



## 15 tips to create an effective interview

*“The cost of a wrong hire has been estimated by all sorts of different people and organisations. They all agree that the minimum cost of getting it wrong is at least twice that person's annual income”.*

*Peter Mitchell*

The people that you employ are such a crucial part of the success or failure of an organisation, and so any recruitment that you undertake should be a well thought out and carefully planned process designed to enable you to pick the prime candidate for your key positions.

In reality significant personnel decisions are frequently based on an interview or series of interviews lasting for short periods of time. But running an effective interview takes skill and preparation. There's no doubt that recruiting can be a time consuming and costly business, so how do you achieve the difficult task of employing the right person within such a limited time frame?

The key is to make the interview process really count – and that takes planning. Just because you aren't the one being 'tested' doesn't mean that you shouldn't prepare for an interview just as carefully as any applicant. A successful interview enables you to identify the candidate that best matches your organisation's needs in terms of the skills, experience, attitudes and knowledge that they bring to the role. If you are to assess this effectively, you need to ensure that you have carefully planned the interview process. The onus is on the interviewer, not the interviewee.

At Vanilla we take time to understand candidates and can assist you at all stages of the interview process. We interview people all day every day so we should be good at spotting who is good at interviews and will be good at the job. These 15 tips are designed to give you some suggestions to make the process of interviewing more effective and to help you avoid the pain and expense of hiring the wrong person.

### 1. Why am I here?

The main aim of any interview should be getting to know all that you can about the person sitting in front of you – both professionally, and within reason, personally too. Whilst CVs and techniques such as psychometric tests and references can provide useful background, the interview should be approached as an opportunity to learn about the applicant so you can make the most informed judgment possible about whether this person is indeed the right fit for your company.

### 2. Be explicit

You want the right person for the job, but that doesn't necessarily mean the most experienced or the most successful. Make sure that the applicants know what the role entails, what you are looking for and exactly what they are applying for prior to the interview – a detailed job specification will help. This way, you will get the right sort of candidate applying and be able to select from an appropriately qualified pool of people. This way you will avoid appointing someone who is impressive at interview, but who is over or under qualified for the position.



### 3. Act natural

An interview is an artificial situation and most people will be nervous – not the ideal state in which to get to know someone. Try to counteract an applicant's nerves by giving some thought to how you can put them at their ease. Setting the tone of the interview is important: how you greet people, how the room is laid out and how many people will be on the panel are all factors that need to be carefully considered prior to the interview.

### 4. Explain yourself

Uncertainty can be very disconcerting, so it is important that the candidate knows what to expect. Either in the invitation to interview or at the start of the interview itself, it's helpful to outline what the whole process will entail. For example, who will be interviewing, how long the interview should take, stipulating if anything should be brought to the interview, when will the decision be made etc. This way, both sides know what is involved and feel all the more comfortable for it.

### 5. Location, location, location

Organising the interview room will be time well spent. Whether you are aiming to create a relatively relaxed environment or a more formal tone, start by deciding on the appropriate location. If you work in an open plan office, ensure that the interview takes place behind closed doors and out of sight as it can be very off putting for the candidate if the environment is noisy or they feel on view to everyone else in the office – even if they can't hear what is being said. Similarly, the room layout can significantly impact on the environment and ambience. Try sitting where the candidate will sit so you can ensure that they are in a position to talk to either yourself and/or the interview panel comfortably without cricking their neck or feeling a lack of personal space. Position chairs at the right height and consider whether you want to interview from behind a desk, creating a more formal them and us approach, or whether you want to keep open space between you to foster a more informal feeling.

### 6. Question time

Questions are a key part of the interview process – if you ask the right questions, you will get to know more about the candidate, so it is essential to spend time thinking these through. Your starting point should be what you are looking for: experience, skills, knowledge and attitudes, so that any questions you ask address these areas. Consider the job specification and what the candidate will be expected to do and plan your questions from here. Open ended questions will tell you far more about a candidate than those requiring a simple yes no answer. However, if a candidate is talking at too great a length, a few closed questions can help to re-establish the flow of the interview. A useful strategy to determine whether you are asking the right questions is to write down how you might answer – or alternatively, try them out on someone else that you work with.

### 7. Lead by example

It's always interesting (and enlightening) asking people to talk about their work and what they have achieved so far. If relevant, request that candidates bring examples of work with them, or talk about a project that has been significant for them. When a person is talking about something that excites or interests them they usually forget their inhibitions and their true qualities show. If your candidate lacks enthusiasm and zest when talking about what they've done, this may set off alarm bells.



## 8. Silence is golden

With a few exceptions, people are generally better at speaking than they are at listening to others. In fact, listening is a very underdeveloped and underutilised skill. Remember why you are there: your aim is to find out about the person sitting in front of you and what they can bring to your organisation, so you need ensure that you spend most of the interview listening rather than talking – an 80/20 split is about right. So resist the temptation to talk about yourself – it's all about the candidate.

## 9. Put it down on paper

If you are interviewing several candidates in succession it can be difficult to remember who said what or what impression they created. It is perfectly acceptable to take notes during an interview, in fact it suggests that what they have said is of interest and so can be quite encouraging. The best way to handle the issue of writing things down is by simply explaining to the candidate that you may wish to take notes during the course of the interview. This way they know what to expect and won't be disconcerted. However, it is still important to maintain eye contact and establish a rapport rather than hiding behind a clipboard.

## 10. Quid pro quo

If properly handled, the interview should be a two way exchange of information. The interview should give the candidate more information about the company: its culture and values, as well as about the duties, prospects and demands of position itself. Therefore, it is important to give the candidate the opportunity to ask questions - this is often how an interview is concluded, although you may also be happy for the candidate to ask questions at relevant points in the process. It is also interesting to note what the candidate chooses to ask: this can provide some interesting insight into their attitude and expectations of the role. Similarly, a candidate who shows little curiosity by having nothing to ask could be a cause for concern.

## 11. Do your homework

As the interview is such a small window of opportunity, you should aim to use all the tools that you have at your disposal to learn more about the candidate. For example, applicants' CVs shouldn't be used for short listing and then discarded. Ensure that you re-read each CV prior to the interview so that you have a clear background fresh in your mind prior to meeting each candidate. You may also wish to ask questions about the contents of the CV or refer to it during the interview.

## 12. Aim for clarity

Be clear about what the role entails. Your job specification and pre-interview information should explain clearly to applicants what they will be expected what the position involves as well as the essential and desired skills, knowledge and experience. It is important to make this clear at the outset, or you may end up interviewing unsuitable candidates which is a waste of everyone's time. Likewise, you could end up employing someone who is inappropriately qualified (under or over) for the position – and then the whole process will have to start again.



### 13. What's in it for them?

A high calibre candidate may be in the fortunate position of being able to pick and choose. If you like a particular candidate and you want them to choose you, make sure that you explain the benefits of the role and the benefits of coming to work for you. But remember that honesty is the best policy – exaggeration or making false promises will inevitably backfire when the candidate becomes an employee – and discovers the truth for themselves. Present yourself as a professional organisation and explain what the company can offer, but be honest about the role and its prospects.

### 14. Looking for clues

What people actually say in an interview is significant, but there are also other ways of learning more about people if you are alert and observant. For example. A person's body language is very telling – obviously many candidates will be nervous and this may be reflected in their body language, but be on the lookout for non verbal clues and how the candidate presents themselves. Do they seem relaxed and professional? Do they make and maintain eye contact? How do they enter a room, greet you and sit down? An eloquent candidate may know how to answer a question, but if successful they will be representing your organisation so how they present themselves both verbally and non verbally is important.

### 15. Take a look in the mirror

Similarly, if you want to establish a rapport and encourage a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere, be aware of your own body language and how you appear to the candidate. Making eye contact, smiling and nodding are all encouraging signs whilst folded arms can be interpreted as a barrier – or even hostility.

## 5 Key Questions

As mentioned earlier, the questions that you ask are key to a successful, informative interview. Specific questions will be dependent upon the nature of the role, but as a general rule you should aim to include some personal, open ended questions to start the interview – almost like a warm up as people generally find it easy to talk about themselves.

It's also important to determine what ambitions and aspirations a candidate has as this may be relevant to how well they fit both the role and the company.

In addition, always aim to ask the candidates about any professional experience that they have and what attracts them to the position that you are interviewing for.

Whilst there are many, many questions that you can ask, depending upon the nature of the position, as well as the industry and company that you work in, our 5 key questions (in no particular order) are:

1. Tell me about something that you have achieved both personally and professionally that you are really proud of.
2. What attracts you to our company and the position that you are applying for?



3. What did you (a) most enjoy and (b) most dislike about your last job?
4. Where do you would like to be professionally and personally in ten years' time?
5. What makes you suitable for this company and this position?

So, whilst the interview isn't an infallible process, there are steps that you can take to make the most of the opportunity that it presents.

Planning and preparation are just as important in recruitment as they are in other areas of business so ensure that you invest the time, effort and resources necessary to make the process worthwhile and get the right person for the job.