# Professional Practices

# Interviewing and Selecting Exceptional People

# What brings success to an organisation?

The answer is obvious but when recruiting new people, promoting staff, or creating new teams it helps us to focus. People bring about success and it's how they behave that determines performance.

Certain jobs suit people with specific behavioural traits. This means people under performing in one job might perform exceptionally if moved to another.

In each section, the main tips are listed upfront. This makes it quick and easy for you to get a flavour of how to employ exceptional people. You can go back at your leisure to learn and apply each of these tips. You have everything to gain, so have a go!

### The cost of recruitment mistakes

The turnover created by getting the wrong people in jobs can reduce the bottom line by £600,000 per annum for a company with $250^{1}$ employees.

Using knowledge of behaviours to select people helps cut churn. Past behaviour is the key predictor of future performance. Through this booklet you will better understand the needs you have for your jobs, focus on candidates' behaviours and find exceptional people.

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[1] Based on a company with employee turnover rates of 14% among clerical workers, 12.5% among professionals and 5.5% among managers, an average salary of £25,000 and annual revenue of £15m

In short, we aim to help you:

- Run a behavioural interview
- Employ the right people
- Get the business performance you want.

What's more these hints and tips will speed up the process.

### Proven experience

These techniques were published in a North American HR Magazine article written by Cindy Moser and are based on the work of Don McQuaig. Don is President of our Canadian sister organisation, The McQuaig Institute™, a training and recruitment provider. The principles, based on over 40 years of experience, are ready to use.

### Making interviewing even easier with the McQuaig System™

The McQuaig System gives an insight to help you assess and manage people. It is easy to use, speeds up the process of identifying exceptional people and helps to avoid recruitment mistakes. To find out more there are details on the back page and at www.holstgroup.co.uk.

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- **Understanding why hiring mistakes are made**

- **Asking the questions that reveal the real person**

- **Establishing rapport during the interview**

# Understanding why hiring mistakes are made

Almost ten years ago, I was called upon to hire someone for the first time in my life. Using a few how-to articles that were routed my way by the personnel department, I assembled a list of generic interview questions and plunged into the task. I was not worried about making a mistake. I honestly believed that, as long as the person had the necessary work and educational background, I could figure out the rest by relying on my instincts and gut feelings.

I was mistaken. The person I hired - although certainly a nice person with a professional demeanour - was not right for the job.

What went wrong? To Don McQuaig, president of MICA Management Resources and a partner at The McQuaig Institute, the answer is obvious. I made a mistake that many continue to make today: I put too much emphasis on outward poise and academic history, and too little emphasis on personal characteristics, such as attitude, self-motivation, judgement and capacity to learn.

## A systematic approach
What I needed was a systematic and structured approach that would have avoided this and other common pitfalls of the hiring process. Such an approach is offered here, it is developed by The McQuaig Institute, and judging by the reactions of the people when presented to a crowded seminar of HR professionals, came as welcome and sound advice - even to those who had been in the business for years.

## The three levels of appraisal
According to McQuaig, there are three levels of appraisal at work during a hiring interview:

## Level 1 - Appearance
- The way they appear
- The way they dress
- The way they carry themselves in terms of poise
- Professionalism
- Self-confidence
- The way they express themselves.

## Level 2 - Skills and experience
- Their skills
- Abilities
- Experience.

That is, on their work history, on the technical skills they have acquired along the way, and on the training and education they have received.

## Level 3 - Personal qualities
- Personal characteristics
- Qualities.

## Personal characteristics
The personal traits associated with Level 3, says McQuaig, have the highest impact on how well someone will do a job. He points to six personal qualities in particular that are indicative of future performance and potential growth, and he ranks them in terms of the degree to which they can be changed, from the most to the least changeable.

| | |
|---|---|
| Attitudes and Beliefs | **Most Changeable** |
| Self-Motivation | |
| Stability and Persistence | |
| Maturity and Judgement | |
| Aptitude and Capacity to Learn | |
| Temperament and Behaviour Patterns | **Least Changeable** |
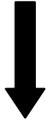
**1 Attitudes and beliefs** - the set of beliefs people hold that shape the way they interpret the world around them and, therefore, the way they act. It includes the way people think about themselves, work, success, responsibility and failure. Lower performers usually see success as something that happens to others because of "the luck of the draw", while higher performers typically see success as something that stems from doing a job well.

**2 Self-motivation** - the energy and drive people bring to a job. People come with different starting points. Higher performers come with more self-motivation and, therefore, attack new tasks with passion.

**3 Stability and persistence** - the ability of people to deal with setbacks and move forward. Higher performers stick to a job and consistently move towards their goal, finding ways to overcome obstacles that may crop up in the process, and bouncing back from any failures they may experience.

**4 Maturity and judgement** - the degree to which people are responsible and accountable for the jobs they take on. Higher performers are not afraid to take on responsibility and to be held accountable for the outcome. They are also considerate and open to constructive criticism.

**5 Aptitude and capacity to learn** - the ability of people to solve problems and learn new skills and tasks easily. Higher performers have the natural abilities - e.g. reasoning skills, fine motor skills, etc, - suited to the job in question. They usually get up to speed in a new job fairly quickly.

**6 Temperament and behaviour patterns** - the underlying behavioural factors that explain why people do the things they do, such as dominance (how much they need to be in control), sociability (how much they need to be with others, or, alternately, to be alone), relaxation (how patient they are), etc. These factors "go to the core of the person," McQuaig says, and are usually deeply rooted. Different jobs call for different temperaments, and the better the behaviour requirements of a job are understood, the more likely it is that the right person will be matched to that job.

The table following shows what distinguishes an exceptional from a non-exceptional employee for each of the three levels and, particularly, for the personal characteristics that are included in Level 3.

**Different jobs call for different temperaments, and the better the behaviour requirements of a job are understood, the more likely it is that the right person will be matched to that job**

**Why we concentrate on the wrong levels**

Level 3 characteristics are very hard to change compared to those associated with Levels 1 and 2, and they often have the highest impact on how well someone will do a job. Yet, as McQuaig aptly puts it, "We hire for Levels 1 and 2 and fire for Level 3." In other words, we do not dismiss an employee because we decide we do not like his or her work and academic history, but because we find out that person lacks the maturity, self-motivation or temperament needed to do the job effectively.

Nonetheless, we still over-rely on Levels 1 and 2 when we make our hiring choices. And no wonder. Although it is a highly subjective decision, determining if someone "looks the part" (Level 1) is pretty easy to do. In fact, given the face-to-face nature of interviewing, it's hard not to make such a determination. Deciding if someone can do the job (Level 2) is a more difficult task, but at least there are objective standards by which these skills can be measured. However, deciding if someone has the personal characteristics best suited to the job (Level 3) is neither easy nor objective.

Furthermore, even if we understand the importance of Level 3 characteristics and think we are uncovering these during job interviews, we often mistake strength in one level with strength in another. For example, we might think that someone who is enthusiastic and confident during the job interview is meeting our Level 3 criteria in terms of having the right attitude and beliefs when, in fact, the person is really only meeting the more superficial qualifications associated with Level 1.

# Levels of appraisal

| Superior performance | Unsatisfactory performance |
|---|---|
| **Level 1: Appearance and presence** | |
| • Makes a favourable impression<br>• Projects confidence<br>• Expresses self well<br>• Shows enthusiasm | • Does not make a good first impression<br>• Unusually nervous or ill at ease<br>• Not strong at expressing self<br>• Projects little enthusiasm |
| **Level 2: Skills, abilities and experience** | |
| **Work experience**<br>• High relevant work experience<br>• Demonstrated record of achievement<br>• Significant progress on previous jobs | • Previous work experience not relevant<br>• Minimal achievement<br>• Progress limited |
| **Educational background**<br>• Relevant and impressive educational background<br>• High grades and record of achievement | • Has minimal educational credentials<br>• Poor grades and record of achievement |
| **Level 3: Personal characteristics** | |
| **Attitudes and beliefs**<br>• Has shown positive, optimistic approach<br>• Looks for the best in others<br>• Confident in abilities<br>• Demonstrates high personal standards<br>• Enthusiastic<br>• Has shown commitment and loyalty in previous situations | • Worrisome and pessimistic<br>• Openly critical of previous bosses<br>• Shows hesitation, doubt in own abilities<br>• Low personal standards<br>• Demonstrates little enthusiasm<br>• Shows little commitment or consideration for others |
| **Self-motivation**<br>• Demonstrated hard worker<br>• Goes beyond what's expected<br>• Attacked previous assignments with energy<br>• Passionate about work and activities | • Has not sustained a strong work effort over time<br>• Does minimum required<br>• Little excitement/intensity demonstrated in previous experience |
| **Stability and persistence**<br>• Has shown consistent interests, goals and activities over time<br>• Has stood up to resistance<br>• Did not shy away from adversity<br>• Completed tasks | • Little consistency of interests, goals and activities<br>• Has backed away from adversity<br>• Did not stay the course<br>• Gave up when going got tough |
| **Maturity and judgement**<br>• Has demonstrated sound judgement<br>• Common sense approach<br>• Willing to take personal responsibility<br>• Realistic about strengths/weaknesses<br>• Willing to forego short-term rewards for longer-term benefits<br>• Shows self-control | • Has acted in the past with little forethought<br>• Lacks self-discipline and control<br>• Avoids personal responsibility<br>• Unrealistic<br>• Closed-minded, inflexible<br>• Doesn't display judgement |
| **Aptitude / capacity to learn**<br>• Demonstrated ability to learn new skills<br>• Absorbs information and ideas readily<br>• Has proven ability to solve complex problems<br>• Progress, achievements are significant | • Finds learning difficult<br>• Uncomfortable with complex issues<br>• Limited progress and achievement |
| **Temperament / behaviour patterns**<br>• Has demonstrated the behaviours (i.e., the right mix of dominance, sociability, relaxation and compliance) associated with high job performance | • Has not demonstrated the behaviours that are associated with high performance in this particular job |

**Aspects of interviews**

|  | Impact on Performance | How easy to Appraise? | How objective is Appraisal? | How Changeable? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Level 1** | Low | Easy | Highly subjective | Highly changeable |
| **Level 2** | Medium | Moderate | Objective | Highly changeable |
| **Level 3** | High | Difficult | Subjective | More stable |

### How to overcome these common mistakes
When it comes to the interview process, McQuaig believes it is "better to do an imperfect job on Level 3 than a perfect job on Levels 1 and 2." That does not mean that the first two levels have no impact on the hiring decision; they do. But the trick is to ensure that they only get the weighting they deserve.

### Prepare a job analysis
This is where a job analysis comes in. You must know the job requirements up front and stick to them throughout the hiring process. As McQuaig puts it, this ensures that you "don't fall in love with each candidate and redefine the job to fit." A job analysis also allows you to develop the interview questions you need to probe Level 3 characteristics effectively.

**Level 3 factors almost always have the most impact on performance and potential**

You start the job analysis by determining the nature of the job and looking at such things as:

- key responsibilities and the time spent on each
- immediate issues to be addressed in the job
- how job performance will be measured
- how the position relates to others in terms of supervision and teamwork
- the nature of the work environment, such as degree of pressure, people contact, autonomy
- the attractive and negative aspects of the job
- the opportunities for growth.

Based upon this analysis, you can determine what qualities at all three levels are needed to do the job well. What requirements do you need in terms of presenting a professional image? What job-related qualifications, training, education and experience are needed? Distinguish between those that you must have and those that it would be nice to have. What personal characteristics are needed? Rank the six in terms of their impact on job performance.

Now you weight the three levels in terms of their importance in the overall appraisal. Remember McQuaig's advice as you do this weighting.

Level 1 factors are rarely as important as the weighting they receive. Consciously defend against over-weighting your decisions on this level. Stop judging outward appearances.

Level 2 factors are often weighted too heavily. **Setting your standards too high in this area may limit your talent** pool unnecessarily, since these factors are changeable. As McQuaig says, "Level 2 is of less importance when you can develop the skills and knowledge to do the job in a reasonable period of time." Avoid arbitrary requirements.

Level 3 factors almost always have the most impact on performance and potential and **usually deserve at least 50% or more of the weighting**. Set your standards high in this area. Remember that not every characteristic within Level 3 will be of the same importance. You have to decide which are most important based upon the job requirements.

Now that you have a good understanding of what the job requires and what Level 3 characteristics in particular you are looking for, **you are now ready to develop the interview questions that will elicit the information you need.**

## Asking the questions that reveal the real person

### Assessing personal characteristics

So you have promised yourself that, when making hiring decisions from now on, you will put more emphasis on "Level 3" factors. But is there really a way to assess personal characteristics such as attitude, self-motivation, persistence, maturity, aptitude and temperament during a one-hour interview? The key is to remember this fundamental principle:

The best predictor of future performance is past behaviour.

Level 3 traits tend to be highly stable. That means they are likely to persist in future and, therefore, affect how well someone will perform a job. But it also means these traits are likely to have shown up in the way a person has acted in the past. **"Your ultimate goal as an interviewer is to predict future performance by getting a deeper understanding of how someone has displayed Level 3 qualities in the past,"** says McQuaig.

For example, say that you have determined through your job analysis that the person most likely to succeed in the job will be very self-motivated. The trick is to not judge candidates based on whether they project motivation in the interview, but on the motivation they have displayed in past situations. That is, you do not ask yourself, "Do they seem to be enthusiastic?" Instead, you ask yourself, "How enthusiastic were they in previous work situations of a similar nature? **If you can learn to make this mental shift - to stop judging bodies and start judging underlying past actions over time - then you will have made an important 180-degree turn,"** says McQuaig.

### Experiences to explore

Three areas can be explored in an interview to learn about people's past actions: work, schooling and outside activities (hobbies, sports, volunteer work, etc.). Your task is to explore how candidates have behaved in these various situations over time. "You are really just taking people back to situations they have had in their lives and asking them to replay them for you, and asking them to reflect on their perception of the world around them," says McQuaig.

### Principles for exploring past actions

Obviously, you do not have the time during an interview to find out everything about a person's past and his or her reactions to it. So you have to structure your interview to focus on those incidences that reveal the most about how people will perform in future. To that end, McQuaig points to these principles:

The best predictor of future performance is past performance in *similar* situations. However, the more *varied* the situations in which the behaviour is demonstrated, the more deeply rooted it is.

### Previous work situation

How people acted in previous work situations is more compelling evidence of future job performance than how people acted in previous academic or social situations. As McQuaig points out, we all know people who may be highly passionate about one area of their lives - e.g., their sports activities - but have little passion for another area - e.g., their work.

Nonetheless, the more areas of their lives in which people demonstrate a particular behaviour, the more deeply rooted that behaviour and, therefore, the more likely it is that the behaviour will be repeated in future. That is, when people are highly motivated not only at work, but also at school and during outside activities, that shows that self-motivation is a strong personal characteristic that cuts across all sectors of their lives.

**The more *recent* the behaviour, the more predictive of future performance. However, the more *long-standing* the behaviour, the more deeply rooted it is.**

### Recent situations

How people acted recently is more telling than how they acted long ago. For example, someone who took on responsibility for a group within the last month is more likely to display the same leadership skills in future than someone who last led a group 12 years ago. In the latter case, you would have to wonder how well-established his or her leadership abilities are.

> **The best predictor of future performance is past behaviour**

## Deeply rooted behaviours

However, when people act the same way over a long period of time, they are displaying deeply rooted behaviours that are all the more likely to continue in future. Therefore, a candidate who can demonstrate strong leadership skills not only in his or her most recent job, but also in the various jobs held over the years or even decades, is displaying a strong, personal characteristic.

People reveal their past patterns of behaviour most vividly in incidences where they experienced great successes or setbacks.

## Defining moments

People reveal themselves most during those defining moments of their lives - those situations that are often referred to as "critical incidents." This is an important principle because it means you do not need to explore the full life history of candidates during interviews. Instead, you can get a lot of information about their underlying patterns of behaviour simply by having them talk about a few key experiences.

Furthermore, people tend to have vivid recollections of these types of critical experiences. Therefore, they can easily recall the details of the situation and how they felt at the time.

**One experience can give you a very rich view of a person**

"You could spend hours talking to people about what they did yesterday and the day before and not get very much information about the patterns of behaviour underlying their actions," explains McQuaig. "However, if you ask people about the biggest challenges and successes they have faced in their recent jobs, you start to explore something that was a defining moment in their lives. You can learn incredible amounts that way. In fact, one experience can give you a very rich view of a person.

## Exploring past histories

The diagram opposite shows that you might spend most of the interview working in the upper left-hand part of the box, talking about several critical incidents associated with the person's recent work history. Then you might travel across and down the box by getting the person to talk about other critical events that happened at different times and in different situations. The point is that you do not need to get a person's full linear history to understand his or her patterns of behaviour. A few well-selected questions from the different areas of the box should be enough:

- Horizontally, the diagram moves from the most similar situation at left to the most dissimilar situation at right
- Vertically, the diagram moves from the most recent past at the top to the distant past at the bottom
- The stars represent critical events
- The shading represents ease of interpretation in terms of predicting future performance, with the darkest area in the upper left-hand corner (recent work history) being the easiest to interpret and the lightest area in the bottom right-hand corner (outside activities from a long time ago) being the hardest to interpret.

## Questions about the future

The only reason you would ask a question about the future is to determine someone's career goals. Even then, the answer would never be a reason to hire. At most, it might be a reason not to hire. For example, if someone's career goals perfectly fit the description of the job for which you are hiring, that information is of no consequence. As McQuaig says, "Most people who are trying to get a job or a promotion will put their best foot forward and, in doing so, will try to make the personal goals align with what the organisation is looking for."

## Areas of interview focus

**Similar Situation** →  **Different Situation**

| WORK | EDUCATION | OUTSIDE ACTIVITIES |
|------|-----------|--------------------|

Recent Past

↓

Distant Past
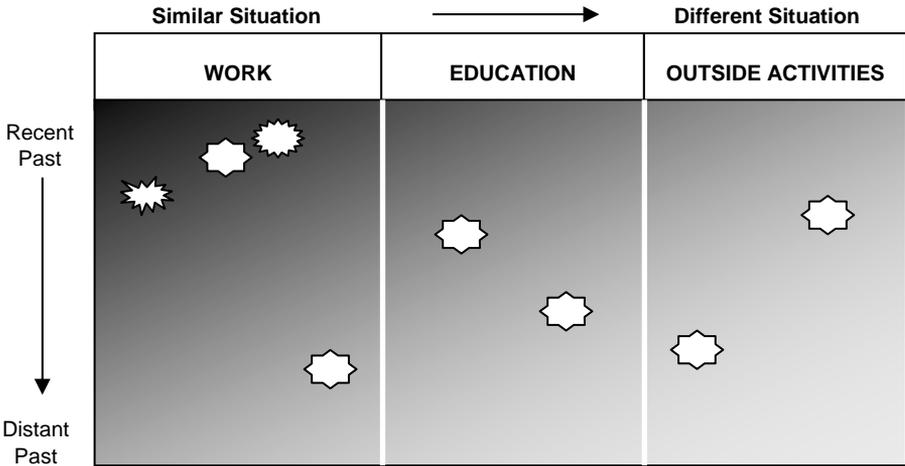
## Constructing your interview questions

The answers to questions about recent work history are the easiest to interpret and the most telling about how people will perform in future work situations. You may be wondering, then, why you wouldn't just limit your interview questions to finding out how candidates acted in their most recent jobs. The reason is this: Doing so would not allow you to discover *patterns* of behaviour. You need examples of behaviour from different situations over time to learn if a certain behaviour is a truly typical personal characteristic.

Furthermore, people are often more candid when they talk about situations outside work, such as their schooling or free-time activities, and when they talk about events that happened in the more distant past, such as their first job. "The real richness of the interview is to explore in detail the recent work experience and to use *older* experiences and *other kinds* of experience as a source of additional data that can help you really see whether something demonstrated in recent work experience is a long-standing or broadly-based trait," says McQuaig.

As far as how to construct your interview questions, McQuaig offer these guidelines:

- **Focus on the past, not the future**
- **Ask for specific examples**
- **Give direction**

- **Ask for contrary evidence**
- **Search for critical incidents**
- **Ask for contrary evidence**
- **Explore all areas**
- **Have a repertoire of questions, but don't try to ask them all.**

## Focus on the past, not the future

If you accept that a person's past actions are the best predictor of future performance, then you can see why future-oriented questions are not likely to reveal very much. The answers to questions such as these are not rooted in any reality, because candidates have a pretty good idea of what you want to hear and will respond accordingly. It's far more revealing to ask about a past situation.

For example, questions such as "Would you be willing to work extra hours from time to time to meet a deadline?" or "Do you think you would like working in our team-based environment?" are not very helpful. What person being interviewed is going to say "no"? But if you say, "Tell me about a time when you had to work extra hours to meet a deadline," or "Describe for me the last time you worked on a team-based project, the role you played and how you felt," you are actually going to find out something about how a person has acted in the past and, therefore, will likely act in future.

# Sample questions to appraise level 3 factors

## Attitudes and beliefs

Do you consider yourself an enthusiastic person?

Tell me about a situation recently where you were really excited and enthusiastic.

- What was the circumstance?
- What was it that captured your enthusiasm?
- What impact did it have on your results?
- How long did it last?

Tell me about a situation where you felt it was important for you to take a stand that was openly critical of your boss or a co-worker.

- What was the situation?
- Why was it so important that you say something?
- What reaction did you get?
- What impact did this have on you?

## Self-motivation

Give me an example of an experience where you felt especially motivated.

- What was the situation?
- What did you find so compelling?
- How long did it last?
- Have you had this experience at other times?

Tell me about a project where you had to work to your limit to get the job done.

- What was the situation?
- How long did it last?
- In what way were you stretched?
- When did this happen?

## Stability and persistence

Describe a recent goal or project at work where you experienced tremendous adversity or where the results were elusive.

- What was your goal?
- What roadblocks did you encounter?
- How did you respond?
- What was the outcome?

## Aptitude/capacity to learn

Can you give me an example of something at work at which you have excelled even though you did not work especially hard?

Tell me about an experience on a previous job that required you to learn a new skill or task.

- What was the situation?
- What was your experience in learning?
- How were you able to apply it on the job?
- What was the outcome?

## Maturity and judgement

Describe a difficult decision you've made on a previous job that required you to exercise judgement or discretion.

- What was the situation?
- In what way did it require judgement or discretion?
- How did you go about making your decision?
- What did you ultimately decide?
- What did you learn from this experience?

It is often difficult to keep an open mind when you have strong views or ideas on an issue. Tell me about a time when you have had such an experience.

- What was the issue?
- Why did you feel so strongly?
- How did others react to you?
- Ultimately, how was the situation resolved?

## Temperament

Tell me about a time at work where you had to work closely on a team to get the job done.

- What was the situation?
- What role did you play?
- Based on your experiences, what have been the pros and cons of working on a team?
- What did you do to get people working together?

Do you consider yourself a risk-taker? Tell me about something you've done in the past that illustrates your willingness to take risks.

- What was the situation?
- What did you see as the risk?
- How did you go about deciding to take the risk?
- What did you learn from this experience?

There are often peak times at work where the load is particularly heavy. Describe an experience where you have had to work under tremendous pressure.

- When did this happen?
- In what way was the pressure heavy?
- How long did it last?
- What was your strategy for coping?

These are only a small sample of the questions you might ask. Many more can be prepared depending on the qualities you are looking for.

However, if you are interviewing for a professional or high-level job and find out that what the person is looking for is not in line with what the job offers, then that is information that may point to a bad fit.

## Ask for specific examples

Using phrases will make people search their histories for actual examples of past incidences that reveal patterns of behaviour:

- Tell me about a time when...?
- Can you recall a situation...?
- Describe for me an experience...?

For example, if someone says, "I am an incredibly hard worker," you might reply, "That's great. Tell me about a situation where you had to work to your limit."

## Give direction

Because you are trying to establish patterns of behaviour, it is important to give direction in your questions about the time (first? most recent?) and the situation (at work? at school?) you want the person to describe.

## Search for critical incidents

You should try to draw out at least four or five such events from different situations to ensure the patterns of behaviour are clear. To find critical incidents, you can use triggering words such as:

- most/least
- best/worst
- success/disappointment.

## Ask for contrary evidence

You want to find out how people have reacted in adverse conditions as well as positive ones. For example, let's say you are looking for someone who works well in a team-based environment. A job candidate might say, "I work great on a team." Your might respond with something like, "I'm glad to hear that. Most experienced business professionals, however, have also been in a team situation where things have not gone so smoothly. Can you tell me about a situation you have been in like that?" Your aim is not to paint a negative picture of the person but, again, to discover the patterns of behaviour demonstrated. "The idea is not to conclude that because someone worked on a dysfunctional team that the person is dysfunctional," says McQuaig. "It's rather to see how the person dealt with the adverse situations as well as the good ones." In fact, sometimes in describing negative situations, people are actually showing positive characteristics about their attitudes, maturity, judgement and temperament.

## Explore all areas

No one area of a candidate's history is enough to allow you to do a complete appraisal. You should explore all areas - work, education and outside activities. Even if 90 per cent of the interview time is spent on the person's recent work history (or, if you are doing a campus interview, on the person's recent academic history), it is essential that the other areas be touched on, even if briefly, in order to get a broader sense of the person.

## Have a repertoire of questions

Most information will come out spontaneously if you ask open questions and listen closely. In other words, you may want to prepare sub-questions in order to probe certain areas relative to the main question. However, you will likely find you don't need these probes because the information will spill out on its own.

Remember as you construct your questions that there are no right or wrong answers. Some are simply more effective as drawing out the "rich" information associated with critical incidents. As an interviewer, you will learn which ones work best for you relative to the particular job for which you are hiring. You will find you then tend to rely on these questions. As McQuaig puts it, good interviewing is like fishing: "There may be fish in the lake, but someone who is good at fishing knows where the pockets are in which the fish hang out."

Also remember that you probably have certain Level 1 (professional demeanour) and Level 2 (education and experience) requirements that you are looking for in candidates. You will find that the information you need to assess these factors will likely come out when candidates answer the questions you ask to determine Level 3 factors. For example, let's say you need an electrical engineer to work on a product development team. That person will need certain Level 2 credentials, knowledge and skills. Some of this information can be obtained from the resume. But other information will come out when you explore the needed Level 3 requirements, such as the ability to work in a team-based atmosphere. You might ask candidates to describe their most recent team-based experience, the product being developed, the role they played, etc. You will then learn not only about their teamwork skills, but also about their product development skills.

### Interpreting the responses

When it comes to interpreting the responses of candidates, it is important that you listen carefully - with an open mind and no prejudices or preconceived ideas. In particular, McQuaig emphasises the following:

- **Don't expect every candidate to have a lot of activity or experience in every area**
- **Don't judge activity and result alone; judge the qualities revealed**
- **There are no right or wrong answers**
- **Don't jump to conclusions**

### Don't expect experience in every area

Find out what activities the candidate *has had* and explore these experiences in detail to see what patterns of behaviour they reveal. In other words, do not judge people by the volume of their experiences, but on how they have acted in the experiences they have had. For example, say a person going for a sales job has not played a lot of sports. The hiring sales manager might assume the person is wrong for the job. But this reasoning, which is typical in the hiring of salespersons, is faulty, says McQuaig. The interviewer should find out what the person *has* done and use those experiences to find out about the candidate's motivation, persistence, attitude etc.

### Judge qualities revealed by activity

Do not jump to stereotypical conclusions about what a person's involvement in a certain activity says about that person. For example, if someone says his or her hobby is bird-watching, do not assume the person is the quiet, studious type, or if someone says his or her favourite activity is playing competitive tennis, do not assume the person is energetic and aggressive. "People often judge people on the activities, not on the behaviours they demonstrate in pursuing those activities," says McQuaig. "That is a trap."

So, too, is judging people on the results of their activities. For example, say a candidate says he or she was fired from the last job. Do not assume there is something wrong with the person without exploring the situation. You could find out that the person's firing was indicative of the positive traits you are looking for, such as a willingness to push back or the independence to stand up for his or her beliefs.

The opposite is also true. Just because someone has been successful in previous jobs does not necessarily mean he or she will be successful in future jobs. "When we say the past is a good predictor of future performance, what we mean is that good attitudes or high motivation in the past means good attitudes or high motivation in the future, not that success in the past means success in the future," explains McQuaig.

### There are no right or wrong answers

Don't ask a question with a preconceived notion of what the answer should be. Instead, look for the patterns of behaviour revealed in the answer. Each candidate will be unique, and each will display patterns of behaviour that reflect his or her personal characteristics.

### Don't jump to conclusions

Sometimes someone may say something that causes you to jump in the wrong direction about the characteristics of that person. Don't forget that you are looking for patterns. If you find you are forming an opinion based on one incident, keep an open mind and ask other questions to test your hypothesis. In terms of interpreting the actions that a person has taken, use the following as a guideline: if done once, it is a clue; if done twice, it is a pattern; if done three times, it is a well established characteristic.

Putting all this information together in order to ask effective interview questions and interpret their answers is not an easy task. McQuaig knows this. He believes it is the most difficult task that someone in a leadership or human resources function will ever be asked to do on the job: "You're trying to assess and predict a complex human being against a changing set of requirements. It's an art, not a science." Nonetheless, he adds, by following the systematic approach described so far, it is possible to do "a very good job" when it comes to selecting a person who is well matched to the position you are trying to fill.

# Establishing rapport during the interview

Learning how to conduct interviews so that job candidates answer questions openly - thereby giving you the rich information you need to probe personal characteristics - is a critical business skill for anyone involved in the interviewing process.

As Don McQuaig explains, you can have two people ask the same question of the same candidate at the same point in the interview and get two different answers. And it's not a matter of whether or not the candidate is telling the truth; it's a matter of the level of truthfulness. What determines the level of truthfulness is the ability of the interviewer to establish rapport with the candidate very early on in the interview. The sooner the candidate feels comfortable enough to open up, the richer his or her responses will be in terms of revealing personal characteristics.

Many executives or managers may think they are already pretty good at establishing rapport. After numerous business meetings and social functions, they might think they have a good handle on how to put people at ease. That could very well be true in those situations, but job interviews are full of barriers.

For example, in the interview, job candidates are typically nervous, which limits candour. As well, they walk into interviews ready to sell themselves, knowing that they only have a certain amount of time to make a good impression. They often come prepared with what they want to say. At the same time, they often come feeling vulnerable because they want what the other person has to offer - the job.

All of these things, and more, make the dynamic of an interview very different than, say, the first meeting between two people at a conference or a cocktail party. "The interview is such a delicate, tricky situation that many managers have to learn they need to do some different things to win people over," says McQuaig.

## Develop a comfortable conversation
So how do you quickly turn around a meeting that is initially fraught with anxiety into one that is essentially a comfortable conversation between peers. McQuaig offers this advice (with the comment that it may all sound like pretty simple stuff, but it is practical and can make a big difference):

- **Hold the interview in a non-threatening environment**
- **Allow adequate time**
- **Prepare in advance**
- **Establish rapport quickly**
- **Set the agenda upfront**
- **Start off positively**
- **Let the interview unfold in the expected way**
- **Let the candidate do most of the talking**
- **Ask open-ended questions**
- **Question tactfully**
- **Demonstrate open-mindedness**
- **Downplay negative information**
- **Recognise your own biases**
- **Affirm and acknowledge strengths**
- **Take notes discreetly, if at all**
- **Do not give negative feedback**
- **Be prepared for the next step**

## Hold the interview in a non-threatening environment
To establish rapport, it is essential that the interview takes place in a location that offers privacy and freedom from interruptions. That means interviews in open-concept offices, cafeterias or rooms where the door is open, where intercom messages can be heard or where people feel free to interrupt are out of the question. For these same reasons, McQuaig says holding an interview over lunch at a restaurant, although it may seem like a good way to establish rapport, is not a great idea. You are unlikely to get the desired level of openness when waiters are walking by and/or interrupting the conversation, or if other patrons can hear what is going on.

## Allow adequate time
People will be more candid in their responses if they do not feel they are being rushed. If they sense at all that time is of the essence, candidates will limit responses to simple-to-explain experiences. "You want to create a sense of timelessness," says McQuaig. "You have to make sure the time limit exists in your head only".

## Prepare in advance

By reviewing the candidate's resume in advance, you can quickly turn the interview from a rigid question-and-answer session into a conversation. For example, the resume might reveal areas of common interest or past history that can be used to establish initial rapport through small talk: "I understand you used to go to High School X. So did I. Did you ever have Mrs. Smith?" Furthermore, as the interview moves into more substantial areas, you can raise topics informally instead of asking direct questions. For example, instead of asking, "Where did you go to university? What did you study?," you can say, "I was hoping to have some time to talk about your years at University of Toronto." This is not only more conversational, but also shows respect because you have taken the time to read the resume and to remember some of its contents.

Going over the resume when the candidate is already in the room is not a good idea. McQuaig suspects that half of all interviews start with the interviewer saying "Can you give me a minute to read your resume?" But this sends the wrong message to the person being interviewed - that you didn't think it worth your time to read the resume beforehand.

## Establish rapport quickly

The first few minutes of the interview should be dedicated to building rapport by engaging in conversation that will build confidence in the candidate, making him or her feel accepted and equally powerful. This can be accomplished by doing some very easy things, such as smiling, being friendly, offering a cup of coffee, engaging in small talk, etc. Do not start off with any difficult questions. You are unlikely to get revealing answers when little rapport has been established. "Think of it as going into a squash tournament," says McQuaig. "You wouldn't start off with a slam, but with a volley back and forth. It's the same in an interview. You want to volley the conversation in a low-key, non-threatening way."

## Set the agenda upfront

When an interview is treated like a business meeting between peers, it is all that much easier to create a good rapport. One way to do that is to outline near the beginning of the interview how you expect it will proceed. For example, you might say, "I suggest we start talking about your work experiences and educational background, and then leave some time at the end for you to ask any questions you might have. How does that sound?" This also makes it clear that the interview will focus on the candidate.

## Start off positively

Nothing drives rapport up faster than saying something nice. Obviously, whatever positive thing you say must be sincere, but that shouldn't bee too hard since, as McQuaig points out, "if you're interviewing someone, there must be a good reason why." For example, you might say, "I read your resume and I'm impressed by your work experience. I'm looking forward to finding out more about it." What this does is move the dynamic from one where the candidate feels he or she has to do a selling job to one where the person knows the interviewer is already interested.

## Let the interview unfold in the expected way

Most people expect interview questions to follow a certain logic: moving from recent and past work experiences to schooling and outside interests. Therefore, once you get into the substantive part of the interview (i.e., once you have established rapport early on through a discussion of common interests or other small talk), you should follow the expected pattern. If you start asking a candidate questions about outside activities first, you are going to throw the person off base, thus jeopardising rapport.

## Let the candidate do most of the talking

The more the candidate talks, the more relaxed he or she will become. Many interviewers fall into the trap of feeling they have to fill any silences. But if you ask a question and the candidate does not respond right away, give the person some time. McQuaig says the brain is a pretty fast computer and will likely find an answer in five to 10 seconds. However, he does not advise letting silences go on too long - i.e., more than 30 seconds. At that point, you can try reframing or rewording your question.

## Ask open-ended questions

To encourage candidates to do most of the talking, your questions should be open-ended; i.e., they should not allow a simple yes or no answer. Don't ask: "Do you enjoy working in a team environment?" Instead, say: "Tell me about a project where you worked in a team environment."

## Question tactfully

McQuaig believes that, in terms of developing rapport, it's not so much what you ask, it's the way you ask it. Within the bounds of respecting privacy and human rights, McQuaig says you can ask almost anything as long as you ask nicely. For example, if you are trying to learn more about people's weaknesses, don't ask the question in a way that makes them feel inadequate: "What's been your biggest failure in life?" Ask them in a way that does not undermine their respect: "We've talked a lot about your strengths. Do you mind if we talk about some of the things you think you could get better at?"

## Demonstrate open-mindedness

Any sign at all that you are judgmental, critical of answers being given or jumping to early conclusions is likely to close the door on building a solid rapport. Do not, for example, make

judgmental comments during an interview about other people in your organisation, about people you and the candidate may both know, or even about politics. That tells the candidate that you are just as likely to be judgmental of him or her.

As much as possible, you should be open-minded during the interview. This open-mindedness must come honestly and, for this reason, McQuaig says some managers may need to convince themselves first that being open-minded is the position they want to take. Being open-minded - by responding to information with phrases such as "I see what you mean" or "I appreciate your point of view" - signals that you are "really trying to understand the candidate's world," says McQuaig.

## Downplay negative information

In the same vein, do not react too strongly to negative or sensitive information that may come out during the interview. For example, if a candidate says something about not getting along with a current or former boss, try not to show any negative reaction or concern because the person is likely to get apprehensive or defensive and not want to explore the subject further. However, you can explore sensitive information by being empathetic. For example, if it's true, you could say, "I've been in that situation and I know it can be tough. I'd like to know how you handled it." Or, if you haven't been in that situation, you could say, "I can only imagine how difficult that must have been. Can we talk about it?"

## Recognise your own biases

If you feel particularly drawn or repelled by a certain candidate, for whatever reason, you must work hard to challenge the assumptions you have made about that person.

McQuaig says the strong initial reactions that can set an interviewer off in the wrong direction are usually associated with relatively unimportant Level 1 characteristics, such as looks and manner of dress. For example, if you feel yourself having an initially strong negative impression of a man who comes to the interview wearing an earring - and "you are from a generation where that comes with a lot of baggage," says McQuaig - you have to stop yourself and say, "That's not what this is all about. Let's get back to probing Level 3 characteristics to find this person's strengths." You might find the interview changing from one where you could hardly wait to get it over with to one where you wish you had more time to talk to a person who has turned out to be a very interesting candidate.

## Affirm and acknowledge strengths

If a candidate talks about an achievement of which he or she is obviously proud, acknowledge the achievement. The more the candidate understands that you can see his or her strengths, the less likely the person is going to feel the need to keep positioning experiences and events in a positive light.

## Take notes discreetly, if at all

Taking notes, says McQuaig, does not increase rapport. It often makes candidates nervous. That being said, notes do have a value in that they can jog your memory when it comes to writing up your interview appraisal. Therefore, McQuaig suggests that at the beginning of the interview when you are setting the agenda, you tell the candidate that you will be taking some notes and offer a pad and pen to the candidate in return so that he or she can also take notes. This, again, sets up an atmosphere of a business meeting between peers.

When you are taking notes, never start scribbling after the candidate has said something sensitive or negative. Notes should be confined to a few words that will remind you of an example or experience the candidate has shared with you.

Those who are new to interviewing are probably better off not taking notes at all, says McQuaig.

"They should concentrate on listening. They will be surprised at how much they can remember." On the other hand, writing up the results of an interview must be done right away. It's just as surprising, says McQuaig, how much can be forgotten during the 10 or 15 minutes it takes to do some intervening tasks.

## Do not give negative feedback

You should not give any feedback if a candidate asks at the end of an interview how he or she did. Because most people understand that more than one person is being interviewed, one of the best ways to respond is to honestly explain that a number of people are being interviewed so it is premature to come to any conclusion.

That said, you don't want to deceive a candidate either. If a candidate is clearly lacking one of the essential Level 2 criterion for the job - e.g., a professional license, being bilingual, no past experience, etc. - it is okay to say so. The essential thing is that you do not talk about any Level 3 deficiencies; i.e., about personal characteristics. "People like to walk out with their dignity," McQuaig says.

## Be prepared for the next step

Although you should rarely reject anyone on the spot, you should be prepared to indicate the next step to a candidate you are particularly keen on.

"You have to be prepared to move fast if you find someone you want." However, if for internal reasons moving fast is out of the question, your next best bet is to keep the candidate involved in the process through ongoing contact. You might, for example, tell the candidate that it will be another two weeks before you will be in a position to make a hiring decision, but then ask the person to come in the following week to meet a colleague or superior.

In the end, McQuaig says, the best way to establish rapport during an interview is to remember this overriding point: *Treat the candidate like you would a customer - with respect.*

In conclusion McQuaig also makes this final comment. The strategies mentioned here for building good rapport in order to encourage candidates to answer questions candidly are not manipulative. It's not only in your best interests that the person who gets the job has the personal characteristics necessary to succeed, says McQuaig. It is also in the best interests of the job candidate.

"You're not doing a favour for anyone if the wrong person is put into a job and he or she ends up failing".

Understanding the behaviours required for the job, the fit of your candidates to the job and the questions from which to illicit this information can be time consuming to complete.

The McQuaig System™ is a recruitment and development tool that can ease this process. You can find out more overleaf.

# The McQuaig System™

Getting the *right* people in the *right* jobs is a real challenge.  By using The McQuaig System, a psychometric instrument that is extensively validated and proven, and also easy to use and practical, you can have an invaluable report about your candidate:

- A detailed insight into the candidate's temperament - a key driver of performance

- Immediate feedback if they are not likely to be suitable - saving valuable interview time

- Concise information on each candidate, allowing you to target your interview effectively

- An indication of a working *fit* with the team they will be joining

- An assessment of linguistic, logical reasoning, and mathematical abilities

The McQuaig System also provides invaluable insight to appraise, manage and develop people.  It provides practical guidance on managing individuals and teams effectively in today's ever-changing world.  The Holst Group helps its clients maximise the benefits of the system by providing the personal support of one of our senior consultants.

## Advantages:

- Measure candidates against *your* requirements in *your* organisation and *your* culture

- Easy to use by line managers, any time, anywhere – total flexibility and immediate results

- Helps managers to identify and address "hidden" problems

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