the job.

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