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A BETTER INTERVIEW:
QUESTIONS LINKED TO YOUR
BUSINESS NEEDS

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Katie is a licensed CPA and PHR (Certified Public Accountant, Professional of Human Resources).

Katie started her career in corporate tax audit with the Franchise Tax Board. She then entered into public accounting with a regional CPA firm, where she performed audits of publicly traded manufacturing entities and construction companies. Katie exited that firm in 2011 to help launch and run a start-up CPA firm. Thereafter, she entered the talent industry with a worldwide recruitment organization. She re-entered public accounting as Director of Recruitment for a large regional CPA firm where she led the firm's in-house talent program. Katie formed a hiring consulting practice within that firm and ultimately exited to launch Hire Education Consulting Group.

Katie has experience serving clients of all sizes and industries. Her focus is in the middle market for growing companies with a focus in construction, manufacturing, professional service and agriculture.

[the hiring corner]

A BETTER INTERVIEW: QUESTIONS LINKED TO YOUR BUSINESS NEEDS



The Scene

I am sitting at a conference room table with the CEO of a multi-million-dollar commercial general contractor, assisting with a day of interviews. We are looking for the company's newest accountant. The other two company owners, absent from communication the week leading up to the interviews, arrive to join two minutes before the first candidate arrives.

Read: There was little time to prepare for the interview before hand.
(What is that old saying about the failure to prepare...?)



By Katie McConnell Olson, CPA, PHR

I welcome the candidate, and the questioning begins.

"Tell me about a time you..."

"Have you ever witnessed an accounting fraud, and how did you handle it?"

"What was your college GPA?"

"Tell me all about everything you have done in your career before this day" (while you do, I will glaze over and feebly pretend to be interested).

After the interview ended, and the candidate exited the building, we gathered to talk about the interview. And the conversation looked something like this:

Me: What was the reason you asked about an accounting fraud? Have you ever had a fraud? You are the owners

and also run the company, and your mom is the only current accounting staff person, so you would essentially have stolen from yourselves. Has that ever happened?

CEOs: No.

Me: Okay. For the next interview, let's focus on some of the pain points you are currently experiencing and looking for help with. Let's ask the candidate for their advice.

Me: Do you think that candidate's past experience means they were good at their job? What if they performed poorly?

CEOs: Hadn't thought of that.

Me: Okay. For the next interview, let's practice moving beyond the "have you done this" question to another layer. Let's ask about HOW they did it. And what they thought about the process and what they would do if they could improve that process. Really explore the depth of the past experiences we feel the right candidate must bring here.

Me: What is the idea behind the GPA requirement?

CEOs: It shows me how smart someone is.

Me: Is that the only measure of how smart someone is? What was your GPA?

CEOs: <Crickets. Blank stares. No comment.>

I then asked the company owners what qualities they were looking for in the person who would best fit this role. We discussed the link between the true needs of the business and valued-added interview questions. And we developed a set of questions that addressed those needs.

The Argument

There are many ways to evaluate if a candidate has the attitude, aptitude and ability to be successful in your organization. Open-ended interview questions that allow the candidate to answer in a thoughtful way that sparks conversation is one way to approach this. Closed questions such as "what was your college GPA" do not open the door for conversation and are isolated facts that leave a giant hole open for your judgements.

Further, past experience is not an indicator of future performance. Past performance, however, is.

The Bottom Line

Before you are sitting across the table from your next potential new employee reading off a list of interview questions from the internet, ask yourself:

What are the traits, skills, past experiences and core competencies you are looking for in a candidate? What kind of questions will help you explore if the candidate has those?

What are the important company initiatives you want to accomplish next year? x

What kinds of questions can you ask to explore indicators of past performance?

Simply sharing this information in an interview and asking the candidate what his thoughts are is a great way to open a dialogue and obtain value-added information to help make better business decisions.

Things to think about: Are you interviewing for your needs, or are you interviewing just for the hell of it?

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