

# Behind the mask: How to effectively evaluate a candidate before interviewing

**H**ave you ever been surprised to find out that you were completely wrong about someone you thought you knew?

This can happen in the workplace too, but with bigger consequences. Sometimes a great new hire doesn't turn out to be the shining star they appeared to be during the interview process. There are some important factors to consider when making major hiring decisions that can help you avoid hiring a wolf in sheep's clothing. The bottom line of the information you're about to read is this: Get to know your hires as well as possible before you make them an offer and definitely before they show up to work and begin to display their true colors!

## READING RESUMES: FROM RED FLAGS TO REAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Sorting through a sea of resumes may sound daunting. The solution, though, is not to abandon the resume screening process. The solution is to sort resumes based on a grading system. This will allow you to assess a candidate's specific skills, experience, and accomplishments. As you review each one, give them an A, B, or C.



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*Here are some important factors to consider:*

- Compare a candidate's experience to the position requirements. Look for substance over fluff. Accomplishments spelled out in specific \$s, #'s, and %s are more valuable than lists of responsibilities.
- Gaps in time aren't necessarily negative, they just mean you need more information. Layoffs, mergers, acquisitions, and other life circumstances can effect time spent in a particular position. Take the time to find out details if they seem like an A candidate.
- Address any job location confusion. Find out if the listed location is the organization headquarters or where the person was actually based.
- Always ask for explanations to red flags and question marks. Most of the time you'll find that candidates have perfectly reasonable explanations. If red flags push the candidate from an A pile to a B pile, you may want to ask questions before you assume they really belong in the B pile. However, if red flags push a B to a C, leave them there and go back to focusing your time on A resumes.
- There is no excuse for errors. Using spell and grammar check is a simple and conscientious task.

## BEYOND THE RESUME: REVIEW AND EVALUATE ALL COMMUNICATIONS

It is important to look at all of the communication you have with a candidate to help you see the complete picture. For example, you can get a good idea of the candidate's level of professionalism and eye for detail by reviewing their resume, cover letters, emails, and other written communication. Another very important and eyeopening tool for recruiters is the candidate's online presence. Make sure there is nothing on their Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or any other online space that seems misrepresentative or non conducive to your workplace environment. Odds are their online presence is much more representative of who they really are than a carefully crafted and edited resume.

By the time you get to the selection stage, you should have a file folder full of information collected from a variety of sources. Running everything – including email correspondence, reference checks, and interview notes – through your grading sheet one more time is a very wise way to finalize the evaluation of a candidate so that you can ensure your final selection is based more on logic and sound reason than emotional or gut-level feelings.

## ON THE JOB: ASSESSING PERFORMANCE BEFORE YOU HIRE

It may be very beneficial to do pre-employment work simulations with all levels of candidates you're interviewing. Many human resource managers and hiring managers think that work simulations are for entry-level jobs only. But they can be used effectively at any level of hiring and for any position. The way a person performs, follows directions, and fits into the micro-culture and environment is just as important as skills sets and experience. A set of work simula-

tions will help you assess the quality of their approach and their willingness to try doing things differently.

It is very easy for people to wear masks during a relaxed and laid-back interview process, but very hard to keep those masks on during a high stress interactive, working role-play. The way a candidate works – their habits, pace, and ethic – can be very revealing, especially during live performances, work simulations, and job tryouts.

### *Here are a few ways to test the waters:*

- Presentations – Have candidates make a formal presentation based on a specific scenario, creative strategy, or business objective.
- Fact-Finding Exercises – Have candidates make a decision about something based on limited or no knowledge, decide what additional information they need, and question the team.
- Role Plays – Give candidates a particular role to assume for a certain scenario. The task will involve dealing with a role player or two in a certain way, and there will be a person watching and taking notes.
- In-Baskets – Ask candidates to deal with the contents or paperwork in an in-basket and make decisions that balance the volume of work against a tight schedule.

### **CONFIRMING THE PAST: BACKGROUND CHECKS**

In performing 2.6 million background checks, ADP found that 44% of applicants lied about their work history, 41% lied about their education, and 23% falsified credentials and licenses. You can make a successful hire only when you have quality and accurate background information and valid performance indicators. Interviewing alone is never enough. Your selection process is not complete until you have conducted reference and background checks.

A background check not only verifies the accuracy of the resume, educational status, and individual accomplishments,

it should also confirm what you have learned about the candidate so far. A typical hiring process contains two rounds of interviews. Therefore, the best time to perform reference checks is between the first and the second interview. This means you'll perform reference checks on everyone on your short list, which will help you make a more informed, final selection.

Secure the contact names of five to ten references, since a few will likely be unavailable when you try to reach them. Ask for a variety of referrals, including current or past supervisors, customers, subordinates, and peers. Make sure the candidate's references are work-related and not personal friends, neighbors, religious leaders, or anyone else from their social life. When asking for the list, be sure you understand the relationship between the candidate and the reference on hand.

Find out from candidates what role the reference played in their working relationship, with what organization, during what time period, and if they are still in contact with the reference. Let candidates know that they should contact their list of references to tell them you may be calling. Remind candidates to let their references know that the check is still a preliminary part of the evaluation stage. This phrasing takes the pressure off of the candidate and the references and makes it more likely the reference will take your call and be more relaxed when you get them on the phone. When you contact the reference be sure to repeat the above information.

Remember, there's always a story between the lines. Force candidates to drop their masks so you can see what kind of employee they really are before they start their first day of work.