



Hiring The Best

Some screening techniques that will help to eliminate mistakes when making hiring decisions.

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You can't eliminate mistakes in hiring, but you can work to improve the odds

To hear a lot of managers talk about it, they might as well be rolling dice. Like it or not, they say, hiring is one of those areas where you cross your fingers and hope for the best. The person sitting across the table *seems* like a great candidate. Bright, eager, well-spoken. Your gut says, go for it. But how do you know it's a good decision? The truth is, you don't -- which is why hiring good people is one of the trickier parts of any manager's job.

Not only do you have a myriad of factors to consider -- experience and compatability, to pick two big ones -- but each is so hard to gauge. Your goal is to learn as much as you can about the applicants. But their goal is to impress you, which, if they're smart, amounts to telling you what you want to hear. Fortunately, there are ways to become more skilled at getting the information you need. One of the simpler and more straightforward approaches I've come across is that of Kurt Einstein.

Einstein, 64, who trained as a psychologist and worked for nearly 25 years as an executive recruiter before he started The Einstein Institute Inc., in Cary, N.C., doesn't pretend to have quick and easy formulas for spotting good people. Unlike a lot of consultants, he doesn't use standardized tests or handwriting analyses. Nor does he guarantee a batting average of 1.000. What he does offer is an instructive critique of why managers make so many costly hiring errors. He also has a smorgasbord of techniques -- everything from interviewing tips to how to read a r sum .

When I first heard about Einstein a few years ago, I seriously questioned whether something so subjective as interviewing could be taught. It seemed to be a skill you either had or didn't have.

But talking with people who have adopted some of his ideas has persuaded me that I was wrong. "If you really work at it," says Dennis Campbell, president of Plastech Corp., in Forest Lake, Minn., "you can begin to get better information about prospective employees."

According to Einstein, there are several key elements to hiring good people, and the interview itself is only part of it. While he doesn't really expect people to follow his guidelines to the letter, understanding them will lead to a more disciplined selection process.

*** Setting the standards.** One of the biggest impediments to successful hiring, Einstein says, is knowing precisely what you're looking for. Managers typically define the scope of a position -- "That's the easy part," he says. But they don't always take the next step, which is to identify the characteristics of the desired candidate. Without a clear notion of what they want, interviewers are frequently less confident in their questioning, Einstein notes. If you know you want an accountant with five years' experience, for example, you won't be too quick to settle for one who has two.

A good solution is to spend a little time before you start interviewing listing what you really want in the individual you hire. For any position, some criteria will be "musts" -- fluent Chinese, say -- while others are only "preferreds." Of course, you may have to revise your standards in response to the applicants you get, but at least you'll have a point of reference.

*** Framing the environment.** Play your cards right, Einstein counsels, and you can learn a lot in an interview. The flip side is that the process can be a gigantic waste of time. To a large extent, it's up to you. The key is to create an atmosphere in which candidates feel comfortable, one in which they feel safe enough to talk about both their strengths and weaknesses. How do you do that? In part, says Einstein, by making people feel important. Seemingly insignificant gestures can go a long way toward setting the right tone: greeting applicants personally -- and on time; asking secretaries, in the presence of the candidates, to hold all calls; requesting the interviewees' permission before taking notes. It sounds simple, says Chuck Frank, president of C. Frank Chevrolet Inc., in Highland Park, Ill. "But if you're opening your mail or looking out the window, people don't want to tell you much."

Yet we're not talking about just good manners here. Many managers, Einstein says, need to reexamine their own role in the interviewing process. Most interviewers want to talk -- a lot. They want to explain the company's approach to business, to sell. It's only natural, but it's also a handicap. "When you talk," Einstein explains, "you're mostly repeating what you already know. You're offering information, so you're programming an individual's answer." Better, he says, to go into an interview with a clear set of ground rules and to explain them early: that you, the interviewer, will ask all of your questions in the first part of the meeting. After that, the applicants will have their turn to ask questions. "You might ask if that sounds all right," Einstein

suggests, "but I seriously doubt anyone would say no."

*** Asking the questions.** The purpose of an interview, Einstein points out, is to explore what the person can do and what he or she is like. So to a large extent, the interview will succeed and fail on the quality of the questions and what they reveal. It isn't possible to create a list of questions that would be relevant to all settings. Yet there are certain kinds of questions that are more likely to give you useful information than others (see "The Art of Asking Questions," below).

Chris Eugenis, sales manager at C. Frank Chevrolet, for instance, used to ask applicants for sales positions if they liked their current job. The response was predictable, he says. "Most would say yes, and if they said no, it would be for some innocuous reason." On the basis of what he's learned from Einstein, Eugenis now asks people to name three things they like about their jobs, followed by three things they don't like. "I get more out of the answer to that single question," he says, "than I used to get from the entire interview."

"The less you assume," Einstein suggests, "the better off you are." But even good questions are just starting points. The most powerful interviewing tool ever invented, in his view, is the follow-up question. It doesn't have to be fancy; it's often just a variation on "why." If you assume that most interviewees are ready for the most obvious questions, follow-up questions will take you deeper -- provided the interviewee feels comfortable. Questions like "Why did you do this?" or "How did that come about?" will make applicants depart from their scripted responses and provide more detail. If nothing else, you may learn that the person is unable -- or unwilling -- to cooperate, which could be useful in and of itself.

*** Getting behind the rÈsumÈ.** Good rÈsumÈs tend to glorify somebody's past activities; most character references have a hidden agenda (fear of a lawsuit, maybe, or guilt). You can't ignore them, says Einstein, but the best way to get an in-depth view of the significant things people have done is to ask the candidates themselves. Einstein calls it the "A to Z method," and it works like this: At a certain point in the interview, ask the applicants to help you understand their past achievements. You ask them to name three accomplishments they're most proud of. Then, you invite them to take you on a journey through each experience, from start to finish, in as much detail as they can give.

The beauty of this technique, say managers who use it, is that it helps you put the spotlight on what the individuals -- not their departments or their bosses -- have done. Recently, for example, Plastech's Campbell interviewed a number of people for the job of controller. Most looked great on paper, he says, but when he used the A to Z method, one candidate in particular fell apart. "He couldn't get specific," Campbell recalls. The person who got the job talked vividly about his favorite projects. "You could tell he was excited," Campbell says.

This technique goes beyond mere facts and figures. You can also get a peek at your candidates' approach to business, their ability to focus on detail, and what turns them on. When you read a rÈsumÈ, it's hard to know what a person actually can do. This helps you fill in the blanks. "In general," Einstein says, "people who can't go into detail -- or refuse to -- don't know what they're talking about." This doesn't mean that you'll have to disqualify them from consideration, but you might want to. The likelihood that somebody can duplicate something they can't even describe is slim.

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If the experience of other managers is any indication, Einstein's ideas won't be the answer to all your hiring woes. For one thing, you'll still need to interpret the information you get. Many managers find that they have to upgrade their listening skills so they can hear more of what individuals say -- and don't say. In any case, you'll probably need to spend more time with prospective employees. It's hard to conduct a good interview in less than an hour; it's more likely to take two or three.

What's the payoff? You and your managers will know a lot more about the people you're considering than you did before. You might make some of the same sorts of choices that you used to make following your gut. The big difference is you'll have a clearer sense of why.

THE ART OF ASKING QUESTIONS

It's not what you ask but how you ask it

Deciding whether someone is right for a job is always a little confusing. It's rare for a manager to have all the information he or she needs to make well-informed decisions. But knowing how to ask good questions can make a world of difference. The secret, says psychologist and personnel consultant Kurt Einstein, is understanding the difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions.

The problem with closed-ended questions is that they tend to trigger limited, monosyllabic answers. Either that or they'll signal to the interviewee what you're hoping to hear. Open-ended questions make no prejudgments -- and provide greater insights into the candidate. Here are some examples of each:

Closed-ended questions

Open-ended questions

Can you learn quickly under pressure?

Under what kinds of conditions do you learn best?

Can you accept criticism easily?

Give some examples of times you've been criticized. How did you react, and why?

Are you ambitious?

What is your interpretation of success?

Have you ever thought of doing any other type of work?

If you could structure the perfect job for yourself, what would you do, and why?

Did you get along with your last supervisor?

How would you describe your previous supervisor?
How were you alike, and how were you different?

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