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# Careers

## The ability to pick biotech talent: Being a better interviewer moves 'you' up the ladder

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### INTRODUCTION

I am regularly asked about the few things a person can do that will guarantee them a rise up the corporate ladder in the bio/pharma industries. Is it continual improvement of one's technical skills or an ability to manage and motivate a team? While these are critical elements of achievement, I believe that there is another factor to long-term success for which management will reward you: *the ability to pick talent*.

Do you know someone who has this unique skill? That person generally is respected throughout the company for his or her ability to interview well, and to spot those few who have the 'right stuff.' Although there is far more to the process of selecting talent than just preliminary interviews, it is indeed interviewing skills that represent the major distinction between managers. Some people

can do this so well it is second nature; others feel as much discomfort in the interviewing process as the applicant does.

There are knocking knees on both sides of the table during many interviews!

### CORPORATE CULTURE INFLUENCES INTERVIEWING SUCCESS

In working with life science organisations large and small, I've found that despite how various individuals treat the interviewing process, there is a general theme that runs through the applicant's interview day. This theme is based on how much 'selling' a company does during an interview. Here are the three styles I've identified:

- (1) *The company that oversells* – Oftentimes these are the smaller firms, the startups, who try so very hard to recruit and attract the best people from the larger companies. This kind of organisation sends its interviewers in sounding like used car salesmen. During a day like this, the applicant is faced with a series of

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interviewers who are more concerned with selling around any corporate weakness than they are in learning what factors drive that interviewee's behaviour.

- (2) *The company that doesn't sell enough* – Certain very successful firms, surprisingly some of the biggest names, develop the attitude that everyone wants to work for them, and they find that this isn't always the case. No selling at all is done in the interviewing process. Occasionally, it comes as a shock to these top-tier firms that they can't land every candidate. Even the big boys need to pitch a little bit now and again.
- (3) *The company that tells it straight but sells when needed* – This is the kind of company that attracts top talent consistently. There is something about candour in the interviewing process that elicits the same response from the applicant, and yet there is a focus on making it a positive day for this important visitor. The company knows that they have to do some selling, but they also know that overdoing it can cause negative results.

To improve as an interviewer, it's important to draw from this last example above and offer candour mixed with the ability to sense what the candidate's 'hot buttons' are in order to bring the right amount of selling to the table.

Despite which of the three your company culture tends to propagate, and whether you are a manager or contributor, it is critical to develop your interviewing ability and skills of discernment to separate out those applicants who really can benefit the company by their presence. Like a centrifuge, good interviewers seem able to spin down through the layers of interviewing gloss and come out with the desired end-product.

## THE CORE OF THE MATTER

The first thing to remember about the biotech interview is that applicants you meet in the process can be either very good at it, or very poor at it, and that oftentimes this has nothing to do with their ability to do the job you are

trying to fill. Their excellent 'performance' simply says that 'she is good on her feet' or that 'he is a well-practiced interviewer!'

It is much the same with résumés. We've all known people who have incredible talent, but whose résumé was awful. On the other side of this issue, you likely know someone whose glittering résumé doesn't reveal how shallow that person's true abilities really are. Realising this, your job as an interviewer is to break through the veil of the interviewing persona and find out who the real person is behind it. This is the core of good interviewing.

Applicants are very aware of how the interviewing process works, and they can spend days or months preparing. There are dozens of books in the library that help applicants by providing them with prepared answers to your questions. Here's an old chestnut: 'My greatest weakness? I guess it must be that I work too hard, and I've got to learn how to spend more time on other areas of my life.'

If you really want to know the person in front of you, you'll have to do more than the perfunctory 20 questions preceded by a 30-second scan of the resume. There are three main answers you'll be seeking above all else, and most of your dialogue with the candidate should be directed to discovery in these areas.

Can this person handle the position they have applied for? (This refers to the technical fit – the basic skills to do the job.) Secondly, does he or she have the motivation to do the job? (It's not enough that a person has the technical skill base, but are they truly interested in and challenged by this work?). Lastly, do they fit into the company culture? (You know what works and doesn't work within your company, and this is a very important barometer of success.)

It is that last piece, the culture issue, which can be your greatest leverage in becoming what I call a 'people magnet.' Think about your best team-mates or reports and what the special issues are that make them successful in your company. It's not a list of technical skills, but something else entirely, and every

organisation has its own special characteristics for 'what works here.'

## INTERVIEW DAY

Because oftentimes you'll be interviewing on another department's position, make sure you have done your homework. The best candidates will want to have as complete a knowledge of the job as possible, not only of the 'must-have's' from the H/R department's job description, but the future of the position as well. What will the job grow into? How will the required skills change, and what does this mean to the person filling that job? Be aware that many interviewees are going to ask questions about all of this.

The first few minutes of the interview are uncomfortable for both parties. Take note of the way that an applicant steps forward and introduces him/herself. You can learn a great deal about a person's level of self-confidence by their ability to look you in the eye and give a warm and sincere 'hello' and handshake.

Always give your applicants a few minutes of easy conversation before settling in on the matter at hand. You will find that people interview much more 'real' when they have had an opportunity to take a few deep breaths and relax a moment before jumping into the fray. This is especially important if you are the person responsible for inviting him or her to visit your firm.

When the conversation gets down to business, begin by giving a brief overview of the position. Most experts agree that it is at this time that many interviewers give away insider's secrets to the job – allowing the candidate to respond with only the answers that he believes you want to hear. Guard against this by not opening with any golden nuggets to which an experienced interviewer will mold their responses.

Your list of questions and discussion topics should have been prepared in advance after a thorough review of the résumé or CV. This will allow you to listen when it is time to hear what the candidate is saying. Too often,

interviewers have *not* done their homework and are worrying about choosing the next question – quickly scanning the résumé once again while they are missing the candidate's response to their last question.

I'm sure your H/R department has already alerted you to those 'taboo' areas that include questions about age, sex, marital or family status, daycare plans, race, height, weight, general health, or religion. In our litigious society, another area that can cause problems is for the interviewer to make promises of some kind. Although you always want to have a positive slant on opportunities, you never want to come across as making promises to a candidate to get them to take the job. Later, that same person may end up taking the company to court because those implied rewards did not come to pass.

While H/R staff and trainers who specialise in interviewing skills disagree on the latest style recommendations for interview questions, there is uniform agreement on the need to ask 'open-ended' questions. An open-ended question is one which does not elicit a 'yes or no' response. 'Would you say that doing your PhD in Biochemical Engineering from MIT was a positive experience for you?' is a closed-ended and worthless interview question. But, change that to 'What were some of the most positive experiences you had in doing your PhD at MIT?' and you may have something of value in the response.

Lastly, don't be afraid to cross the line into an area of obvious discomfort. Although I would never recommend that you purposely try to keep an applicant on the edge of his seat throughout the interview (Human Resources knows this as a 'stress interview'), you may indeed find it valuable to probe further when you hit a sensitive area. This small amount of anxiety may be very useful in learning more about how this candidate handles interpersonal relationships. This could help you greatly in determining the personal chemistry fit within your organisation.

## **THE KEY TO YOUR OWN CAREER PROGRESSION**

After you have introduced the applicant to the next person on the interviewing agenda, sit back and remember that important maxim 'past behaviour equates to future performance.' As Mike Urdanick, former Director of Human Resources with Schering Plough reminded me, 'Focus your reflections on key behavioural examples. All that we've learned about job performance tells us that you can usually predict behaviour on the job

by issues that have come up for the candidate in the past.'

What did you learn about this person's actions and behaviour from their history? Can you project those tendencies forward and see this individual fitting the picture of a successful new employee? Shakespeare said it best, 'What is past is prologue.'

Likewise, your ability to select a winner today, using your constantly improving interviewing skills, will no doubt be your prologue for continued career success in your company.