

CONCLUSION

My key tips for a successful interview all involve preparation. Before you even schedule the meetings, take time to evaluate applications carefully and avoid wasting your time and that of the candidates by selecting people who do not meet your requirements. Prepare relevant questions and do your best not to divert from those you have decided on during the actual interviews. Plan the timing

and structure of the interview. Give the candidate sufficient time to speak but do not let them spend too long answering any one question. If meeting via video apply the same standards and prepare in the same way as with an in-person interview. Finally, remember that when good candidates are in short supply an interview is as much for them to decide if they want to work for you, so present yourself and your organization in the best possible way.

Biography

Victoria North is the Firmwide Director of Knowledge Services at Kirkland & Ellis LLP, where she has worked since 2012. She has recently returned to London after having spent four years working in the same role in the firm's New York office. She has worked as an information professional for over thirty years, mainly in the legal sector. She served as the BIALL President from 2003 to 2004.

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A Hire Purpose: Skills for Interviewers

Abstract: There is plenty of advice for those about to take an interview for a job, but what about if you're sitting on the other side of the table? Here Jas Breslin, Research & Information Services Manager at top city law firm Charles Russell Speechlys, guides us through the key things to keep in mind when you're the one asking the questions.

Keywords: recruitment; interviews; management

INTRODUCTION

Some of the biggest decisions in life, like buying a house for instance, usually take time to make, just because they are so important. Yet some of the most important decisions we make in our professional life are quite often time limited. Take recruitment, for instance. At best you'll get an hour or two to learn what you can from a candidate during an interview, and yet the decision you take in the wake of that interview can affect your team or organisation for years to come. Which is why it's crucial to get things right at the interview stage, however little time you have.

But how do you, as an interviewer, prepare yourself for this, and what are the core skills you need to hone to ensure that you can maximise the time you have when you're interviewing your selected candidates?

SPEC SAVER

Of course, well before the interview stage you will have engaged with your Human Resources (HR) team and

submitted a business case to recruit for the role, and then you will have received authorisation to go ahead with the recruitment process. Every organisation has its own internal procedures and processes, and we will take it as read that this has all been done correctly and you are now ready to prepare for the interview itself.

In essence, the interview is an information exchanging process, and it's very much a two-way street. The interviewer is asking questions, digging down into the responses, and trying to evaluate the suitability of the candidate both in terms of their skillset and whether they will fit in with the current team. Meanwhile, the interviewee is responding to questions posed with the aim of impressing the interviewer and demonstrating that they have all the skills required and are the best person for the job. But to ensure that at least the initial expectations of interviewer and interviewee are aligned at the interview stage it is important to have created a good job specification at the start of the process.

A successful job specification needs to be both clear and succinct. When writing it you also need to

understand that this document will be used as a marketing tool to sell and advertise the role on offer via recruitment agents, your website, and also social media platforms. It therefore needs to both sell the position while also being realistic in terms of the brief. You should use it to define the role; set out the key duties and responsibilities; describe the required skills to do the job; and outline the key attributes you are looking for, as well as the knowledge and experience required.

The important thing to bear in mind here is that potential candidates should be able to read the job specification and then quickly and easily work out what the role is and what skills are required, and also whether it's a role that they find attractive. In addition, the job specification should give a flavour of the values of the team and the wider organisation it's a part of, and also what success in the role advertised would look like.

The job specification is also the basis for the selection criteria when it comes to reviewing and sifting through CVs, so it's your own checklist, in a way. If someone's obviously not right for the job, then it's far better to find that out before the interview stage, and your own job spec is a very useful tool in this respect.

PANEL SHOW

Of course, it will not just be you asking the questions, and working out who is going to participate in the interviews from the HR side of the firm is also crucial. More generally, it's always useful to have more than one person, to help share the role of asking questions, and also to offer a second opinion on candidates. Be careful, though, it's easy to overdo this, and bear in mind that having more than three people asking questions can easily change the dynamics of what is, in essence, a conversation. Remember, what you're after is an interview, not an interrogation.

Also, if there are two or more people on an interview panel then it's vital that those involved are in agreement over what questions should be asked and who should be asking them, and when during the interview they should be posed. There's little to be gained from two people asking one interviewee the same question – unless they respond with radically different answers!

PLAN OF ACTION

Preparation for the interview itself should include formulating some sort of procedure for covering the points and questions you want to raise. It might seem obvious, but you really don't want to come out of an interview thinking 'oh, I wish I remembered to ask them ...'. So, go in with a checklist of questions that you must put to each and every candidate. Their CVs or application letters will cover many areas, such as technical skills, but it's only by posing the same specific questions to each candidate that you will be able to see how each person responds, and this will also allow the interviewer to evaluate all candidates equally and fairly.

That said, judgement is needed here, and it's best not to rely too heavily on a script of questions that you feel you must work through to the bitter end in the interview itself. Rather, the aim should be to use the specific questions as a framework, and then tailor your other questions depending on the answers provided during the course of the interview.

You should also carefully consider the types of questions you want to ask. Some of your questions will be to ascertain the candidate's experience or clarify something on their CV, and these will be easy to come up with. But you also need to think ahead a little, to try and envisage the candidate working in the role.

With the above in mind scenario or situational based questions can be very useful. This is where the interviewer outlines a situation, whether real or hypothetical, and then asks the candidate how they would have dealt with it. For example, *When you work on several projects with tight deadlines, how do you make sure you stay on track? Or How would you approach a situation in which you had to persuade someone to see things your way at work?* These questions are useful in assessing so called soft skills, like time management, conflict resolution and communication, and they allow the interviewer to see how well the candidate can think on their feet. Incidentally, while 'soft' skills might not sound so vital, never underestimate their importance.

It's also very important to ask *open* questions, as these will allow the candidate to share their thoughts and demonstrate the skills they have more fully. Or to put it another way, ask questions that can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'.

Of course, questions are not much use without replies, and you will need to remember these answers, too, so at this pre-interview stage you will also have to consider how you will record the responses that the interviewee gives. Writing down the answers in real time, as the interviewee is talking, is one approach, and this means that you don't have to spend so long afterwards remembering what was said. But some people find that it's easier to make the notes immediately after the interview, so that they can focus on asking the questions and listening to the replies during the discussion itself. Where there are multiple interviewers it's good practice for one person to take responsibility for taking formal notes. By the way, increasingly these days interviewees may ask for feedback about their interview performance, and this is another reason for taking notes.

QUESTION TIME

Once you have selected the candidates to invite for interview, and you have your interview ready and have briefed anyone else who may be attending and agreed a method, it's time to get down to business. But what skillset does an interviewer need to employ during the actual interview? Listed below are nine approaches to a successful interview, and the related skills you will need to get the very best from them.

Building rapport: Working life is a web of relationships, and these can start at an interview. There's nothing to be gained in starting off on the wrong foot, and a candidate will not be at their very best if they feel overly nervous or uncomfortable. It is, then, important to make the interviewee feel comfortable, by behaving in a friendly and helpful manner. You should try to put them at ease by helping them adjust to the interview environment. It's also a good idea to set out the format of the interview, particularly if there is more than one interviewer present, and to indicate how much time has been set aside for the meeting.

Communication: Before the interview your written skills will have been put to good use writing a succinct and honest job description, plus writing effective social media posts to sell the role. During the interview this all goes up a notch, as you are now the face of your organisation and team. You're now communicating the responsibilities of the role, as well as the culture of the team and organisation, and you need to get this across quickly and clearly: *this is who we are, this is how we work, and this is what we want from you.*

Listen up! As an interviewer you need to actively listen to what the candidate is saying and understand the points they are trying to communicate. You should listen intently and know when to keep quiet so that the other person can get across their point without interruption. Valuable information that can help with evaluating experiences and skills can be gleaned while the interviewee is talking, some of which may also be useful for later negotiations on pay etc. The point of the exercise is to gain information on the candidate; so make sure you don't miss what they're actually saying.

Natural curiosity: Successful interviewers will be curious to learn more about a candidate than that which appears on their CV or application. You will want to discover what drives them, their ambitions, and their values. This not about being nosy, it's about finding out how a candidate is likely to perform on the job and, importantly, how they will fit in to the team.

Body language: This is a two-way thing, in that you need to be able to read another's body language, while also displaying your own confident body language, with the intent of being open and inviting. This skill sits hand in hand with building rapport, as you'll be able to ascertain if the candidate is relaxed or stressed, or seems anxious. Being able to read body language is also useful to help assess if they're not being wholly truthful about their skills and experiences. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, with more interviews taking place remotely, some have argued that body language is not as important in these situations, but that's not the case. The simple truth is that the ability to read body language and facial expressions is even more crucial now. As we have become more used to socialising via a screen the interview, if it's also via video, can seem more natural, which means it's even more likely you're seeing the real person. Arguably, at least. Also, distractions such as the

doorbell ringing, a dog barking or a toddler running in screaming about ice cream, can provide an illuminating insight into how the candidate reacts to unplanned occurrences!

Empathy: Job hunting can be a stressful and emotional experience, and it's important to be empathetic. There are a great deal of pressures that come with applying and interviewing for a new job. We've all been there, so this should not be too difficult.

Use the silence: With the above in mind, remember that silence is not necessarily a problem, indeed it can be a useful tool. Candidates may need to marshal their thoughts and a period of silence while they formulate their response is acceptable. Many people do feel uncomfortable with a silence and will want to fill the awkwardness with words, but remember that a silence may seem longer to the interviewer compared to the interviewee, who is trying to impress. But silence is also an answer, of sorts, so also use the quiet period to assess why your question may have instigated a pause.

Confidence: here we're talking not so much about having the confidence to run the interview, but more about having the confidence to make the decision at the end of the process. There's a lot hanging on your decision, and the consequences of choosing the wrong person for the job can weigh heavily in a manager's mind. But, with experience, this does become easier, and justifying the decisions you have made through the processes you put in place early on in the recruitment process can stand you in good stead. Confidence is also key when candidates are asking their own questions about the role. You need to be sure of your facts and figures, just as you expect them to be sure of theirs.

Unconscious bias: You really need to ensure you are aware of unconscious bias and the influence it can have on decision making. Unconscious bias affects everyone and can be particularly important when you're recruiting. When making decisions, take your time and do not rush. Ensure that you justify decisions by considering the evidence available, and then record the reasons for your decisions. This is not the time for relying solely on 'hunches' and 'gut feeling'. That said, it is generally accepted it's a good thing that you get along with the person you employ. Ideally, what you're after is someone who ticks all the boxes who you also happen to get along with very well.

One thing on the above, though. While ticking the boxes as regards skills and experience is important, sometimes someone will come along who you feel is simply right for the job, even though they don't quite fulfil the checklist. When this happens, always remember that it can often be possible to teach a particular skill or technique to someone new to a role, but many other attributes are rooted in values, and it can be hard to teach or influence these.

INTERVIEWER AS INTERVIEWEE

An experienced interviewer will be aware that during the interview process they are also being judged, and it is not

only the interviewee who needs to impress. The interviewer will need to impress those outstanding interviewees who are likely to receive multiple job offers. How you dress, your choice of interview questions, how you listen to the responses, your body language and tone of voice, and your visible background during remote interviews, can affect how prospective employees will view you and your organisation. So, don't forget that you are being interviewed too!

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Once the interview is over you need to ensure that you have documented the conversation you have just had in as much detail as possible. Your notes will prove invaluable. It's easy to think you will remember each candidate, their responses, and how you felt during the interview, but memories can blur through the course of a week and numerous other interviews, and other calls on your time and energy. If you document your notes properly after the interview you will have a solid basis to help you make your decision, whether that's to invite the candidate for a second interview or perhaps even make a job offer, or to reject their application.

After the interview, it's very useful to have a debrief with the others who interviewed the candidate with you, to share views and compare initial gut feelings. Hopefully, there will be a consensus of opinion, and any points or

issues about how the interviewer answered (or didn't) a question can be discussed.

Along with documenting the interview in detail, it's also advisable to go back to the job description and make a comparison between the skills and experience required for the role, and those of the candidate, to see if there is a close match. As mentioned above, it's hugely tempting to be led by your initial gut feeling or unconscious bias – *I really liked her! He's exactly what I am looking for!* - but professional decisions need to be based on fact and not solely on feelings. Many organisations these days will have a two-stage interview process, and even perhaps three stages, so if you have been impressed with the candidate you can invite them back to meet others in the team or organisation who can then also have an opportunity to ask some questions and provide their views. This will also give you an insight into how the candidate interacts with the team or other people in the organisation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Interviewing a number of candidates and then selecting the best, or the one most suited to the role, is seldom easy. But work hard at this, get it right, and it will save you a great deal of possible grief and disappointment in the long run. In fact, you might say that these few hours are some of the most important of an entire career. For the interviewee and interviewer both.

Biography

Jas Breslin is the Research & Information Services Manager at city law firm Charles Russell Speechlys LLP, where she has worked since 2015. She manages a small team of information professionals, and has responsibility for developing and delivering the strategy for the Research & Information Services team, which includes legal and business research services, current awareness and training, and managing and developing the firm's collection of print and electronic resources. Jas has over 20 years of experience working in the law firm sector and is an active member of the legal information community, most recently having served as a member of BIALL Council for four years; and she is currently a co-owner of the LIS-LAW listserv. Jas served as BIALL President in 2013/4, and was the Chair of the City Legal Information Group in 2012/3.