

# The Five Most Common Hiring Mistakes And How To Avoid Them



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Tom was interviewing a candidate for a sales associate position. He liked the polished, fresh-out-of-college look of the first applicant, Andy. When Andy mentioned that he was a scratch golfer, Tom, who also golfed, viewed this favourably. He envisioned a meticulous, focused individual with the competitive desire he needed to win in sales. He suggested that Andy interview with Barb, their VP Sales. Barb didn't like Andy's self-confidence and textbook answers to her questions. When Andy mentioned he was a competitive golfer Barb saw this as a red flag. How could anyone have enough time to become that good at golf and still spend the time he needed to build a client base?

Whoever said that first impressions are everything must have been referring to the hiring process. A recent study conducted by the University of Toledo demonstrated that a group of interviewers had, for the most part, made up their mind within fifteen seconds of meeting the candidate – by the time they had settled into the chair!

While "hiring and retaining talent" is frequently cited by business leaders as key to their organisations' success, the reality is that most managers are less scientific about hiring their "greatest resource" than they are when buying

a piece of equipment – they replace rigorous analysis and reference checking with general impressions and gut feel.

In this article we will discuss five common mistakes made in the interviewing process and five tips to help avoid them.

## Five Common Mistakes...

■ **Getting Tricked by Surface Qualities:** Research has shown that the way a candidate looks has a tremendous impression on the interviewer. A John Hopkins University study showed that candidates who were sharply dressed, smiled a lot, made eye contact and found something in common with the interviewer received higher ratings – even on technical skills!

■ **The Halo Effect:** We often let one factor outweigh everything else. For example, maybe the candidate shares your alma mater or a common interest or perhaps she works for a competitor you respect. In my work with a large financial services firm, I met a sales director who hired investment advisors. While other directors often hired "rookies", he swore by his practice of wooing seasoned sales reps from competitors. He was shocked when an internal analysis showed that his region's revenue-per-employee was actually one of the lowest in the country. "As long as the candidate had a large book of business I was blind to all their other faults" he commented, "I spent more time selling the opportunity than evaluating the candidate."

■ **Asking the wrong questions:** Many hiring managers choose from a standard list of predictable, opinion-based questions that favour the well-prepared candidate – questions like 'what are your strengths and weaknesses' or 'where do you hope to be in five years?' Hundreds of websites list the most common questions that employers are likely to ask – and many provide the appropriate answers. If you want to see the level of sophistication that this has elevated itself to, just visit

the Virtual Interview section of Monster.com's Interview Center.

■ **Steering the candidate.** If you know the answer to the question you are asking, you will be inclined to fill in the blanks for candidates, especially if they have already made a strong first impression at the fifteen-second mark of your interview. As a result, we draw assumptions regarding the candidate's responses and paraphrase for them. For example, we may say things like 'you must have been bored with all that routine work' or 'so it sounds like you left to explore greater opportunities'. If you could keep your own viewpoints out of the question you'd get more candid, meaningful responses from candidates.

■ **Over-selling the job.** Selection guru and human resources consultant Dr. Kurt Einstein determined that one-third of qualified candidates will leave the job within 90 days, based on a mismatch of job expectations. When we meet our dream candidate, we tend to go into selling mode, overstating the opportunity and leaving out some of the less attractive elements of the job. One of my clients in the consulting business confided that they lost a candidate after three days on the job because no one told her that there was nowhere for her to sit. I asked why this was not discussed in the interview phase, since the company's growing pains might have been positioned in a positive way. The recruiter responded that the hiring manager suggested keeping quiet on it – he was aware that she was being courted by competitors and afraid that they would lose her.

### ...How to avoid them

**Ask the same questions of all candidates:** This sounds like a simple and obvious thing to do, but the majority of managers prefer to play it by ear and let the interview go where it takes them. As a result, three candidates with different interests, personalities and backgrounds will get evaluated on three sets of criteria, or worse yet, evaluated on the gut feeling that the interviewer is

left with after their "chat". Asking the same base questions of all candidates can improve on this. As studies conducted by Canadian industrial psychologist, William Wiesner, have shown, any attempt to increase structure will increase your chances of picking a better applicant.

■ **Get a Second Look at the Candidate:** Improved interviewing techniques can increase objectivity, but as human beings we are still wired to make snap judgements. We can definitely benefit from another, independent viewpoint that may challenge or

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confirm our initial gut response. More objective measures, such as personality assessment instruments can provide a scientific evaluation of tough-to-evaluate candidate qualities like leadership style, team fit and adaptability. From my experience as an interview skills trainer, it is these soft skills which are most frequently cited as being critical to job success, yet, managers admit that they are also the most difficult to assess in today's well-prepared candidate. As Tanya Pyne, corporate recruiter for Aon Canada, Toronto, explains, "a key interview challenge is to get beyond the 'gloss' of a well prepared interviewee. Behavioural assessments help us do this".

Over the years these assessment tools have become easy to use and, with the advent of the Internet, the results are accessible instantly. Think of a personality assessment as one more look at the candidate – like adding a fourth interview in your three-interview process.

A VP for a U.S. retailer once com-

mented: "we know that 80% of our store managers score high on competitiveness based on our personality test. Occasionally we meet a candidate who hits a home run in the interview but the assessment tells us they are essentially uncompetitive. So what do we do? I tell the hiring manager that our first impression has just received a serious challenge and we need to dig deeper. We prepare a list of questions that dig into the person's past — we look for times when they strived to win, showed tenacity to overcome obstacles, set aggressive targets and exceeded them. In the end we get a better understanding and make a more informed decision."

### Give them an assignment

Research has consistently shown that work samples are valid predictors of job performance. The work sample provides an opportunity to observe the candidate in-action: we let them perform key job tasks in the interview.

For example, a technology client of mine has senior engineer applicants "whiteboard" a project that they are developing and explain it to a panel of interviewers. They have found that communicating complex tasks is a make-or-break competency for the job and need to see the candidate in action to assess this skill. Another client in the insurance industry gives claims manager job candidates fifteen minutes to review two case files and make recommendations.

When using work samples, it is important to make the exercise as job-related as possible and keep in mind that you are only measuring one factor — don't let the candidate's performance in the exercise cloud your judgement on other qualities. A sales manager once fell in love with using mock sales presentations as the key performance predictor during the hiring process. Then a consultant specializing in time-management informed her that her sales force, on average, was spending just 17% of their time in front of customers. "I was basing my hiring evaluation almost exclusively on the

mock presentation”, she said, “and ignoring the other 83% of what they did on a day-to-day basis.”

## Use pre-emptive reference checking

Reference checks are a good way to get a more objective view of the candidate. Of course, these days it is difficult to get more than "name, rank and serial number" references from large corporations. Yet, your intent to check references can be effectively leveraged to increase the integrity of candidates' responses.

For starters, ask candidates early on, whom they will be providing as references. Make it clear you are not requesting permission to call the references at this stage, but simply want an idea of the individuals they will be putting forward. Be sceptical of candidates who will not be providing the names of former supervisors.

Next, link your questions to references. For example, you may say something like: "That's a great example of how you saved the company money by developing a new process. Were you reporting to the operations manager at that time? What did she say?" This encourages success stories that are based on fact, not fiction.

Finally, remember that you don't have to settle for the two or three names that the candidate gives you. Even a marginal performer can find three people who have great things to say about them. You can ask for more than three references or state specifically who you would like to speak to. Of course, you cannot call a former employer without the candidate's permission.

For those of you who still believe that reference checking is not worth the time, don't forget about one of Canada's most infamous exports, John Davy. Mr. Davy was a highly creative resume writer and great communicator who managed to secure a job as CEO at a New Zealand broadcasting company with a totally fabricated resume and without a shred of relevant job experience.

## Use a Realistic Job Preview (RJP)

To avoid “quick-quits” many companies have started using the RJP. It gives the candidate a realistic perception of what it is like to work in your organisation and lets them self-select out. The RJP may include a meeting with future co-workers, a facilities tour or simply a candid discussion about some of the more challenging aspects of the job. The common element is that some of the negative aspects of the job are discussed. Kal Tire, a leading Canadian automotive retailer has elevated the RJP to higher level. They allow candidates to spend a day getting familiar with all aspects of the job, from customer service to on the road tire repairs. The human resources manager, Paula Olmstead, states that, "by aligning the candidate's expectations with ours, we have reduced the number of people who leave early on because they decide the career is not for them."

In summary, it appears that, over the past decade, job candidates have upgraded their interview skills at a faster pace than hiring managers have. Investing time and money in things like developing interview questions, work samples or personality testing may seem like a lot of work but it is far less costly than putting the wrong person in the job and having to fix the situation later.

As Coleman Mockler, former CEO of Gillette once said, “Every minute devoted to putting the proper person in the proper slot is worth weeks of time later.”

*Michael Gravelle is Vice President for The McQuaig Institute®, an organisation with over forty years experience providing businesses with the tools they need to make better hiring decisions.*

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