Hiring the Right Employees

These tips will help ensure you hire the right people.

BY DALE A. REIGLE

One morning not long ago, I stopped at a local coffee shop on the way to work. The young waitress was busy wiping down tables at the far end of the establishment. Yet on seeing me, she quickly crossed the room with a wide smile on her face and said, "Welcome to the Daily Grind! How may I help you this morning?" I mumbled something about needing a moment and she quickly replied that I should take my time and let her know if I had any questions. She said the baker would be bringing out more delicious pastries in a moment if I did not see the perfect thing in the counter. She stayed close by, but was not hovering.

After handing me my order she thanked me for coming in and asked if there was anything else she could get for me. Her smile and personality were warm and sincere. I paused for a moment, then took out a business card and handed it to her. I told her we were currently looking for a receptionist and that if she ever thought about starting a career in the healthcare field that she should e-mail me a letter of interest. I said her employer was lucky to have her. She beamed and thanked me. I have no idea if I will hear from her, but hope that I do. Here was a young person who knew how to greet customers and make them feel special without a supervisor anywhere in sight. She subtly promoted her organization and its services. Someone did a good job of hiring.

Hiring the right employees has been like the search for the Holy Grail. A lot has been written about it
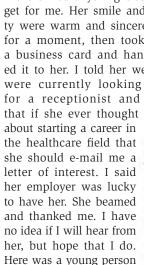
and a lot of people have attempted it, but it remains elusive. Managers have tried skills tests, personality inventories, team interviews, open-ended questions, surprise questions, and many other means to identify top candidates. However, there is little empirical evidence to show that any

of these actually work. Few human resources professionals can tell you with certainty which questions or which answers consistently reveal star employees. Without a workable grading key, even the best questions have little worth. Even good questions and a good grading key do not

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stop a poor interviewer from rendering them useless.

In most cases, job knowledge and prior work experience at similar companies are only fair predictors of top performers. What you should be looking for is aptitude, attitude, motivation, and fit. If someone has these attributes, you can generally teach him/her the additional job skills necessary to be successful. You cannot teach personality, nor can you force someone to love a job that is not a good fit. You need to hire for what you can't train.

If you have been in your current practice for a while, you should be able to identify your top and bottom performers. What differentiates them? How do they respond differently within the workplace? Most importantly, how

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can you use that knowledge to develop interview questions and a scoring guide that reliably predict whether an applicant will be a star?

Setting up the Interview

People reveal more of their true personality and give more forthright answers when they are relaxed. Take the first 5 to 10 minutes of the interview to put the candidate at ease. Model open communication by frankly discussing the position and your practice. Acknowledge that interviews are intimidating and that being nervous is normal. Let the candidate know that your goals are the same as his or hers—to determine whether he or she would be a good fit for the position. Encourage the candidate to ask any questions he or she might have to help make this determination. The questions asked by the candidate may reveal even more about fit than the answers given to your queries.

Arrange seating so that you can observe the candidate's body language. A round table with the candidate sitting in the quartile next to yours is ideal. The table provides the safety of person-

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al space, but you can still fully observe physical tell-tales such as the clasping of hands below the table, sudden nervous kicking of the feet, or shifting in the chair—things you can't see sitting across a desk. Watch for signs of piqued interest such as a sudden slight forward lean of the body or slight rise of the eyebrows.

Have a second interviewer sit directly across from you. This requires that the interviewee shift position and focus from one to the other during the interview. Ideally, the second interviewer's personality should be different from yours. This will reveal how quickly and well the candidate can shift his or her attention and style based on the person he or she is

answering. A candidate may tell you that he is good at multitasking, but become completely flustered when his attention is divided.

Keep in mind that the candidate is also watching you for nonverbal cues. You want to keep your own body language and facial expressions open,

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appropriate, but not overly revealing. If you nod enthusiastically and your tone shows excitement, you have broadcast to the candidate what you want to hear. And you will hear more of it, whether it is genuine or not.

Silence is a very strong interview tool. Many candidates feel compelled to fill in gaps in the conversation. Using silence to elicit more information does not lead the candidate toward a specific type of response.

Interview Questions

Most interview questions asked by hiring managers are poor predictors of good employees. We tend to hire based on our gut reactions and the likability of the person being interviewed. We congratulate ourselves that most of our employees are "pretty good" and that only a few disappoint us on a recurring basis. Yet if you ask your peers, you will find that their experience is generally the same as yours. If your hiring results are no better than the norm, what can you do to rise above that level?

Interview questions should reveal how the candidate acted in past situations similar to ones that will occur if they are hired. For example, the problems that happen at the front desk are different than those in x-ray, and both are different from what the physician encounters. Select situations appropri-

ate to the position by using the circumstances that are handled much better by your best employees than they are by an average employee (or, if you still have them, your worst employees). You should ask for specific examples, not hypothetical responses. "How would you handle a difficult situation with a co-worker?" is not as powerful as "Can you tell me about a difficult situation that you had with a co-worker?"

Most candidates know the correct answer to the first question and will give you a rehearsed answer: "I would attempt to resolve the situation by discussing it with them privately away from patients or other co-workers. I would try to find a compromise that was positive for both parties. If we still disagreed I would suggest that we discuss it with our supervisor..." It may be the right answer, but is it what the candidate would really do? The second question requires a recounting of actual events. Although the candidate might still skew the answer in a more favorable light, people will usually be more accurate in describing an actual event versus a hypothetical situation.

One of the most common mistakes made by an interviewer is leading the candidate to the desired answer. The question, "Can you tell me about a difficult situation that you had with a co-worker?" does not telegraph the desired answer. A less desirable candidate will likely respond in one of the following three ways:

1) "I can't really think of any situation where I've had any real disagreement with anyone at work. I am very easy to get along with and accept others for who they are."

2) "Yes, I had a co-worker who always thought that she knew more than anyone else. No one in the office got along with her, and patients often complained about her. She was always telling others what they were doing wrong."

3) "I had one co-worker who kept making mistakes. I pointed this out to

my supervisor numerous times, but he kept giving her second chances. I finally had to tell the practice administrator because no one was doing anything, and she ended up firing her."

Candidate #1 is not credible or is very passive. Candidate #2 described the situation, but did not mention any resolution. This candidate does not think in terms of results or problem-solving. The inexperienced interviewer will come to the rescue by asking, "And what did you do about it?" because that is what the interviewer wants to know… and now, so does the candidate. Candidate #3 is more persistent than #1 or #2 in identifying problems, but sees problem-solving as the role of management. He may be personally competent, but he will be your constant complainer and finger-pointer. Each of the responses tells you what you need to know about the candidate. Follow-up questions to bring out a better answer are just projecting what you want to hear, not who the candidate is.

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A good candidate is likely to describe a fairly serious situation and the steps he or she took to correct it in detail: "One of my co-workers would not pick up phone calls from the pool. She kept her phone turned to busy so that the calls would not come through. This was frustrating to the rest of us. One day after I had taken several calls in a row, I mentioned that I was feeling overwhelmed and really needed her help so that I could keep up with my work. She admitted to me that she didn't take the pool calls because she didn't know the other doctors' preferences and was afraid of making a mistake. I talked to the rest of the receptionists, and we each made up a preference list for our physicians. I laminated them and put them into notebooks that we could each keep on our desks. After I showed my co-worker the notebook, she still seemed concerned. I offered to listen in on the first few calls. After just a few tries, she was excited that she was doing so well."

Here are a few "favorite interview questions" submitted from various people. Let's see how they can be tweaked to make them more meaningful.

Original: What would you do if the doctor was running late for clinic and patients were complaining? The problem with this question is that it is hypothetical.
Modified: Can you tell me about a time that a patient was upset because the doctor was running late?

Original: Tell me about a time that you had to reschedule an elective surgery patient because he or she could not pay the required deposit. This is a leading question.

Modified: Can you tell me about a time a patient said he or she could not make a deposit for the surgery?

Original: What would you do if you were faced with a difficult situation and there was no policy or procedure to tell you how to handle it? The problem with this question is that it is hypothetical.
Modified: Could you please tell me about a situation in a previous job when office policies or procedures did not provide guidance on what to do?

Original: Please describe how you helped your physicians resolve an issue where several of them disagreed on what to do. This is a leading question.
Modified: Can you tell me about a time that your physicians were strongly divided on an important issue facing the practice?

It is okay to throw in some "softball" questions. These help to keep the candidate at ease. Inquiries such as, "Tell me a bit about yourself" may provide some insights about the person. However, even if you did not directly ask the question, if a candidate reveals information that puts her into a protected class, you cannot use that information in making your hiring decision.

Scoring Answers

In addition to developing good questions, you need to develop consistent scoring guidelines. Your best employees can provide your scoring key. Think of common tasks and challenges faced by your employees and form them into questions. Put your questions to the test by doing mock interviews with good and less good employees. Compare the responses. If the answers given by a good employee and a mediocre employee are essentially the same, throw out the question. It does not differentiate and is therefore meaningless to hiring. If there is an obvious difference, use transcripts of those answers to develop a scoring guide.

Practice and debriefing are important to consistent scoring. Have all your supervisors, including any who were not in the mock interview, score the answers. Mark Murphy, author of *Hiring for Attitude*, recommends a seven-point rating system.[1] Using seven points seems to provide adequate separation without becoming overwhelming to the evaluator. Critically analyze each area of disagreement to resolve differences of opinion. See whether those scorers who were not in the interview correctly identified the answers coming from your best employees. Once you agree on the rating, you can use these good and poor answers as examples on your question scoring guide.

After every real interview, debrief the scoring with your team. Those who were not present should question how and why each interviewer gave the score they did. Over time, scoring will become more consistent. Close the loop by evaluating how each hiring decision turned out. If you made poor hiring decisions, you need to change your questions or scoring (or both). Keep in mind that

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"good" and "poor" are relative and will vary from position to position and practice to practice. The person who works well for me may be vexing for you. The traits you are looking for in billing may be different than those you want in a medical assistant. The way you score an answer must be done in the context of the job.

Conclusion

Current employees can provide the best examples of the type of aptitude, attitude, motivation, and fit we are looking for, or not looking for, in new employees. All four of these attributes are present in star employees. Using what we know about our best and worst employees can assist us in developing questions and scoring templates that will help us categorize current applicants.

Past performance is a good indicator of future performance. Unfortunately, we often do not have good information about prior performance. Past appraisals, letters of reference, and results of reference checks are seldom dependable conveyors of past performance. Hiring managers need to formulate questions in a way that elicits informative responses from candidates.

The interviewer should try to put candidates at ease and encourage honest, two-way communication. The astute interviewer will reconcile the content of the candidate's answers with body language and other nonverbal cues to try to assess not just the honesty of the answers, but also the commitment and motivation behind the answers.

Interviewing is not a science. Practice, critique, and critical review of outcomes improve our ability to become good hiring managers. People and situations change, so we will never achieve 100% success in filling our ranks with only the best employees. However, "pretty good" should not be good enough, and hiring the right people is one of the most important jobs we have. **PM**

Reference

[1] Murphy M. Hiring for Attitude. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

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