

Talent+[®]

THE SCIENCE OF TALENT[®]

Talent Plus' Professional Associate Interview

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Introduction

Over the last several years, a continued area of growth and development for Talent Plus' world-class clients has been in the selection, development and career pathing of professional associates. Professional associates include knowledge workers, a term coined by Peter Drucker. In an interview with Forbes magazine, Drucker stated: "We live in an economy where knowledge, not buildings and machinery, is the chief resource and where knowledge workers make up the biggest part of the work force. Until well into the 20th century, most workers were manual workers. Today in the U.S., only about 20 percent do manual work. Of the remainder, nearly half, 40 percent of our total work force, are knowledge workers" (Brigham, 2000). A study by Lord and Farrington (2006) demonstrates that knowledge workers represent the fastest-growing sector within the labor force. In alignment with the growth of professional positions, over 40 percent of the U.S. work force will reach retirement age by the end of this decade (Wolfe, 2006). This shift in demographics will have at least two results. There will be increasing need to replace these retirees and it is likely that more will be asked of employees in terms of workload and productivity. It is therefore essential for growth-oriented companies to take the steps necessary to identify, select, develop and retain highly talented professional associates.

Professional associates are responsible for developing or using knowledge to help an organization grow. For example, a professional associate may be someone who engages in tasks such as planning, acquiring, searching, analyzing, creating, organizing, storing, programming, distributing, marketing, managing or otherwise contributing to the transformation and understanding of information. Other roles in this category include internal and external consultants and specialists who manage activities or projects in an endeavor to make knowledge productive, rather than managing people in the traditional hierarchical sense. These individuals work in a performance-oriented organization and may manage small specialized teams. Examples of professional associates include engineers, accountants, architects, facilities managers, auditors, purchasing managers, software engineers, financial advisors, computer programmers, counselors, lawyers, scientists, merchandise buyers, brand/product managers, marketing managers, project managers and numerous types of analysts and specialists.

Development of the Professional Associate Interview

To ensure world-class organizations have a competitive advantage in selecting the most highly talented professionals, Talent Plus has developed its Professional Associate (PA) Interview.

Through a process focused on rigorous research methodology, statistical analysis and partnership with clients, a scientifically validated structured interview was created to select highly successful professional associates. Empirical and statistical steps were aimed at achieving a refined understanding of the recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that define highly successful performers in professional associate positions.

Talent Plus and its clients invested three years of intense work creating the PA Interview. This interview represents another milestone in the journey of The Science of Talent®. Talent Plus was able to leverage decades of experience in researching and validating interviews utilizing the latest in psychometric methods and analyses. The total investment from Talent Plus was well in excess of a million dollars.

Job Analysis

Talent Plus associates began the interview creation process by conducting a job analysis in order to develop an understanding of the task requirements associated with professional associate positions. In addition, the characteristics necessary to excel in such jobs were also studied. The job analysis began with archival research, including a review of existing assessments and published articles related to PA positions, as well as a review of existing job descriptions for such positions.

In addition to archival research, focus groups were also conducted to explore the worker attributes of top performers. Through these focus groups, the attributes necessary to be successful in a variety of PA positions were further identified. Focus groups were composed of job incumbents, managers and executives. Participants were considered Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), as they were successful employees with advanced tenure in PA positions. Additionally, the incumbents included in the focus groups were selected to represent the broad range of professional associate positions.

Facilitators of the focus groups asked standardized questions with demonstrated utility in forming a conceptual understanding of individuals in certain jobs as well as questions uniquely tailored to PA positions. In addition to studying the tasks and behaviors inherent to the performance of responsibilities associated with PA positions, the thoughts, feelings and behaviors held by the incumbents and their managers pertaining to PA

positions were explored. The focus group dialogues were recorded and transcribed for further study.

In addition to the focus groups, more objective worker characteristics for professional associate roles were studied. These work activities and styles were derived from O*NET, an extensive online source for occupational information. This site provides “key attributes and characteristics of workers and occupations” (<http://online.onetcenter.org/>).

The ratings derived from O*NET added quantitative data to the qualitative information gained from the focus groups. Research interview items were then drafted to measure the important requirements of professional associate roles from a more objective standpoint. This information also helped Talent Plus identify the degree to which a group of jobs is related based on the ratings.

Interview Item Development

From the job analysis, Talent Plus associates drafted a large number of research questions aimed at discovering the themes or concepts that distinguish top performers from contrast. These research interviews consisted of many more items than the final interview to allow for selecting a final set of interview items which would maximally distinguish top from contrast.

In addition to the objective performance data gathered, a standardized rating scale (Talent Plus' Performance Rating ScaleSM [PRS]) was also completed by each research participant's direct supervisor. This form permitted standardized measures of performance to be obtained for research participants across all professional associate positions studied. Ratings on the PRS form, as well as objective performance measures, were used to identify research participants as either top or contrast performers.

The interviews were each recorded, transcribed and independently scored by two trained Talent Plus interview analysts. Any scoring discrepancies between the two analysts were resolved by a third analyst.

Creating the Final Interview

Responses to all of the research interview items were statistically analyzed to determine the degree to which each item distinguished between top and contrast performers. Each item included in the final PA Interview significantly discriminated between top and contrast performers. In addition to analyses of individual items, groups of items were also analyzed to assess the degree to which those items were related to one another in a thematic sense. That is, items measuring similar concepts (both conceptually and statistically) were considered to form themes within the interview. Analyses were conducted on the final set of interview items as a whole to ensure these items functioned together to distinguish top and contrast performers.

In addition to assessing the degree to which the final items included in the PA Interview distinguished top and contrast performers, scores on items, themes and the total interview were analyzed for correlation with age, gender and race of the study participants. These analyses were conducted to ensure the interview does not have adverse impact (i.e., discrimination according to age, race or gender).

Discussion

Talent Plus research has identified the natural attributes and themes that define successful professional associates. The PA Interview has 16 themes comprised of 112 items on which people's talents are measured. These 16 themes are grouped into the following five categories for both assessment and developmental purposes.

Drives and Values: A highly successful professional associate has a desire to excel professionally and personally. They may differ distinctly in the recognition needed for this accomplishment, some using external and others internal measures of success. To some degree, their work defines who they are. It is never just a job; rather, it's a key aspect of their motivation. Themes included in this category are *Achiever*, *Competition* and *Self-Management*.

Work Style: No organization moves forward without thousands of small steps and successes that add up to change. The professional associate has the ability to make things happen, with a work style that focuses on quality outcomes. There is complexity in

the number of distinct ways their work is done and the inherent motivation in each. *Exactness, Flexibility, Resourcefulness, Responsibility* and *Work Intensity* are the themes included.

People Acumen: The professional associate is concerned with results and may demonstrate the ability to reach these by working flexibly to support others' efforts through their work. In addition, they gain critical information through such interaction. While not Machiavellian, they have a purpose for interaction other than simple interpersonal reward. They may not actually be all business but can seem so. The *Caring, Positivity* and *Relationship Insight* themes help to define their approach to people.

Influence: These themes indicate that professional associates have an impact on their environment in clear-cut ways. They will not allow key projects and decisions to stall because of the multiple priorities that exist in an organization. If the goal is important, they will find a solution. One style is to simply take charge and exert influence. This does not mean they have to do all the work; rather, by doing what needs to be done, they are able to define and keep alive expectations and progress toward outcomes. Others will move people to action through a style that influences people more directly. Representative themes include *Command* and *Persuasion*.

Thought Process: Professional associates easily navigate the complexity of organizational change. The ability to assess, ascribe meaning to and influence complex organizational components ensures they get results. Some will demonstrate a sense of understanding related to the impact of decisions made now on future considerations. The ability to gather information and to continually learn will fuel some efforts by having the data and perspective necessary for success. Themes in the Thought Process category include *Conceptual Awareness, Discernment* and *Learner*.

Consideration of 16 distinct themes as the base level of data begins to reveal the depth of analysis that can be performed with the interview. Further, the existence of intense and lower themes will lead to an understanding of an individual's composite talent and resulting work style.

As with any of Talent Plus' interviews, the PA Interview will be subjected to ongoing research and discovery.

Conclusion

In today's challenging business world, the importance and contribution of talented professional associates has never been greater. It is estimated that companies worldwide will need an additional 32 million professional associates to fill open positions by the year 2020 (Foster, 2008). With shifting demographic trends and the resulting hiring needs, successful organizations will be those that are able to accomplish more with fewer people. The selection, development and coaching of top performers will provide organizations a considerable competitive advantage. By utilizing Talent Plus' statistically validated Professional Associate Interview, organizations can consistently select people like their top performers.

References

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