

Think Again: What You Don't Know but Should About Interviewing & Reference Checking



By Erin Gloeckner

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

“Death will be a great relief. No more interviews.” — Katharine Hepburn

Walking into an interview is like walking into a pressure-cooker. As an applicant, you sense that the interview is your best chance at winning a job. Most nonprofit hiring teams would agree that an interview would make or break a candidate's chances. But research has shown that interviews are often flawed, making them a less reliable source of information on which to base hiring decisions. Former Center staff member John C. Patterson, the author of our upcoming “Staff Screening Notebook” has shared two little-known secrets with us. Reference checks are a nonprofit's most important screening tool, and interviews should be analyzed through a new perspective.

The Ugly Truth About Interviews

Interviews are a significant piece of the hiring puzzle, but they are often given too much weight. The “Staff Screening Notebook” reminds us that an interview is only one screening tool and should not be the sole basis of a hiring decision. Edward Lawler, Distinguished Professor of Business and Director of the Center for Effective Organizations in the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California writes in a recent Forbes article, “Years of research on job interviews has shown that they are poor predictors of who will be a good employee. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the key explanation is that individuals simply don't gather the right information and don't understand what the best predictors of job success are. A careful analysis of the background of individuals and their work history and work samples are more accurate predictors of success on the job than are the judgments which result from interviews.”

So what's the real problem with interviewing? Interviews invite bias and legal risks into hiring, more so than other screening tools.

- Interviewers often make a decision in the first 30 seconds of the interview (and first impressions aren't always accurate)
- Interviewers are susceptible to confirmation bias—listening selectively for information that confirms the first impression
- An individual interviewer can't offer your nonprofit the same range of thought as a team of interviewers
- Inconsistencies in interview questions or interviewers could lead to inaccurate or illegal hiring decisions

(e.g., one candidate is asked different questions than another candidate)

- Your nonprofit could face discrimination lawsuits if interview questions focus on the applicant's personal life rather than the job description (e.g., a simple question like "Tell us about yourself..." can lead the applicant to reveal personal information which should not be assessed by the hiring team)
- Interviewers often fail to confirm applicants' qualifications during interviews (dates of employment, position titles, academic credentials, etc.)
- Interview questions could be better formed to address the job description rather than gathering extraneous or illegal information.

It's tough to avoid these interview faux pas, but recognizing the risks before conducting an interview will enable you to handle the situation appropriately. Consider the strategies below as you prep for your next big hire.

Interview Like a Pro

- Reflect on the true objective of the interview—hiring a candidate based on qualifications related to the job description
- Remind yourself to consider all screening results—including applications, reference checks, etc..not just the outcome of a candidate's interview
- Recognize the legal limits of interview inquiries and avoid questions that pertain to an applicant's personal life
- Select a small team of interviewers who will be available to meet with every candidate; encourage the team to deliberate together, or ask a team member to play devil's advocate if the interviewers are all gung-ho about a candidate
- Use the same interview questions and interviewers for each candidate to avoid inconsistencies and hiring bias
- Confirm applicants' qualifications during interviews, and look out for red flags that hint at dishonesty or embellishment
- Keep an open mind and listen for information that counters your first impression of an applicant
- Observe the candidate's body language for extra signs of nervousness or dishonesty
- When drafting interview questions, focus on the four categories of questions suggested by the *Wall Street Journal*:
 - Fact-finding: confirm application information such as gaps in employment or details of an applicant's previous position
 - Creative thinking: ask questions about the candidate's awareness of trends related to the position, to probe the candidate's ability to express thoughts on an impromptu basis
 - Problem-solving: explore the applicant's past experiences, or ask "what if" questions regarding challenges the applicant might face at your nonprofit
 - Behavioral: get a sense of how the candidate would react in common workplace situations—this will help you determine if the candidate will fit in at your organization (e.g., "How would you respond when a supervisor gives you critical feedback?")

Putting extra thought into your interview methods will likely result in stronger matches for open positions and a more positive interview experience for your applicants. Remember to consider every screening tool you have available—especially reference checks, which are a vital component of due diligence in the hiring process.

Reference Checking

Reference checking provides insight that hiring teams can't always get during interviews. The biggest risk of reference checking is failing to complete this step of the screening process. References can offer valuable information concerning an applicant's previous experience in similar positions, or personal attributes that would offer positive contributions to the organization. References may also offer information that could disqualify an individual from consideration for a position. These tidbits are essential when vetting finalists for a position, so reference checks should never be skipped.

Be aware of reference checking risks before blindly believing everything you hear about an applicant. A major concern is receiving information from references that may be inaccurate, incomplete, based on gossip, or deliberately falsified. Another risk is receiving information that can't be used to qualify or disqualify a candidate. Practice the strategies below to avoid common reference checking risks.

- **Skipping references:** Adopt and execute a reference checking policy—consider whether there are any circumstances when skipping references is okay
- **Information you can't use:** Create a script for reference checking calls so you ask references for appropriate and relevant information
- **Uncooperative or fearful references:** If a reference is uncooperative or fears defamation charges, share the applicant's signed statement so the reference knows you have permission to contact him or her
- **Negligent hiring claims:** always record information received from references—this will enable you to justify your hiring decisions if you hire a candidate who should have been disqualified

To retain quality information from references, focus on the following four objectives from the “Staff Screening Notebook.”

- **Get permission:** Obtain an applicant's written authorization to verify any and all information contained on the application for employment, including employment and volunteer history
- **Qualify the reference:** verify that the reference can offer you accurate, insightful information
- **Verify information provided by the applicant:** try not to ask leading questions for the reference to confirm—instead, ask open questions to which the reference can provide a truthful answer (asking “Why did the applicant leave your organization?” is better than asking, “The applicant said he left your organization due to a family illness. Is this correct?”)
- **Probe for information regarding the applicant's suitability:** ask the reference about the applicant's creative thinking, problem-solving, or behavioral work practices that pertain to the position
- **Seek information about potential risks or liabilities:** design questions for references with the risks of the position in mind—aim to avoid negligent hiring by asking references about a candidate's performance and character

For more guidance on employee and volunteer screening, order a copy of NRMC's popular book, [Staff Screening Notebook](#).

Erin Gloeckner is the former Director of Consulting Services at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.