



**supplychainrecruit.com**

the online home of **purchasing & supply chain recruitment**

## **Assessing Potential Employees**

By Steve Crosbie, SupplyChainRecruit.com

Assessing an individual's ability to be successful in a specific role and organisation is a complex and critical process, and one that must be approached in a planned and methodical way.

Before the recruitment activity started you should have defined...

1. Why you are recruiting?
2. What do you need?
3. What characteristics will have the most bearing on the candidate's ability to handle the job effectively?
4. What specific tasks need to be performed?
5. What values and personality characteristics will work best in your organisation?

Interviewing is the most useful tool in the entire recruitment process, if you know how to handle it. Approach each interview with a sense of purpose. Effective interviewing requires a systematic approach. The worst thing to do is approach the interview as if it were a conversation with the purpose of "getting to know each other."

### Point 1 - The Basic Rules of the Game

Before we consider some elements of the interview process in detail let's briefly review some of the basics.

Like it or not, there is a little bit of gamesmanship in every interview. Whether or not you are a good sport or a poor sport depends on how well you follow the rules. Some of the rules are listed below.

#### 1.1 Treat the Candidate as a Guest

Keep in mind that you have invited the candidate to come visit with you. Treat candidates as you would any other guests. Don't keep them waiting. Offer a beverage. Make them as comfortable as you would a guest in your home. An old adage says, "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression." If it turns out this is the candidate you want, a poor first impression could be the single factor that busts the deal.

#### 1.2 Reserve a Block of Time

There's a lot of information you want to get from your candidates during the interview. But keep in mind that your candidates have a lot of questions themselves. It's rare when an effective interview can be conducted in less than an hour. Pay your

candidates the courtesy of reserving an adequate amount of time to get both your questions and theirs answered.

### 1.3 Private Interview (No Interruptions)

An interview is a private and personal event. Don't conduct your interviews in a public or semi-private area. All interviews should be conducted behind closed doors. Also, an interview requires both your and the candidate's concentration and attention. Make sure everyone knows that you will be in an interview and they have been instructed not to disturb you. Also, when you begin the interview, forward your phones. Pay your candidates the courtesy of giving them your undivided attention.

### 1.4 Explain the Process

Don't forget that an interview is a two-way street. You have a great deal of information that you want to get from your candidates, but they also have many questions that deserve answers. Spend some time at the beginning of the interview to provide your candidates with an overview of the company, the job, and the recruitment process. The more they know, the better they will be able to provide you with complete and candid information.

### 1.5 Provide Appropriate Information and Literature

An interview is a two-way sales situation. First, it is an opportunity for the candidate to sell his or her skills and abilities. Second, and just importantly, the interview is your opportunity to sell the job and the company. Don't lose sight of the fact that highly recruited candidates must be sold. A good place to start is by providing adequate company literature, benefits information, and any other written or verbal information that can convince the candidate that your company is the place to be.

### 1.6 Ask the Same Questions of Each Candidate

One of the primary reasons for writing out your questions before an interview is so you will ask each candidate the same questions. Remember that you are trying to determine which candidate is best qualified to perform a specific set of duties. If you ask one candidate one set of questions and another candidate a different set of questions, when it comes time to make a decision, you'll have no basis for comparison. Focus your questions on the job requirements, and ask each candidate the same questions. This way, you'll ensure that you're finding the best candidate for the job.

### 1.7 Screen In versus. Screening Out

Too often, interviewers take the negative approach. They probe each candidate's background to find reasons why they shouldn't recruit them. The problem with this approach is that we are all human and we all have flaws. It's a rare candidate that can pass such close scrutiny. If you're recruiter has done a good job of pre-screening, you should already be comfortable that, at least on paper, your candidates meet the minimum job qualifications. If they do, look for the reasons why you should recruit them. When you've finished with all of the candidates, the candidate with the most reasons wins. A positive spin such as this makes the process all that more enjoyable for all concerned.

### 1.8 Don't Play Games

There are lots of games you can play to test your candidates' grit and resilience. One word of advice...DON'T. All interviews are too short and there's too much information that needs to be gathered to waste time with games that don't yield much if any

usable information. Pay your candidates the courtesy of treating them as adult professionals.

### 1.9 Closing

Once the interview is complete, explain to your candidates what the process and timeframe for your decision will be. Don't be afraid to deliver bad news. For most candidates, even a bad answer is better than no answer at all.

### Point 2 - Beginning the Interview

Before you begin to ask questions, it is best to establish some rapport. This helps to reduce anxiety, both yours and the other person's. Three to five minutes of small talk will generally suffice. Since the purpose is to reduce anxiety, avoid controversial topics such as politics, and social issues.

As a simple means of making the transition from small talk to the actual interview, a good question is, "What do you know about our organisation?" This type of open-ended question should serve as a warm-up for the candidate. It allows them to talk freely and spontaneously. When they finish, you're ready to define the interview process and enlist their cooperation. Your next statement may sound like this...

"Today, I would like to talk with you about your background and experience. That way we can tell if we have opportunities in our organisation that are suited to your talents and interests. Certainly, it's to your advantage as well as ours to become well acquainted with each other before proceeding further. So, I'd like to hear about your previous jobs, education, interests, and anything else that you would like to tell me."

The nice thing about such a statement is that later it makes the transition from one topic to the next much easier. The information you gather will stay organised for later analysis, and it will be easier for the candidate to follow your line of questioning.

### Point 3 - Controlling the Interview

Before you ask your questions, get out your note pad and pen. This signals the beginning of the interview. Later, when you are ready to close the interview, the simple act of closing and putting away your note pad will indicate that the interview is over.

There are two major points to remember when taking notes...

1. Only write down important points. Taking too many notes will inhibit the flow of your conversation with the candidates and make them nervous.
2. Make notes only after positive or neutral statements. Note taking immediately after negative statements greatly increases the candidate's anxiety. If they tell you that they were fired from their last job, wait. Later, when they are telling you about some enjoyable project they worked on, smile and write down "fired from last job."

As you begin asking your questions, remember that you are in control of the interview, and it is up to you to provide guidance and direction. It is your responsibility to get below the surface and extract the in-depth information needed to accurately evaluate this candidate. If the candidate evades your question, bring them back to the topic by saying, "you didn't finish telling me about..." If the

candidate stops short of telling you all that you want to know, use probing questions, like the ones in the following section, to find out more.

#### Point 4 - Questioning Techniques

One-step probes start with words like what, when, where, who, and how much. Two-step probes are really add-ons to the one-step probe and start with why and how. When a candidate is not forthcoming with information, that is, they are giving you short, simple answers, use a two-step probe...

INTERVIEWER : "What are your hobbies?" (always use plurals)

CANDIDATE : "I like gardening."

INTERVIEWER : "How did you become interested in gardening?"

Another way of getting beyond a short, simple answer like the one above is simply to be silent until the candidate tells you more about the topic. You may find the silence difficult or uncomfortable at first, but it is one of the most effective techniques available.

When you want to test the candidate's in-depth knowledge of a topic, use simulation or contrast and compare questions...

1. Simulation questions are best for determining technical knowledge. You state the question in problem form, for example, "If this situation occurred, what would you do?" Use words like "suppose" and "assume."
2. Contrast and compare questions are just what they imply. Ask the candidate to contrast or compare two situations, methods, or events, and then listen for how well they understand the differences and similarities.

Intersperse these types of questions with your technical and behavioural questions so the person doesn't feel like they're taking an oral examination.

You can have the candidate expand on a subject by asking a general question, following it up by asking a specific question, and then asking a descriptive question.

Like this...

INTERVIEWER : "What are your major strengths?"

CANDIDATE : (Candidate recites a list)

INTERVIEWER : "Which is your strongest one?"

CANDIDATE : (Candidate names one)

INTERVIEWER : "Give me an example of how this strength has helped you?"

Practice wording your questions in such a way that they are open-ended and cannot be answered in one or two words. Direct questions are useful in gathering specific information, but ask too many, and you'll end up doing all of the talking. If you find yourself asking too many direct questions, remember the specific-to-descriptive technique we've just discussed.

#### 4.1 Developing Interview Questions

A person's ability to perform is demonstrated by his or her behaviour. The key is not what a candidate knows about a process or discipline. The key is how well the candidate is able to apply his or her knowledge and skills in a specific set of

circumstances. To predict an individual's potential for success, we must examine their past behaviours.

In the interview game, one thing is true...Past Behaviour is the Best Predictor of Future Success.

The value of having a written set of job specifications is that they can now become the basis for preparing your interview questions. In this section you will learn how to...

1. Formulate open-ended questions that will encourage a candidate to describe specific situations, experiences, or tasks as they relate to the requirements of the job you have open.
2. Write out your questions to ensure that you cover all the main points in the interview.

#### 4.2 Time Saver Questions

Start developing your interview questions by preparing Time Saver Questions. These are questions designed to ferret out a candidate's "critical fits." In other words, Time Saver Questions determine at the outset whether or not a candidate meets the very basic qualifications for the job.

For example, when the person you are speaking with lives in another town or country, and the job requires relocation, an appropriate Time Saver Question would be "Are you willing to relocate?" If the answer is no, you simply say that relocation is a requirement for the job and immediately turn your questioning to their knowledge of anyone else they may know and refer.

Review your job specifications to determine your position's critical fits, write out your Time Saver Questions, and always have them in front of you. If you get a wrong answer to one of them, you'll know that this candidate is not viable. Time Saver Questions have to be objective and applied consistently. It is not a valid Time Saver Question if the answer can be viewed subjectively. But used correctly, Time Saver Questions can save you a lot of time.

#### 4.3 Behaviour-Based Questions

A great CV, extensive education and experience, and sterling references don't mean much if an employee is unable or unwilling to perform on the job. As we mentioned earlier, past behaviour is the best predictor of future success. But how do you learn about a candidate's past behaviour?

You can get a good glimpse of a candidate's past behaviour by asking Behaviour-Based Questions during the interview. These questions are designed to have the candidate describe his or her past behaviour in circumstances similar to those surrounding the job you are trying to fill.

To formulate these questions, review your job specifications and pick out the behavioural skills required to effectively perform the job. For example, the job may require a person with strong planning skills or the ability to persist against opposition to accomplish their objectives. Your questions should be open-ended. Start by describing the circumstances surrounding the job, and then ask the candidate to describe his or her experiences in similar circumstances.

For example, to determine a candidate's persistence, you might ask..."Describe for me a work situation where you had to overcome resistance. What were the circumstances, how did you deal with the resistance, and what was the outcome?"

#### 4.4 Skill-Based Questions

Now we want to develop questions that will help us evaluate whether or not the candidate has an acceptable skill level in each area we identified. Since our goal is to recruit someone who can perform the job in a truly effective manner, evaluating the answers to these questions will be the main focus of the interview. You gather information by having the candidate tell you about specific situations from their past.

Write out open-ended questions that will encourage the candidate to give specific experiences about the past that emphasise the behavioural and technical skills you identified. Remember, sometimes one question may provide evidence useful in evaluating more than one behavioural skill.

#### Point 5 - Effective Listening Skills

In an interview, it is pointless to ask questions unless you are prepared to listen to the answers. To give another person your full attention requires a lot of effort and skill, but it is essential if you really want to communicate effectively. Listening is an active process. There is a real distinction between merely "hearing the words" and really "listening for the message."

Very often people listen to only some of what the other person says. What is heard are often those parts that confirm the listener's own opinions and views. This selective filtering operates against real understanding of the other person's position. Some other things which get in the way of accurate listening include...

1. Rehearsing what you are going to say next.
2. Working to get your share of the talking time.
3. Trying to impress the other person.
4. Judging what the other person says as irrelevant, illogical, inconsistent, etc.

The net effect of all these behaviours is to discourage communication. You hear what you want to hear rather than what is actually said.

#### 5.1 Active Listening

Being an active listener means participating fully in the communication process. This means listening to everything the other person has to say. It also means listening to yourself. You must be sensitive to the signals of your own body. You must realize the impact of your body language in the communication process. Active listening involves paying attention to the non-verbal as well as verbal messages you send to the other person. It helps if your posture and behaviour reflect your interest. This is done by...

1. Facing the other person squarely.
2. Adopting an open posture.
3. Leaning slightly towards the other person.
4. Making good eye contact.
5. Being comfortable and relaxed.

In other words, make an active effort to show the other person that you are open to and interested in what they have to say. You must be in tune with your own

reactions and emotions. You must sense quickly your own feelings towards the other person. Watch out for anger, boredom, or disinterest.

### 5.2 Matching and Mirroring

One of the best listening styles is the Reflective Listening style. With this style, you show your understanding of the other person's comments by "reflecting back" or paraphrasing what they have said. This involves reflecting back not only the literal content of the message but any underlying emotional content as well. This echoing technique is useful in checking the accuracy of your understanding of the other person's viewpoint. It also signals to the other person that they should continue talking, which keeps you listening.

You can also use the reflective style in your non-verbal communication by matching and mirroring the other person. This means matching the other person's mannerisms, energy level, etc. and mirroring, or reflecting back, their body language. Studies show that people are attracted to other people who are like themselves. By matching and mirroring, you are sending a subtle message that says, "Hey, I'm just like you." The net effect is that the other person becomes more comfortable and relaxed which will result in increased rapport and more honest responses.

The 70/30 Rule Active listeners spend 70% of their time listening and only 30% of their time talking.

### Point 6 - Closing the Interview

Interviews get tedious at times, so avoid letting the interview turn into a marathon session. It helps to use humor occasionally to lighten things up, but stay on track with the set agenda.

After you have covered the relevant topics and closed your note pad, close the interview crisply with something like this...

"You've given me a good review of your background and experience. I've enjoyed talking with you, and I appreciate your sharing this information with me. It will be of value to us in making our decision. Before we close, what else would you like to cover? What questions would you like to ask me about the job, our organisation, or anything else?"

Once their questions are answered, be prepared to immediately give any needed instructions, such as where to go next, whom to see next, and what is the next step in the process.

### Point 7 - Overview

After you have interviewed each viable candidate, it is very important to make a determination before the information you have received goes stale in your mind. Two hours after the interview, most people remember slightly more than 50% of what they heard, and 48 hours after the interview, they remember slightly less than 20%.

While the information is still fresh, list the candidate's name on the top of a sheet of paper, and list the factors important to the job down the side of the same sheet. Many of the factors you will use for this evaluation will come directly from your written job specifications. Then, using a 1 (low) to 10 (high) scale or a ranking system you are comfortable with, rank the candidate on each factor.

After you have seen all the candidates and totaled each of their scores, sit back for a few minutes and reflect on which candidate best meets your needs. Then go ahead and decide. The longer you wait, the more your final decision will become colored by chemistry, price, short term needs, and the fear of making the wrong decision. Click on any of the buttons below for additional decision making tools.

#### Point 8 - Closing the Candidate

Once you have evaluated all of the candidates and decided on the one who is best qualified for the job, it is time to extend an offer. The offer itself will be formulated with input from your Recruiter. Your goal is to have your offer readily accepted by your candidate of choice. And, once the offer is accepted, to lock in the new recruit against the possibility of a counter offer.

As we've already discussed, a big part of the interview is selling the candidates on the company and on the job. When you make the offer, you will want to draw on the points used during the interview. Making a job offer is really closing the sale, and your success hinges on your ability to handle any real and imaginary objections that arise.

To close the sale, you must know your buyer's needs. So, before the offer is finalized, talk to anyone else who was involved with the person to see if they spotted a need. Talk with your recruiter who will have a detailed understanding of each individual's need. It is a good idea to have your recruiter trial close the candidate to see what concerns they have. If you get an "I want to discuss it with my spouse," or "I want to think it over," draw the person out, see what issues are likely to be discussed and what their concerns center on. Discuss the likelihood of a counter offer via the recruiter and draw out their reaction. Search for hidden objections. Then get a commitment to a deadline for an answer.

#### Point 9 - Securing the Recruit

After the candidate accepts your offer, it is important that somebody stays in contact with him or her. The recruiter is best placed to fulfill this task. Even if the person is currently in a job that is not good enough to keep, the thoughts of all that is involved in making a change may make the job too difficult to leave. So, a little hand-holding in this phase will help to seal the offer. Call often, set up events prior to the person's start date, and begin to fill the person's post-recruit calendar. Occasionally have their new boss (to be) contact them as this will also assist in the commitment-building process. These things will all work to raise the person's comfort level with their decision. This is a very critical phase and should not be overlooked.

Get ready for the person's first day. Send out an announcement a few days before their arrival so they will be expected and can be greeted by their fellow employees. Make sure they have everything they will need to perform the job and have some meaningful task to perform on the first day. This is an often overlooked point, but a critical one. It is an immediate esteem-builder if the person can go home after work the first day and talk about what they did. All too often people are shown to their desk and given a stack of manuals to read. Believe me, they did not change jobs to read manuals. They are here to solve problems and to be productive