THE INTERVIEW

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Exemplary Recruiting & Hiring Practices

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Table of Contents

Welcome to our eBook: The Interview: Your Step-by-Step Guide to Exemplary Hiring & Recruiting Practices. This guide is for small business owners, HR professionals, and talent acquisition specialists. In this eBook, we focus on candidate prescreening, interviews and how to avoid hiring bias. Our 3-part hiring guide covers the entire hiring workflow.

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How to do Candidate Prescreening

In volume 2, we explain step-by-step what to do once your job posting has attracted applicants. This includes prescreening candidates, scheduling interviews, conducting interviews and avoiding hiring bias.

What is candidate prescreening?

Prescreening is the first-pass filtering of job applicants. The sooner you can cull the unqualified out of your applicant pool, the better. The goal of prescreening is to isolate the best candidates to move into the next stage.

Though you begin prescreening as soon as you start receiving applications, you prepare to prescreen earlier. You can create your prescreening materials before you post your job, once you have created your job description.

To prepare for prescreening, do the following:

1. Create a questionnaire based on the job description (the questionnaire can be included in the application)

2. Determine the scoring system for the questions

Why is it important to do prescreening preparation before posting the job?

Once you post a job you are competing with other employers to find great candidates. Take the time up front so you don't slow yourself down after the applications start flowing in.

Another advantage is that you can make changes to your job description if necessary because you haven't already posted it.

Applicant tracking systems (ATS) make prescreening quick and easy.

Write your screening questions

You should have a list of job requirements from your job description. (If you don't, rewrite your job description.) Using the requirements, create a questionnaire. Applicant tracking systems (ATS) have questionnaire templates that simplify the process.

In the questionnaire, write a question and answer for each requirement. The question should reveal whether a candidate meets the requirement.

There are three main ways to structure your screening questions:

• Yes/No (Binary choice)

• Multiple choice

• Essay (not recommended because it is time-intensive to review them and it's difficult to standardize scoring)

Apply scoring criteria

After writing your questions, create scoring rules. There are generally two ways to score each question: 1. Assign a numeric point value or 2. Designate it as a knock-out question. You can also apply scoring rules to keywords in resumes.

Let's suppose you are looking for a certified pediatric nurse who can work flexible shifts. You would need at least two knock-out questions.

- Do you have a current CPN (Certified Pediatric Nurse) credential? (Yes/No)
- Can you work a mix of days, evenings, and graveyard shifts? (Yes/No)

If the applicant answers no to either question, you eliminate the applicant. If you have an ATS, it will "knock" them out or mark them Do Not Pursue. Note that you will still have them in your applicant database, but they will be marked as unqualified for that particular position.

Weighted scoring

You can take screening to another level with weighted scoring. Weighting is a mathematical calculation that assigns varying levels of importance to questions. For example, suppose you're hiring a junior developer. They must know Python and JavaScript. Ideally, the candidate would also know HTML, C++, and Ruby. Basic graphic editing skills and a familiarity with SEO analytics would be nice, but not mandatory. This is a junior position, so it's unrealistic to expect your applicants to have extensive experience.

In your questionnaire, you assign values based on the requirements. Suppose the development team uses Python most often followed by JavaScript. On the right is the point value (or weight) you would assign to the question. Here are two example questions.

- Do you have at least one year of experience using Python? (if YES, add 20 points)

- Do you have at least one year of experience using JavaScript? (if YES, add 15 points)

You would also like to know if applicants have basic graphics editing skills. This isn't a dealbreaker, so you don't assign any points. Do you have basic graphics editing skills?

(0 points assigned, informational only)

Their answer will be included in the candidate record for comparison. The candidate completes the questionnaire before you decide whether to advance them to the phone screen stage.

Resume keywords

You can also use the applicant's resume for first-pass filtering. You assign points based on resume keywords. For example, if you are looking for an accountant, you can add points to their score if their resume includes "CPA." Consider how knock-out questions, weighted scoring, and resume parsing can weed out candidates you don't want to spend time on.

Tabulate the scores

Once you have screened the questionnaires and resumes, you can tally the scores. Then you can sort your applicants by score.

Save time so you can laser focus on the cream of the crop

First-pass filtering is a best practice used by successful businesses. By requiring applicants to fill out a screening questionnaire, the pool of candidates self-filter before you spend time reviewing their resumes. This helps you identify the most promising candidates as quickly as possible. Your time is best spent engaging with qualified applicants.

How to schedule interviews

Once you've filtered out the unqualified applicants and isolated a manageable pool, it's time to schedule interviews.

There are several ways to interview a candidate:
- Phone interview
- Live video interview
- Pre-recorded automated video interview
- In-person interview

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Your choice depends on several factors. If you are a 100% virtual company, you may not conduct any in-person interviews. If you have a hybrid workforce (both onsite and remote), you may not interview in-person for remote roles because you don't want to incur unnecessary expenses for candidates' travel.

Regardless of which type of interview you choose, you need to schedule a time. If there are only a few applicants, you can call the candidates on the phone and try to find a mutually acceptable time. You could send each candidate an email and start a back-and-forth until you settle on a time. Both of these ways have their drawbacks. Number one, it takes a lot of YOUR time. And it takes more time for your candidates. Anything that is inconvenient for your applicants reflects poorly on your company.

Using a cloud-based calendaring tool is quicker and more convenient. With a calendaring tool, you can allow the applicant to select an interview time from pre-cleared calendar slots.

To use applicant self-scheduling, have your interview team select available times on the shared calendar. Email each candidate a link. They can choose a time that works for them from slots your hiring team has already cleared. This practice can shave days off the recruiting timeline. If you are in a competitive labor market, saving even two or three days during the interview process is critical. In-demand candidates are most likely weighing several offers. Make sure you don't lose superstars to competing employers with a speedier process.

Most ATS integrate with a calendaring tool. WorkforceHub Applicant Tracking, for example, integrates with Google Calendar and Office 365. The benefits of candidate interview self-scheduling:

- Improves the applicant experience by allowing self-scheduling from any mobile device
- Decreases time-to-hire by eliminating back-and-forth calls and emails
- Reduces abandoned applications due to schedule confusion
- Frees up time for your team to pursue high-value activities instead of back-and-forth texting or emailing to set up interviews

Automated interviewing scheduling improves your employer brand

To stand out in your labor market, you need to provide an exceptional applicant journey. Confusing interview scheduling downgrades the applicant journey quickly. Automated interview scheduling strengthens your company brand. You are less likely to lose an applicant due to a clunky interview scheduling process.

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How to conduct interviews

Structured interview scripts are a best practice for many reasons. They help you more accurately evaluate candidates and they keep you on the right side of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). They also help new hiring managers conduct an effective and compliant interview even if they don't have a lot of experience.

What is a structured interview?

A structured interview uses a uniform script of questions. The interviewer follows the same script for each candidate, asking the same questions in the same order. The questions are chosen specifically for the skills required for the position. They also include questions that reveal desired behavioral attributes.

Things to consider when creating an interview script:

1. What skills are required for the job?
2. What behavioral attributes are required?
3. Are each of these questions legal? (per EEOC or state law)

Standardized scoring

A structured interview system also uses a uniform format for rating applicants. The scoring system is tied to the interview questions. We will take a deep dive into candidate scoring in volume 3.

Structured interview questions and scoring provide a standardized way to evaluate applicants. If you want to improve your hiring outcomes, create a structured interview process.

How does a structured interview process improve hiring?

- It is more objective—all applicants are asked the same questions in the same order
- It minimizes confirmation bias (when the interviewer seeks to confirm a subjective first impression or initial bias)
- It is more effective for evaluating soft skills
- It helps the interviewer cover all the important topics
- It helps the employer comply with laws governing hiring practices
- It is more efficient because you store your interview scripts along with your job descriptions and update both as necessary
- It helps new interviewers conduct interviews legally

How do you create a structured interview?

- Write a highly-detailed job description
  - Include skills/certifications/ experience (hard skills)
  - Identify the behavioral qualities (soft skills) you are looking for
  - Use the STAR method to create behavioral questions
- Create a script that puts the questions in order
- Create a scale to rate the answers to each question
- Keep interview variables as uniform as possible—time of day, location, interviewer
- Train hiring managers on the system
  - Make sure interviewers are familiar with the script before they interview a candidate
- Interview applicants
- Rate each applicant on each question/answer
- Schedule feedback meetings with the hiring team

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What are behavioral questions?

Behavioral questions help predict how an applicant will perform in the job role because they identify soft skills. Behavioral questions focus on how the candidate performed in previous positions.

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are behavioral attributes that help an employee be effective at their job. They are especially helpful for positions that require working with a team. They are also important for management roles.

How soft skills can help you hire for hard to fill roles

Do you have difficulty filling job roles because there aren't enough skilled candidates? Do you have the resources to train new hires? If the role doesn't require a license or credential, you should be able to train for it. Unless it's a new position, someone is already doing it, right? Consider hiring for soft skills and training for hard skills once the new hire is on board.

What soft skills are important?

The following soft skills help employees be successful in their jobs:
- Positive attitude
- Communication (written and verbal)
- Adaptability
- Leadership
- Organization
- Time management
- Critical thinking
- Collaborating with a team
- Coachability
- Ability to learn from criticism
- Ability to resolve conflict
- Creative problem-solving
- Dependability
- Self-confidence
- Honesty and integrity

What is the STAR method for behavioral questions?

The STAR method is a common system for creating behavioral questions. STAR stands for situation, task, action, result. The STAR method works best when you are as specific as possible.

To write an interview question using the STAR method:
- Identify a challenging situation common to the position
- Identify the task you wish to achieve (your goal)
- Identify what action should be taken to accomplish the task
- Identify the ideal result

Examples of behavioral questions and the soft skills they reveal

1. Why do you feel you are the best person for this position? (Strengths, self-confidence, ambition)

2. Tell me about a time you made a mistake. What did you do about it? (Weaknesses, maintaining composure under pressure, ability to receive criticism, self-awareness)

3. Describe a problem at your previous job and how you solved it. (Problem solving ability)

4. Describe a situation in a previous position where you had to resolve a conflict between members of your team? What did you do? How did it turn out? (Conflict resolution, creative thinking, ability to work as a team, leadership, positive attitude)

5. What's your favorite thing about [insert applicable job position]? (Values, goals)

6. How would you prioritize competing projects that have the same deadline? (Organization, creative problem solving)

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7. Describe a time you disagreed with your manager and what you did about it. (Coachability)

8. Describe a time you had to persuade team members to do something they didn't want to do. (Leadership, management)

9. Describe a time you had to learn something fast for your job. (Adaptability, creative problem-solving, critical thinking)

10. Did you ever fail to meet a deadline? Why? What did you do about it? (Work ethic, organization, time management)

11. Have you ever had an ethical dilemma at work? What did you do? (Integrity, honesty)

Tailor these questions to the position. For example, for a customer service position, ask the applicant to describe a time they solved a problem for a customer. For a teaching position, use scenarios involving students.

Save candidates with soft skills in your talent database

Behavioral questions can also reveal whether a candidate is a better fit for another position. If you pass over a candidate for the initial job to which they applied–but they have valuable soft skills–keep the applicant in your talent database. When a position opens up that is a better fit, reach out and invite them to apply. You will
have a head start because you have already screened them.

ATS with interview tools make it easy

ATS are affordable for small businesses and tight hiring budgets. Most have a nominal sign-up fee. You can start small and inexpensive and scale up as your company grows. If you are wary of long-term contracts, look for a month-to-month subscription. For a small investment, you can try it out. Discover how it streamlines structured interviewing.

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How to avoid hiring bias

You can't prevent bias if your recruiting team and hiring managers don't understand it. Therefore, it's important to conduct formal training. You can create your own internal training program, hire a consultant, or use online resources like Google's unconscious bias training.

The Harvard Business School's Project Implicit (requires registration) is an eye-opening exercise. It can help people recognize and measure their biases. At the start of training, consider having participants take a few surveys to learn what social stereotypes they may be harboring. Encourage them to challenge their assumptions.

Even if you use structured interview scripts, train employees to avoid asking questions that could lead to a candidate sharing his or her age, religious affiliation, sexual orientation or gender identity. This information doesn't relate to a candidate's ability to perform in the role and could bias hiring decisions. If the candidate volunteers the information, instruct your interviewers to steer the conversation elsewhere and discourage them from sharing the information with the rest of the panel.

Review resumes blind

Research shows that resumes with white-sounding names receive more callbacks or interviews than those that seem non-white. Consequently, many candidates "whiten" their name and background. It's unfortunate that many feel they need to do this to have a fair shot. Why should a candidate's name affect whether he or she is a fit for an open role? You can use an ATS to remove names and hide demographic information from resumes and applications. This will help your team avoid name-based bias during the resume review process.

Retool your job descriptions and job requirements

Do you use gender-neutral terminology? Scrutinize your job descriptions and take out any gender-specific language. Instead of "he" use "he or she" or "s/he". You can always use the job title in place of any pronoun. Many words used frequently in job postings discourage women from applying. There are many free gender decoder tools online. Just paste in your job description. In addition, create job description templates after carefully crafting them to avoid bias. Manage them in an applicant tracking system.

Take out corporate culture match

Just as important as giving your job descriptions a makeover, consider your job requirements. If "corporate culture match" is a hiring criterion, remove it. The very existence of this qualification in your hiring lexicon is a red flag that there is bias in your organization.

Be sure to check out volumes 1 and 3 of How to Hiring Machine: Your Step-by-Step Guide to Exemplary Hiring Practices. Coming up in volume 3, we will discuss how to evaluate candidates, do background and reference checks, and extend a job offer. The Swipeclock team wishes you success in your hiring efforts.

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THANK YOU

To learn how to optimize the entire hiring workflow, see our companion eBooks:

Creating the Position - Your Step-by-Step Guide to Exemplary Recruiting & Hiring Practices

1. How to Create a Job Requisition Approval Process

2. How to Create a Job Description

3. How to Advertise Your Job

Hiring the Ideal Candidate - Your Step-by-Step Guide to Exemplary Recruiting & Hiring Practices

1. Candidate Scorecards For Interview Evaluation

2. Background and Reference Checks

3. Extend the Job Offer

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