

RECRUITING AND INTERVIEWING

Recruiting for Success: Best Practices for Job Interviews

Abstract: This article is aimed at anyone who is responsible for recruiting staff and discusses how to prepare for a successful job interview. It is written in the context of a competitive recruitment market caused by the increased workload in law firms since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author, Victoria North, is a senior information professional with many years of experience of building successful teams. She shares some of the best practices she has learnt during her career.

Keywords: recruitment; interviews; management

INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing this article, the market for legal information professionals has become very competitive. One positive result of the pandemic, has been the increased demand for our services and an increased willingness from firm leaders to approve new positions. As a result, the recruitment process has become increasingly challenging. Good candidates are in high demand and recruiters have to be prepared to make quick decisions. If conducted well, an interview is an excellent opportunity to sell the benefits of joining your organization, especially when candidates have a number of options. Asking the right questions should provide you with enough insight into a candidate's suitability in order to decide quickly when making an offer. There are plenty of available resources which give you helpful advice on preparing for a successful job interview, but how many of these have remained relevant during the pandemic? Like many areas of our working lives, Covid-19 has changed the way recruitment is conducted and those involved in the recruitment process are having to learn some new skills. I can't claim to have all the answers to finding a perfect candidate or the perfect job but I can provide some insight based on my recent experiences of recruiting new staff.

INTERVIEW SKILLS

Over the years, I have attended numerous training sessions on good interview practice. One organization I worked for ran a two-day course which culminated in being filmed with the interviewing of an actor who played the role of a very arrogant candidate. This was more nerve-racking than interviewing a real candidate, but proved to be very useful in terms of building my confidence. I have picked up lots of useful tips along the way which I believe have stood in me in good stead, and through successful selection I have managed to build a

number of strong and talented teams. If your organization offers interview skills training, I advise you to take advantage of what is on offer. Even professionals who have been recruiting staff for many years benefit from refresher training and should be mindful of not developing bad habits. In addition, to ensure that the workplace is more inclusive and diverse, taking direction from HR professionals on appropriate recruitment practices is extremely important.

The aspect that I have not received training for relates to how to conduct a video interview which, since the outbreak of the pandemic, has become the standard way to meet job candidates. For this approach, I have prepared in a similar way to meeting candidates in person, which so far has served me well. Of course, there are some differences which I will discuss.

SELECTION PROCESS

Selecting candidates for interview is the first important step in the process. Depending on the level you are recruiting for, you may find yourself overwhelmed by the number of applications you receive. Generally, the more junior the role the more potential candidates are available. If you are fortunate enough to have an HR team that will screen applications first, take advantage of this support. It will save you a lot of time if HR can filter out the CVs of unsuitable candidates. How the CV is presented is the first part of the selection process. If a candidate does not make the effort to present their career history with care, how will you be able to trust them to present work products professionally if they join your team? Spelling and grammatical errors are not unforgivable but if the content is also poor then the CV is likely to be moved to the bottom of the pile. CVs that are longer than two pages are off-putting as are fancy fonts and inappropriate use of colour; however try not to immediately reject them. A quick check of the content

could reveal a candidate who is worth meeting. CVs which have not been adjusted to meet the requirements of your role demonstrate a certain lack of interest. I look for candidates with previous experience in a similar organization, their academic and professional achievements and examples of relevant projects they have worked on.

SCHEDULING

A good HR team will be able to set up the meetings for you. Try to be flexible with times and dates. I always put myself in the position of the candidate and I am usually happy to meet before or after standard office hours if that is their preference.

PREPARING THE QUESTIONS

I find it helps to have a standard list of questions which I ask all candidates, adapted slightly to account for each candidate's individual experience. The questions can be divided into those which ask the candidate to talk about their experience and those which ask for specific examples relating to the desired competencies of the role. For example, if the role requires excellent attention to detail, you could ask the candidate to tell you what steps they would take to ensure their written communications are worded appropriately and are grammatically correct.

To learn more about the personality of the candidate and what motivates them, note any projects or personal achievements mentioned in their CV and ask them to tell you more about one that particularly interests you.

I like to start my interviews by asking the candidate to tell me more about their current or most recent role. This gets the candidate talking about a topic they are well versed in; helps you to understand in more detail what exactly their role entails; and also helps you to judge their interest in and enthusiasm for their work.

I might ask the candidate to tell me more about a specific project they have highlighted in their CV. Such examples can be a good way to lead into the competency questions.

COMPETENCY QUESTIONS

Typical competencies required for library, research and information roles include: communication, customer focus, relationship building and business insight. With limited time I would suggest focusing on a couple of competencies which you feel are most important for the role or which you feel the candidate has not already provided sufficient evidence of possessing. When drafting competency-based questions aim to ask for specific examples where the candidate has shown strength in the competency or where there has been a successful outcome.

Here are some examples of competency-related questions:

Communication

Describe a time when you had to use your written communication skills to get an important point across.

Customer focus

Describe an occasion when you provided a level of service which went over and beyond normal expectations.

Relationship building

Have you ever had to build a relationship and establish trust with a team member who was reluctant to work with you? Tell me about the situation? What did you do? What was the result?

Business insight

Explain how you stay current with industry trends and information. What is the process you use?

Finally, it is worth asking what they know about your organization, to help judge how interested they are in your specific role, and to learn if they have taken the initiative to prepare sufficiently for the meeting.

Personal questions are best asked by HR. They are well-versed in what questions are appropriate to ask and which are not. For example, you cannot ask someone their age but you can ask if they are over 18. You cannot ask when a candidate plans to retire but you can ask about their long-term career plans. You cannot ask someone about their domestic arrangements, but you can ask if they can work with your required schedule or what days they are available to work.

Questions relating to salary expectations, availability to start work and any planned absences are also best handled by HR.

PREPARING FOR THE MEETING

Remember that for the candidate you are the public face of your organization so present yourself appropriately. If business attire is the required dress code in your organization, then dress accordingly even for video meetings. In my experience candidates dress as smartly for video interviews as they would for an in-person meeting, so I recommend interviewers do the same. If you are conducting a remote meeting from your home, be mindful of the usual advice for conducting professional video meetings. Ensure you will not be interrupted by a family member or a pet. Use a suitable video background if you do not feel comfortable sharing a view of your home office. Switch mobile devices to silent. Conduct the meeting with the same attention to detail that you would apply if interviewing in person at the office. I have heard of one video interview where one of the participants paced around the room. This was distracting and rather disrespectful of the other party.

INTRODUCTIONS

When you first meet the candidate do your best to help them relax and feel comfortable. For in-person meetings asking about their journey is a good conversation opener. For video meetings there is less scope for small talk but checking they are comfortable with the technology you are using can be the equivalent to the journey question. For both in-person and video meetings try and find a common topic of interest to help break the ice and to start building a rapport. You might know someone they have worked with, attended the same university or lived in the same city, any of which you can make a quick reference to.

It is important the candidate knows who you are and why you are interviewing them. I like to start any interview by introducing myself, my role in the organization and a brief summary of my career. I also give a brief summary of why I am recruiting and how the role fits in with the rest of the team. Make sure they have read the job description and let them know they will have the opportunity to ask their own questions at the end of the meeting.

For some, one advantage of a virtual interview is not having to consider whether an introductory handshake is appropriate. Pre-pandemic, in my place of work, candidates were taken to the meeting room in advance of the interviewer arriving and therefore avoiding the need for a handshake greeting. However, I did think it polite to shake hands as the candidate departed. It is possible that, following the pandemic, handshakes may become a greeting of the past, which may be a good outcome for some, I suspect.

MEETING STRUCTURE AND TIMING

If your candidate is meeting several members of your organization in succession, you may only be allocated thirty minutes each. This is not long, so when preparing the structure of the interview, roughly work out how much time to spend on each section. I suggest allocating five minutes for introductions and rapport building, twenty minutes for your questions and five minutes for candidate questions. Briefly explain the structure of the interview once you have completed the introductions. It is helpful for the candidate to know what to expect and it also sets the tone for ensuring you keep control of the proceedings. If you plan to take notes, alert the candidate that you will be doing so. Once you are ready to start asking the questions, it helps to include a transition statement such as, 'Shall we get started'.

INTERVIEWING BIASES

Be mindful of any factors which may cause you to be unnecessarily biased towards one candidate over another. Such factors can be categorized as follows:

Cultural bias

Cultural biases in the hiring process may lead to less racial or cultural diversity in the workplace. During the selection and interview process treat all candidates in the same way regardless of their cultural background. Be conscious not to view candidates from similar backgrounds to yourself in a more positive light.

Non-verbal bias

This is when emphasis is placed on non-verbal cues that are unrelated to job performance. A candidate's style of dress, or their mannerisms, might unduly influence your view of them.

Contrast effect

Do not be swayed by a confident candidate, the substance of their responses may be no more impressive than those of a more reserved candidate.

HANDLING AWKWARD SITUATIONS

In my experience the most awkward interviews are when a candidate either speaks too much or too little. Handling loquacious candidates requires a degree of control by the interviewer. You may have to interrupt them or remind them that time is limited. For the more reserved candidate, asking open questions - those prefaced with why, how or what - may ensure they provide sufficient answers. Alternatively, finding something on their CV which you judge they would enjoy speaking about might help to encourage a candidate to talk more openly; and it could be a personal, rather than work, achievement.

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

Aim to keep as close to your planned structure for the interview as possible and to not overrun on time. The candidate may have meetings scheduled with other members of your organization immediately following the interview.

Remember to inform the candidate of the next steps in the recruitment process. These could be a second round of interviews to meet other members of your organization.

Let them know that if any further questions occur to them that they should contact HR, not you directly, as you would not want to be put into an uncomfortable position.

Thank them for attending and remain non-committal about the eventual outcome of the meeting.

If you meet a candidate who seems particularly suitable for your role let HR know as soon as possible. They can find out if the candidate has other interviews planned and then keep them keen for your role. Make an offer as soon as you can.

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