How to Nail the Interview -- When You're the Interviewer

Last year, I was tasked with hiring 11 of the best graduates from the class of 2011 for my company, Inflection. We called it "11411." We had 350 applicants—and ultimately made 18 offers and hired 17 outstanding graduates from Stanford, Harvard, Yale, and other top schools. And along the way, I interviewed over 100 applicants.

Now here's a secret most candidates never consider: Interviewing isn't necessarily so easy from the other side, either. I was, in fact, initially quite uncomfortable doing interviews. But with guidance, coaching, and a whole lot of practice, I'm starting our next cycle—12412—much more prepared. Here's what 100+ interviews have taught me about making the right hires.

Get the Right People in the Door

You want your new team members to propel your product, division, and company forward. How do you get that? Our advisor Eben Pagan puts it very simply: "Only take A-players." At every stage in the process—from resume screens to offers—keep your bar high. Set tough standards, ask questions that let you probe a candidate's knowledge and skills, and most importantly, don't take people you feel so-so about just because you feel bad, want to be nice, or are having a hard time verbalizing why your gut is telling you "no."

Beyond that, set your recruiting process up to help your applicants self-select. What makes your company unique and attractive? Whatever it is, make sure it gets communicated. At Inflection, we have a unique and fun culture, well-illustrated on our website through charts and infographics. So we often direct people to the website, and bring printed versions of it when we attend career fairs. When we see candidates get excited about it, it's a good sign we'll have a good culture fit.

Prepare for the Interview

First, know your business—not just your own job. This is especially true if you haven't been at your company for very long, or have been there a shorter time than most of your peers. Your company's business models and weekly reports can help you get informed, as can conversations with more experienced employees.

If you're new to interviewing, I'd also recommend Startup Lessons Learned (if your company is in the tech or start-up space) and Bradford Smart's *Topgrading*, a definitive book on hiring and retaining top talent.

Next, know what you're looking for in an ideal candidate. What skills is it most important he or she already has, and what are you comfortable teaching him or having her learn on the job? For example, does a candidate already need to know a particular coding language or be familiar with a certain market or technology platform? Further, if you're hiring for technical positions and don't have a technical background (the case for me), online classes like Stanford or MIT's Computer Science 101 or Codecademy's shorter version can help you become versed in the basics of what you'll be discussing.

Preparing for the individual interviews is also crucial. Study a candidate's resume and portfolio carefully before the interview and consider what sticks out to you. Ask yourself which of his or her past projects seem most interesting or transferable to your company, and what claims seem unreasonable or exaggerated. I also like to look up at least one company he or she has worked for and understand what it does. Make notes to yourself on what you want to ask in the interview, so you'll leave with a more complete picture of the candidate and how he or she would fit into the role you're hiring for.

Finally, if you're interviewing with a partner (highly recommended—see below), plan the interview beforehand. You want the interview to go smoothly, so you and your partner should agree ahead of time on how you will organize the interview and who will lead the discussion, or what sections of it each of you will lead.

Start the Interview Off Right

I always start an interview by telling the interviewee what I do, and then asking if he or she has questions about the role or company. This both puts the candidate at ease and gives you some insight into his or her concerns upfront. Remember—from the minute you meet the interviewee, you represent your company and can get a candidate excited about his or her potential role.

If I can think of a project I've worked on or know about at the company that's relevant to a candidate's interest or experience, I talk about it, ask for his or her opinion on it, and make a note to try to orient any case questions I ask later around that theme. For example, if a candidate listed "Bay Area Sports" as an interest, the case question I might later ask him would be to estimate how many unique visitors had attended a professional sporting event in the Bay last season.

Next, I generally ask candidates to detail their recent work experiences, or those most relevant to the job. As they talk, I take notes on both their narratives and their thought

processes. I try to gauge their entrepreneurial inclinations, critical thinking, and communication skills. Some of my favorite questions:

- Why did you choose to switch jobs?
- What did you learn from a given job?
- For younger candidates: Why did you choose your major or your internships?

A good candidate will not just share the same info that's on his or her resume, but will bring that experience to life—letting you see his or her creativity, initiative, project management abilities, organization, and other essential skills, as well as his or her passions. On the other hand, if a candidate has no justification or rationale for career choices he or she had made, can't pinpoint his or her contributions to projects, or seems to have been just drifting through past internships and jobs, that can be an indicator of a lack of clarity, critical thinking skill set, and purpose.

Drill Deep

Candidates have rehearsed answers to many questions. So if you want to see what he or she is really like, you need to get beyond that. The fastest way to do so is to focus on a project or accomplishment of interest, and dive deep.

For example, if a candidate "Worked on a product team that increased quarterly revenue by 14%"—you need to find out a whole lot more. Beyond the basics of the candidate's team and product, I find that good questions are:

- What, exactly, were you responsible for on the team?
- In what ways was the product different because of your participation?
- What would others on your team, including your boss or employees, say about working with you?
- Did the product cannibalize another, and if so, to what extent (see this piece)?

Also ask questions that let you find out about a candidate's engagement and abilities in his or her last position. Looking for analytical skills? You can ask about revenue streams, profit margins, and how the product cycle worked. If a candidate can readily discuss these and other financial and business calculations, that's a good sign he or she was engaged with the numbers, and is probably analytically capable. If a candidate can give you a detailed, compelling story on how the product fits into its market, differentiates itself from its competitors, and would be adapted to changing market trends—those are all good indicators he or she would excel in a brand or product management position.

Finally, consider giving the interviewee an assignment or test. For example, this year, we're doing a coding challenge for engineers, which candidates will have to complete in four hours. Giving a test can be great for any role—it measures skills and saves you time, plus it lets you engage with prospective employees about the types of challenges they'll face.

Start Recruiting Early

Finally, don't forget that the interview is also a chance for *you* to make a good impression. Ask yourself: Would you work somewhere where the people were detached, not engaging,

or stiffly professional? No, you wouldn't—but some companies still project this image during the interview process.

So if someone is struggling with a case question, offer help. If she reacts well and improves, she is a quick, eager learner, and you've made her comfortable. And why not have fun and banter a bit? Treat interviewees like people, and you, as the driver of the conversation, give them permission to let down their barriers and demonstrate they would be a good cultural fit.

Beyond that, there are two specific strategies you can use during the process. First, I try to connect candidates with a co-worker I think they would get along with. Second, there is no substitute for a great signing bonus (if your company budget permits); this year, we're buying our 12412 members a round-trip ticket anywhere in the world. We can hype this and learn about our candidates at the same time by asking where they would travel.

Three Concluding Thoughts

If you can, interview with a partner. One of you can take notes while the other focuses on questions. Afterward, you will have a detailed record and a partner to calibrate your impressions with, and you can communicate the candidates' strengths and weaknesses with their next interviewer, as appropriate.

Second, it can be disconcerting to ask tough, penetrating questions or probe deeply during a case question—but you have to do it (or find a partner who will). We are socialized to be accommodating, likeable, and fluid conversationalists. Be aware of this, and control your instinct. Also, don't spend too much time talking about yourself or the company—you need to learn about the interviewee. If need be, let silence happen while you think, and press for answers if you are unsatisfied. If the interviewee does well under pressure, he or she is a strong candidate. If not, you avoid the wrong hire.

And lastly, good interviewing means your company will hire the best talent, save time on deliberation, and encourage candidates to accept offers. For you, the interviewer, the gains can be more subtle—especially if the new hire will not report directly to you. But the benefit is still there: At Inflection, for example, a few employees are known as exceptional interviewers, and people go to those who are good interviewers for advice. And that gives you the opportunity to make contacts across your company, plus it's yet one more way to earn the general credibility and trust of your peers—and your boss.

This article was originally published on The Daily Muse. For more expert management advice, check out:

- First-Time Manager? How to Fast-Track Your Education
- Pros in Different Area Codes: How to Train Remote Employees
- Rally the Team: Create a Cool Office Culture

Matt Sundquist studied philosophy and earned his teaching certification at Harvard College. After completing a Fulbright Scholarship in Argentina, he joined Inflection, a data commerce startup in Redwood City. He is a Products and Privacy Specialist.