

## **How to Conduct Job Interviews for Employment Support Professional Positions** **By Patricia K. Keul**

Interviews are designed to help employers get to know candidates better and establish whether a candidate responds well to questions regarding the duties and expectations of the job under consideration. Interviews enable employers to screen a number of candidates on the same or similar questions and conditions. The hope is that at least one candidate will stand out from the rest as the clear choice for the job based upon their performance during the interview coupled with the education and training the candidate has earned. However, while the candidate that performs best during the interview may be the clear winner of the interview process, there is little data to support that the best performing person during the interview will prove to be the best candidate for the job. Human Resources (HR) professionals generally acknowledge that the interview process has a near 50/50 success rate, meaning half the time the winner of the interview proves to be the best employee whereas the other half of the time the interview winner proves not to be the best employee in the long run.

If interview performance is such a poor predictor of employee performance, what can be done to improve the odds above the 50/50 prediction rate? Many HR professionals report that interviews are often flawed because the employer has not taken the time to truly vet the qualities and attributes necessary for success in the job that is available. If an employer has not clearly identified the qualities and attributes of successful employees who currently hold the position in question, finding another candidate to fill an open position is a hit or miss affair. The interview discussion should be informed by questions that are relevant to the qualities and attributes of the most effective employees performing this same job, in this case the job of employment support professional.

It is also important to understand that defining the attributes of successful employment support professionals is a subtle but different process from defining the job skills required. Personal attributes denote an individual's motivation and attitude towards work whereas job skills more narrowly define the actual tasks performed in a job. More often than not, the motivation and attitude one brings to a specific job influences success more than skills. Specific job skills can be taught but attitude and motivation is more intrinsic to each person's personality and core beliefs. For example, someone who is motivated and has the personal attributes to perform detailed operations, with precise standards and rules, will make a far superior accountant than a candidate who loathes following regulated standards and excels at improvisation. No matter how well you teach the improvisational candidate to do the essential functions of keeping books they will be unlikely to excel at the task because the job does not play to their core strengths and innate personal attributes.

The best interview questions are derived and informed by a clear understanding of the attributes of successful employees doing the same job, as much if not more so, than

from an understanding of the skills needed in the job. A survey of your current successful employment support professionals will be time well spent in defining the attributes needed in the new hire. Other ways to gain this insight include: asking other successful supported employment programs how they define successful employment specialists, and doing some research on the literature on publications describing the qualities and attributes of successful employment support professionals. Once these attributes are defined interview questions should be designed to address the following areas:

### **Steps in the Interview Process**

After soliciting for candidates via a recruitment procedure, the interview process can proceed.\* Presented below are some suggested steps to follow.

**1. Initial screening and contact with potential candidates:** An initial screening of resumes and letters of interest should be done to weed out obvious poor candidates (those who do not meet even the minimum requirements of the position.) The pool of candidates that results after this initial screening may be further screened via telephone calls to each candidate to determine whether an interview is beneficial to both parties. A brief description of the job duties along with disclosure of the salary range to expect, may deter some candidates and save you time and further delay because you will only be setting up interviews with “pre-qualified” candidates.

**2. First Interview with hiring manager or program director:** The program manager or director should conduct the first interview to determine if the candidate is a good fit for the organization. In addition the employment application can be completed at this time and, with written permission from the candidate, validation of education and previous experience can be secured. Managers who are confident in the candidate pool that results after this additional research can feel secure that in later team interviews, any candidate that impresses the group has met the essential criteria for employment with their organization.

**3. Second Interview with program staff present:** A second interview with staff from your agency is highly recommended. In addition, consider including an individual with disabilities, parent or guardian, and a board member or volunteer, as well in this team interview as well. The job of the employment specialist is not an isolated one. Even if this position is the first employment specialist hired by your organization, they will still have to interface with others on your program staff to gain insight on how to support the individuals seeking jobs through your agency. Time and again, managers report that the staff interview led to a better hiring decision as staff provided insight to the candidates that may not have been revealed in the first interview with the manager.

*\*In another white paper the recruitment process was outlined (see NCAPSE WEB site) and will not be repeated here.*

**Interview Focus Questions:** Regardless of the composition of the group interview the questions should be consistent for each candidate interviewed. When composing interview questions, it is helpful to ask your staff to provide real life examples of situations they have encountered that reflect the demands encountered by the employment support professional. Generally speaking, HR professionals prefer to ask “behavioral questions” because they tease out more specific information about how each candidate may react to a real-world scenario.

For example: Ask the candidate how they would handle a situation where the job performance of the individual with disabilities was rated very differently by the front line supervisor than it was assessed by the owner of the business. (A high assessment from one party and a low assessment for the other could cost the individual his job, so your candidates should be observing and probing for more information to determine how to solve this problem.) The question above is a more effective line of questioning than asking the candidate a general question such as “How would you handle a disagreement on the job?” In addition to basic questions regarding past experience and past training and education, the team should have a list of questions that reveal the attitudes and attributes of each candidate. General categories to group your attitude/attribute questions are presented below.

**Philosophy & Values:** Questions in this area should address each candidate’s basic philosophy toward employment for people with disabilities. Ask each candidate to describe their personal philosophy and the values they hold dear with respect to employment of individuals with disabilities. Ask follow up with questions to define the candidates “perceived limits” of competitive employment. For example, a candidate who believes only certain individuals with specific disabilities can work and other individuals are too limited due to disability, may not be able to think creatively to develop and implement the customized employment supports that work for individuals with more significant disabilities.

**Attitude & Motivation:** Ask each candidate to give you examples of how they overcome frustration, negative feedback or difficult situations. Ask each candidate how they might turn a “no” into a “yes” when talking to an employer about a specific job placement for an individual with disabilities. Ask each candidate to give you an example of how they overcame a difficult situation in their past. Another set of questions to ask that addresses motivation is “why do you want this job?” and “what motivates you in your work?”

**Character traits:** Honesty, integrity and commitment are all desired qualities in any employee, including employment support professionals (ESPs). ESPs have to be flexible and adaptable to change as well. People who can communicate effectively with many different types of individuals are able to converse easily with the many different stakeholders (individuals with disabilities, parents, employers and co-workers.) that ESP's encounter. Successful ESPs can be introverts or extroverts but all share the ability

to adapt their communication style to their target audience. Ask each candidate to give you examples of when they had to adapt to change in order to facilitate communication or accomplish a goal.

**Knowledge and Education:** Education and previous experience can be an asset or a liability in potential candidates you interview. The wrong kind of training results in candidates who tend to define people with disabilities by their diagnosis and cannot see past a medical or developmental approach to services. The right kinds of experiences will support a creative, proactive and empowered professional. Whereas the wrong kind of experiences render some professionals unable to think creatively because they are so conditioned to follow conventional approaches.

### **Interview tips:**

The time interval between the first interview with the manager and the group interview need not be lengthy. Holding a time slot during regularly scheduled staff meetings for interviews is one solution for making sure that the group interview is a standing procedure in your organization. If no openings need to be filled in a given week then that part of the staff meeting is canceled. However, if you need to complete the interview process and bring on new staff quickly you need only wait for the weekly staff meeting to occur to conduct this final group interview before making an offer. Another tip that assures this is accomplished quickly is to schedule both the individual interview with the manager and the follow-up interview with the staff during the first call to schedule interviews with each candidate. That way both dates are on each candidate's calendar and a time line is established to reach a decision on the final candidate without delay. Following the group interview the manager and staff will compare notes and then the manager will make the final decision.

In conclusion, to date there is not one scientific solution that guarantees that you will make better hiring decisions if you follow a specific process. Rather, through focus on the essential qualities of your most successful employees who are currently employment support professional (or if this is your first time hiring an ESP, by gathering this information from other providers and from research of the literature), you will improve the odds of selecting the best candidate for your next opening.

### **References & Additional Resources:**

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