

Despite the recent downturn in the employment market candidate quality remains the number one concern for employers. Unemployment is still low for skilled people, and demographic projections still indicate a long-term trend toward a market driven by candidates. Based on previous cycles and projections of future economic growth it is likely that employers will once again experience difficulties in find good candidates and struggle with a new generation of workers with different attitudes about employment.

Most employers rely entirely on reviewing resumes and interviewing candidates to determine their quality. Yet, study after study shows that for most employers interviewing is a pretty unreliable process. It is rarely done consistently from person to person, is highly subjective, and is based on whatever assumptions (prejudices) the hiring partners have.

Here are some practical things you can do right now to help reduce the number of poor-quality hires that your firm makes.

Number 1: Establish a Firm Wide Definition of Quality and Use it to Select People

Most organizations do not have any definition of a "quality employee," nor do they even have a performance management system that eliminates bias to ensure that performance reviews do not turn into a popularity contest. There is a wide variety of published literature on the pros and cons of different performance management philosophies but the one area of common ground is that before any performance can be assessed, the organization has to have a clear idea of what good or exceptional performance looks like. It needs to have longitudinal studies of its best performers so that a pattern of actions, competencies, and skills can be established that are linked to success. These characteristics can then be used to select new people.

This is the time to unravel the characteristics of the good performers, and develop profiles by function of top performers' skills and competencies. But, while these profiles are essential for determining candidate quality, there's still the need for the creative and unorthodox, from time to time, to keep the creative juices flowing and to unseat the status quo that can be damaging to new ideas and growth. What you should be striving for is not perfection, but improvement and the setting of some minimum selection criteria.

Number 2: Develop a Comprehensive Job Description

Partners with busy practices and limited training in HR will rarely have the time to prepare a comprehensive job description. By taking the time to understand a partners requirements and the nature of the role will help HR managers and/or internal recruiters better meet the firms needs.

There are seven steps to truly understanding a job:

1. Analyse and understand the job function and job description. We recommend spending significant time working out exactly what someone will be required to do in their job. Because of the wide variety of activities undertaken in most practice groups and the increasing complexity in most areas of practice a generic job description will rarely provide a sufficient description of what prospective candidates will be required to do on a day to day basis. Positions evolve and change, so to get a proper feel for the job it's best to talk to the incumbent (where possible), hiring partners and senior associates about what the key functionality of the role will be.

2. Determine what are the most critical competencies (e.g. drafting skills, the ability to deal with demanding clients or practice development skills) these should be limited to five.
3. Identify what capabilities, skills and education are required for someone to perform the critical duties.
4. Determine which competencies/capabilities the candidate "must have" in order to perform in the position and what could be trained. For example, a solicitor who is expected to have a great degree of client contact must have a friendly, courteous manner, but they could be trained on how to develop and enhance client relationships.
5. Identify any drawbacks or problem areas associated with the role, for example long hours, or a busy partner with little time to provide training or mentoring. These must be mentioned during the interview;
6. Conclude the key selection criteria for a candidate to be considered right for the role, such as presentation, travel ability, academic qualifications, prior knowledge, etc; and
7. Develop the interview questions that will validate these criteria.

Throughout the process, it's essential to *quantify* (ask how often, or what percentage of the time is the person required to do this in the role e.g. if is a combined front end/back end construction role what percentage of the candidate's time will be spent doing each part of the job), *qualify* (what exactly are they doing? e.g. if it is a banking and finance role is the candidate going to be working predominantly on debt or equity finance transactions? If it is a debt finance role is the work predominantly capital markets based on acting for financial institutions?) and *clarify* (ask, "have I got this right?" Check with multiple people, as often everyone has a different perception of job competencies and behaviours).

Number 3: Educate Partners

Few partners have received training about selection or what it takes to assess a candidate. Even though some firms have provided partners with some sort of interview training, our experience is that many have forgotten most of it and have used less. Natural biases often lead to a lack of discipline and one cannot expect the typical partner to become an expert with these techniques from the limited and non-systematic training provided to them.

One area where HR managers can add value is to pre-screen and evaluate candidates against criteria that are objective and job-related. Partners can help you determine what those criteria are, and they should be well aware of the consequences of using the criteria. Using them might mean that their best candidate technically is a poor candidate when it comes to attitude or fit and should not be hired.

You can hold briefing sessions, spend time one-on-one with partners, hire a consultant to work with them, or simply gather and use case studies and examples from your own firm to help partners understand how important it is to select people with the right skills *and* the right organizational fit and attitude. As a guide you can start with our tips for improving interviews and candidate selection set out in the next section of this paper.

Number 3: Improve the Interview Process

To improve upon the generally weak results obtained from traditional interviews, consider the suggestions presented here, which revolve around interview planning, preparation, and adding structure to what often is a free-form process.

If your partners tell you they don't like structure, it is important to remind them that there is plenty of data to support the fact that structure improves interview reliability and accuracy.

Improving the Candidate Experience While Simultaneously Improving Interview Results

Everyone who has ever been to an interview knows that the uncertainty about what is about to unfold makes everyone nervous. The problem with this high degree of nervousness is that it affects the interview.

Highly anxious people don't perform the same as calm people. The concept is simple, if you want to improve interview accuracy, reduce any unnecessary uncertainty or stress on the part of the candidate. Making the candidate experience as positive as possible is also important because many candidates will be interviewing at more than one firm and will be assessing potential employers at the same time as they are being assessed.

Interviews are improved one small step at a time. Although some of the recommended steps might seem minor at first glance, don't underestimate their impact. If you want to reduce unnecessary candidates stress, here are some things to try:

1. *Set expectations.* Almost every candidate is unsure what to expect when it comes to interviews. Keeping people in the dark is never a wise move if you are trying to land a tough candidate. As a result, tell candidates upfront what particular skills and traits you are looking for in this interview. Putting together a simple interview plan helps to alleviate a lot of fears because they know what is coming next and where they are in the process. Unfortunately, because most interviews are not planned and are put together haphazardly, the results are skewed in the favour of those who don't get as nervous.
2. *Explain timing.* Educate applicants about the interview schedule.
3. *Provide interviewers' bios.* Interviewers become less like strangers if you let applicants know in advance who they will be talking to. You might also consider letting them know the specific focus (what is being assessed) of each separate interview (i.e., interview one, technical skills; interview two, organizational fit).
4. *Prevent death by interview.* Over the last couple of years we have noticed that some firms have increased the number of interviews a candidate is required to attend in order (we suspect) to make up for the absence of other screening tools. In some cases, the number of interviews has proliferated like rabbits. From the candidate's perspective, attending a large number of interviews spread out over a long period of time is tedious and time-consuming. The solution is simple, reduce the number of interviews in total and try to schedule them so that they are all completed within two weeks of the first interview. Knowing that they can complete the interview process in a relatively short time frame can reduce top candidate dropout rates, and by sending the

message to the candidate that your firm is both decisive and efficient, you can also increase offer acceptance rates.

Design Structure Into the Interview Process

Like any business process, the results of the interview process can be improved by effective preplanning and design.

Some of these entail a significant amount of pre-work but if you have the time, they will certainly improve your results dramatically:

5. *Preempt death by repetition.* It is quite common for different interviewers to ask exactly the same exact questions in back-to-back interviews. This tedious repetition is often because it is often important for the candidate to meet different people at the firm (i.e. HR manager, hiring partner, senior associate and team members) and the appropriate questions for each interviewer are not planned or coordinated. From the candidate's perspective, having to answer duplicate questions over and over is frustrating and confusing.
6. *Script interview questions.* Lack of preparation can cause some interviewers to ask questions that either make no sense or are illegal. A common pet peeve of interviewees is when interviewers ask questions like, "Where did you work last?" (this information is usually contained in the candidate's CV and/or candidate summary when a recruiter is used. Limit this "free forming" and instead make a list of the total number of interview questions that need to be asked and then assign the appropriate interview questions from the list to individual interviewers (based on their knowledge area). By scripting the interview questions, you can reduce repetition, candidate frustration, and eventually, offer rejections. It's also wise to periodically track which interview questions are actually being asked to ensure the same questions are not arduously repeated in the follow-up interviews.
7. *Pair interview questions to the required job skills.* Because all jobs have different skills and knowledge requirements, interviews need to be tailored to the specific job or job family. Individual interview questions must be developed and then "paired" with the specific skill requirements of this job.
8. *Assign weights to each question.* The next step is obvious. Because all job skills and knowledge are not of equal importance in successfully doing the job, it's essential that you assign a degree of importance to each of the major requirements of the job. This also means that their corresponding interview questions (and answers) must be assigned a weight equivalent to the weight or importance of skill or knowledge that the question is assessing.
9. *Develop and use a scoring sheet.* The best way to ensure consistency is to give all assessors a sheet containing their "assigned" interview questions and another separate scoring sheet. The scoring sheet not only gives you documentation and accountability but also forces assessors to limit their assessments to only relevant areas. In fact, this is a useful tool whether you assign questions to interviewers or not.
10. *Know the answers in advance.* Perhaps the biggest fault in interviewing is that interviewers are almost universally not told what is a great, average, or bad answer to a particular interview question. Unfortunately, if the definition of the great answer varies

among interviewers, you'll get strikingly different "scores" for essentially the exact same answer (not good). As a result, identify a great, good, and bad answer for each question by working with your own top performers in that job. The best approach is to provide outlines of these answers on the sheet that contains the assigned interview questions.

11. *Know any knockout factors.* If there are to be knockout factors that immediately eliminate a candidate, determine them in advance so that everyone agrees what they are and that they are actually job-related.

Number 4: Investigate and Experiment With New Tools for Screening and Selection

It is startlingly obvious that very few firms, before investing a large amount of time in interviews, are taking advantage of the many psychometric tools that are available to help screen candidates. Fewer firms still ask candidates to engage in a dialogue and mutual assessment process. While you are looking at their skills and fit, candidates should be encouraged to look at your firm so that they can make informed decisions about whether or not they like what they see. Many candidates we have spoken to have seen one side of a firm while interviewing, and another less attractive one after they are hired. Let candidates speak to other solicitors/employees so they can gather accurate information about what it is like to work at the firm.