

The Art Of The Interview

This is it. You've gone through the steps of defining your expectations, developing the compensation package and generating potential candidates for the sales manager's position. Now you are at a critical phase of the hiring process - preparing for and conducting the interview. It's at this point that you need to take the time to prepare for the interview and not rush into the process or a hiring decision. Regardless of how important it is for you to hire someone quickly, this is far too important a decision to make without sufficient information or time to consider all factors.

1. Initially, Conduct Telephone Interviews

Once you've lined up candidates for the position, you need to evaluate those candidates against the criteria and expectations you've developed. Based on this assessment, you'll then be able to determine which individuals you'd like to interview.

But don't automatically set up appointments with these individuals. Take the time to conduct a quick interview by telephone *before* scheduling an in-person meeting. In this conversation, you can first determine the candidate's level of interest in the position, his/her salary requirements and whether significant issues such as relocation are a concern. This discussion will also enable you to get an idea of the individual's style and personality. A 15-minute preliminary interview will allow you to determine whether or not it's worth both of your time to proceed.

2. Prepare Scenarios That Require Response

If the decision is to move forward, you'll need to prepare yourself for the actual interview. This means not only setting up a time and place where you'll not be interrupted, but more importantly, knowing the questions you want to ask and the information you need to obtain. These questions should be based on the expectations for the position and elicit how the candidate has accomplished results.

Remember it's not just about what they've done, it's about *how* they've done it. This type of approach is called "behavioral event interviewing" and focuses on how candidates handle specific situations that are important for success in the position. You need to create scenarios that reflect important decisions or skills that will be required and then evaluate how effectively the candidate responds to them.

For example, if the position requires people management, design a scenario that will require the candidate to display his management style, such as asking him how to address a situation where an employee has consistently used poor judgment in how she managed her accounts. Don't simply ask the candidate if he's a good manager or to describe his management style. This won't give you the necessary insight into his approach to make a good decision.

3. Keep Your Guard Up

Also, it's essential that you maintain your objectivity during the interview. It's very common to get a "gut reaction" about a candidate in the first few minutes of the discussion. And while these are often accurate and valuable, relying solely on them can limit your ability to probe deeper on areas where there may be some problems or shortcomings.

Similarly, you need to guard against hiring someone because he has a style similar to your own. While that can make the initial transition easier, it won't be effective in the long run if ultimately the candidate doesn't have the necessary experience and qualifications to perform the job.

Some other things to keep in mind...

- **Have all candidates complete an application.**

Should there be a problem in the future, employment applications include a statement advising that falsification of this information is grounds for immediate termination. You don't have this protection by simply having a resume on file.

- **Conduct more than one interview.**

Hiring a sales manager is a major commitment, and you want to make sure you've gained sufficient insight into the candidate's qualifications and style. Employers will often jump too quickly because they like the person without taking the time to collect and consider all of the available information. By the same token, you don't want to delay your decision too long or you'll risk losing the candidate.

- **Check references and conduct pre-employment tests.**

This is another reason not to make an offer in the first interview. If you extend an offer without testing or checking references, you cannot go back and change your decision without increasing your risk of legal exposure. Also, reference checking and testing are more effective if conducted after the first interview because you have the opportunity to focus on those areas that may have been a concern in the interviews.

4. Remember, There's No "Perfect" Candidate

Once you have collected all of the data on all of the potential candidates, you should step back and objectively assess them against each of the criteria you've established for the position. It's important to remember that while you want to find the most qualified person, there is no perfect candidate. You must determine where you're most able to compromise or where training and coaching may be able to overcome those areas requiring development.

With any luck, next time your company has to hire a salesperson, you new sales manager can practice the "art of the interview".

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