The Evolving Art of the Job Interview

Job interviews are often stressful for the interviewee. But as trends show, there is a new onus being placed on the employer as well, as new techniques are emerging in the workplace—all geared toward hiring the best person for the job, for the long haul.

By JACLYN C. STEVENSON

The drill-down.
It's a daunting term, which means getting to the meat of the matter, or to delve beneath the surface to glean deep, thoughtful answers to questions.

And when related to the process of interviewing for a job, an aspect of working life that is stressful for most, 'the drill-down' sounds downright nerve-wracking.
But it's a term that Rob Phillips, vice president of Talent Management at MassMutual Financial Services in Springfield, learned about five years ago as part of an intensive interview-skills course meant not to sharpen his skills as the interviewee, but rather the interviewer.

“It's proof of a paradigm shift in the hiring process,” he said. “For a long time, people have been conditioned to walk into an interview and give a 30-second commercial about themselves, but that's just not relevant anymore. We needed to learn how to get more relevant answers from potential employees.”

Behavioral interviewing, as it’s called, has been practiced at MassMutual for some time, and Phillips said the style differs greatly from the older, competence-based model of years past.

“We used to ask people about their strengths and weaknesses,” he said. “Now, we ask for specific examples of how they've dealt with dysfunction in the workplace, or what they've done to turn a team around.”

Phillips said that, in many cases, interviewers follow a more formal rubric through the behavioral process, working from a pre-developed set of questions, or following a specific model to glean answers from candidates regarding problem-solving, team-building, innovative thinking, and other intangibles.

It took some getting used to, but Phillips said he went from being an “O.K. interviewer” to screening candidates with a high level of confidence. He added that the system makes sense when one of the primary goals is hiring not just qualified employees, but those who will gel with a company's overall mission and culture, and thrive in the long term.

“We're looking to find out how well people play in the sandbox with others, but we're also looking to meet our own business needs,” he said. “There's always a certain amount of risk involved when hiring someone, and history of past performance isn't always the best indicator of how one will perform in the future.”

Theory vs. Reality

To get beyond the theory and rhetoric that candidates often offer in an interview (which many hopefuls still perceive as relevant and necessary to the process), a greater number of human resources and talent-management professionals are using behavioral interviewing skills to drill-down, or flush out, the best of the best for a given position or business.

According to Kathy McCormack-Batterson, assistant vice president of Talent Management, MassMutual uses the acronym 'STAR' as one tool to get more real-world examples of how an interviewee might handle issues in the workplace.

The letters stand for four areas candidates are asked to define and expound upon in regard to an instance of problem-solving or effective management, or even a time at which a lesson was learned.

“We ask them to define the situation, the techniques they employed, the action plan that was put into place, and the results,” she explained. “Those types of questions allow for a much deeper assessment.”

McCormack-Batterson said that's because the line of questioning demands specifics, which better enable an interviewer to discern how much real-world experience a candidate has had in various areas.

“We can evaluate how much practical experience a person has, not just how well they can talk about abstract concepts at a high level,” she said. “That, in turn, allows us to make better calls. We're not trying to make people uncomfortable, and it can be intimidating, particularly for people at the junior level who haven't experienced much of the drill-down yet in their careers.”

“It's a tough labor market,” she added, “and more in-depth interviews are a way we can raise our overall level of talent and develop new ways to get people thinking strategically.”

Testing 1, 2, 3

Similarly, Sarah Corrigan, director of Human Resources at OMG in Agawam, said that manufacturing company also uses a number of tools to hone in on the best candidates for various jobs. OMG recently instituted timed online tests, administered in-house, which measure and assess intan-
gible qualities such as judgment and analytical capability. Corrigan said the tests are given before person-to-person interviews are scheduled, and help to target those candidates with the skill sets that meet a position's specific criteria.

"Tools of the trade are regularly introduced in HR just like in any other industry," she said. "We can't refute that they're helpful — they help us make better decisions, because we're armed with more information."

On the executive level, tests are also given — more in-depth, written questionnaires that are aimed, again, at getting a better read on soft skills.

"That test gives a sort of personality profile," said Corrigan, "which is important to many of jobs within a company, especially those in the fields of finance and management."

Overall, Corrigan said she sees the use of assessment tools growing in human resources and hiring offices.

"I've seen much more reliance on testing and assessment," she said, "and candidates shouldn't be surprised by them when they're going in for an interview. They're not the kind of thing you can study for, but you can be prepared for the possibility that it will be part of the interview process."

Still, she added that the human factor is far from being eliminated from the equation. At OMG, interviewers are handpicked by the HR department based on their own skills, and the task is now being seen as equally important as day-to-day management of the company in terms of running a lean, efficient shop.

make a first assessment of a candidate," she said. "Then, at the time of a second interview, interviewers are chosen based on their background. These are people who

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hardest questions,” said Foster. “They’re open-ended, and usually relate to a problem or situation and how one has, or would, solve it. But really, interviewers are looking for a few key things. They’re looking for common sense, and to identify transferable skills, such as time management and leadership.

“It makes sense,” she added. “At the point of an interview, employers have already seen your resume. They’ve identified that you have the hard skills, and are judging you as a person — if you will be productive, communicate well, and fit in.”

Foster noted, however, that even in this changing corporate climate, many of the basics still apply to the interview process for people at all stages of their career.

“I always stress preparation,” she said. “There is so much information available to us today that there’s really no excuse not to learn everything you possibly can about a company before going on an interview.

“Plus, many employers are moving in many new directions in terms of interviewing and hiring,” Foster continued. “In the past few years, for instance, I’ve heard of more group interviews, where people are placed in one room together, asked questions, and observed to see how they interact. It’s key to know what’s going to happen when you walk in the door.”

Screening Names

Conversely, with this new emphasis on a candidate’s behavior as it relates to the workplace, those on a job search must also be mindful that employers, too, are using online channels to better prepare themselves for interviews.

“People should be thinking about their online presence,” Foster said. “First impressions are now being made before a person even shows up to an interview.”

Foster said the Internet is becoming a proactive tool to identifying the best candidates. Job seekers should first use defensive tactics to ensure their online presence is professional and appropriate (by performing a Google search of their own name, for example, or granting private access only to Web pages on social sites like MySpace).

But in addition, a greater number of people are positioning themselves online deliberately, using directory and networking services such as LinkedIn or ZoomInfo to create a short bio that potential employers can readily find.

“It’s a whole new world,” said Foster. “You need to make sure you know what’s out there, but you also need to be there.”

In other words, know the drill.*

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