

Career development & training

Show your stuff and sample the job

Job interviewees should get a chance to show their wares, not just talk about them, writes SIMON PANCKHURST.

A critical downfall of the interview is applicants are required to 'talk' about their skills and attributes.

Yet none would dispute, there's a little more to work than talking the talk.

Nevertheless, managers are more than happy to make selection decisions after a question and answer session where the applicant, who clearly wants the job, tells the manager how good they will be. Have we all gone bonkers?

The job interview will always be the central part of the recruitment process.

But there is room for improvement.

If we look at other domains like the sports field, arts or entertainment industries their approach doesn't appear to be as delusional.

Graham Henry surely prefers a hard seat in the stands, than an office chair at the interview table.

So why when you go for an interview do you not get a chance to really show your stuff? Can we afford to continue to fly in the face of the old proverb "actions speak louder than words?"

The employment equivalent of a trial on the sports field or an audition on stage, does exist, it is called a work sample test. Applicants are asked to perform a critical task that encapsulates the essence of the position.

A good work sample test concentrates on challenging aspects of the role not necessarily the most common duties.

A test should focus on the key issues the interviewee will face in the vacant position and skills needed to tackle them.

Strong customer service is a commonly sought after attribute. The test could take the form of a role play with a panel member playing the difficult customer. Or an applicant could be required to produce a written response to a request or complaint in the form of an email, memo or letter.

When assessing responses, recruiters look for examples of behaviours that high performers consistently demonstrate but which are sadly lacking in lower performing staff. For example, the test might target the ability to empathize with customers and see things from their point of view.

A good response in a role playing exercise dealing with a difficult customer might be "I can understand why you feel that way, I would probably feel the same way myself. What do you see as a satisfactory resolution".

Recruiters should not expect responses that are consistent with company policy as while that might be consistent with best practice, not knowing how your company operates does not mean the applicant cannot be trained and acquire those knowledge and behaviours.

Instead recruiters should focus on identifying more ingrained characteristics – does the applicant demonstrate a more

technical or more humanistic approach? Is there evidence of a strong detail focus or is the applicant more laissez-faire?

It is these personality characteristics that are unlikely to change and therefore of greater interest.

Prior to conducting a work sample test the recruiting panel should agree on what represents a poor, satisfactory and outstanding response. But at the same time be careful not to get obsessed with anticipated behaviours or actions. Sometimes truly innovative or brilliant ideas can initially be greeted with disapproval only to be later saluted as resistance to change relents and the benefits become more apparent. An open mind is a wonderful asset.

A transparent testing process has many benefits.

This requires explaining the attributes being tested and exactly how they will be appraised. Feedback on how positive and indifferent responses were interpreted creates an opportunity to explore the rationale behind the approach adopted and iron out any miscommunication or confusion. Of course, a good test has been trialed on existing staff, and perfection first time is uncommon.

Importantly academics agree the information collected from work sample tests is extremely predictive of future performance. You'll also find suitable candidates will genuinely enjoy the experience as they get a real insight as to what the job involves and thrive from the opportunity to demonstrate their wares.

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