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Note on the Hiring and Selection Process

Hiring people is one of a manager's most important tasks. In growing firms, selection decisions are even more critical because of the rapid pace at which new employees are being added to the organization. Moreover, these decisions are often made in a context where the structure of organizational roles is still evolving and where the new employee's responsibilities are likely to change quickly. Despite its importance, however, hiring people remains one of the least well practiced arts of management. One executive recruiter, for instance, reports:

> Executives make up their minds about whether they like a candidate in the first 20 seconds and spend the next half-hour justifying their decision. It's called the "halo effect." Once you have formed an opinion, you only see what you want to see.

Another headhunter says:

> I can spend endless hours screening candidates and culling resumes that fit the criteria I have painstakingly developed with a client. And managers will still hire the person with the right "chemistry," even if they don't fit the criteria at all. They fall in love with a candidate and that's it.

And, while recruiters seem to think executives approach the hiring process in a haphazard way, recruiters themselves are quite idiosyncratic in their own approaches. In *The Career Makers*, "the U.S.'s top 150 executive recruiters" are asked what they look for in a candidate. The responses vary from "intelligence and common sense" (65) to "presence, energy, vision, sense of humor" (317); one recruiter suggests that "the first thing I look for is the degree to which a candidate is truly comfortable with himself/herself." (275)

You are likely to meet a great many people during the course of your life and to consider yourself a good judge of people and character. It's tempting to apply these same intuitive skills to the hiring process. Yet, the experience of most managers suggests that such "gut" reactions can often result in poor hiring decisions.

The solution, however, is *not* to ignore these aspects of personal character and focus solely on the resume. As the above recruiters' comments make clear, there are many critical success factors that have *nothing* to do with a resume or direct work experience and, indeed, could never effectively be conveyed in a resume. Rather, the key is to be sure that the personal characteristics for which you are

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Professor Michael J. Roberts prepared this note as the basis for class discussion. Sources utilized in preparing this note include John Sibbald, ***The Career Makers*** *(New York: HarperBusiness, 1992); Jim Kennedy,* ***Getting Behind the Resume*** *(New York: Prentice Hall, 1987); and Alan Weiss,* ***Managing for Peak Performance*** *(New York: HarperBusiness, 1989).*

searching are a *true reflection* of the qualities needed to *perform* in the job, rather than merely a reaction to the kind of person you like as a friend or tennis partner. This, in turn, requires

- fleshing out the requirements for the position as accurately and completely as possible; and,
- assessing the candidate's fit with these requirements.

The objective of the hiring process is to find a person whose skills, abilities, and personal characteristics suit the job. It is a question of *fit* between the individual and the requirements of the position. But making such an assessment requires a model of the dimensions along which you are seeking to create this fit.

Certain dimensions of fit are relatively easy to discern: A CFO needs to know the fundamentals of accounting and finance; a vice president of sales needs to understand enough about the product and its customers to craft a cogent sales plan. Yet, there are other factors that have less to do with the particulars of knowledge and experience and more to do with fundamental personal characteristics: the ability to work well as part of a team, acquire new knowledge as markets and products change, rise to a challenge with an extra measure of effort—these are all personal qualities that simply can't be discerned from a resume. Thus, there are two sets of factors that can be used to analyze the requirements of a position and then determine the degree of fit between an individual and the position:

- Background factors, which include education and experience; and,
- Personal factors, which include intellectual ability, personality, and motivation, and which often translate into a management "style."

Each of these sets of factors will be discussed, in turn, below.

Background Factors

The background factors are those dimensions of an individual that *can* be discerned from a resume, including education and work experience.

Education

Certain jobs typically have an educational background that is almost a requirement: an engineering degree for certain manufacturing positions, a CPA for a controller, perhaps an MBA for a consultant. Such background is considered important because it is assumed to convey certain knowledge and skills. However, it is worth considering carefully whether or not a specific educational background is *actually* necessary, or simply a traditional practice. In college administration, for instance, it's often assumed that administrators need to have a Ph.D.—in whatever field—so that they will be able to deal with faculty members on an equal footing. This is a case where the degree is certainly functioning more as a credential than as an indicator of specific knowledge and skills. It is also true that the significance of educational background probably decreases the longer a candidate has been out of school.

Experience

Experience is a great teacher. Specific experience is often one of the most important factors in a hiring decision. However, it's easy to make a fatal flaw in logic, as exemplified by the following statement: "I need to hire a VP-marketing for my software company; therefore, I need someone who's had experience as a VP-marketing at a software firm." Experience is valuable because of the knowledge and skills it imparts. Before simply leaping from a position description to an assumption about the particular work experience that would be desirable as background, it's important to think through the specific knowledge and skills desired and what particular experiences are likely to have imparted these abilities.

Industry experience A certain amount of knowledge comes from working in an industry, which may or may not be essential to the performance of the job. For instance, consider two positions in the personal computer software business: product manager and controller. The product manager's job involves positioning the product with respect to its competition, developing an advertising strategy that may include many small or specialized publications, dealing with a host of industry insiders who review software, and so on. The performance of these functions is considerably enhanced if the individual has a great deal of specific knowledge about the industry, the competition, and the key players, prior to assuming the responsibilities of the job. A controller, on the other hand, deals mostly with internal procedures, such as the booking of expenses and the counting of inventory, that do not necessarily vary greatly from one industry to another. Thus, particular industry experience is less critical when the function requires less industry-specific knowledge.

Think hard about the specific knowledge that will be required to perform in the position. Is it dependent on experience in a particular industry, or could it have been assimilated through a variety of experiences? If there is specific knowledge that's required, don't assume that the individual possesses it simply by having worked in the industry. Be sure to probe for evidence of this knowledge during the interview.

Functional experience Knowledge and skills also come from functional experience. That is, people tend to hire people with marketing experience for marketing jobs and manufacturing experience for manufacturing jobs. Again, the assumption is that certain knowledge and skills are gained through particular experiences. Even with an excellent educational background, the person who has been led through several annual cycles of product forecasting, budgeting, quarterly variance reports, and action planning will be better able to lead an organization through such a process. Similarly, all things being equal, it's preferable to hire someone into a general management job with P&L responsibility if that person had such experience before. Experience *is* a valuable teacher.

Again, it's worth thinking through the particular aspects of functional experience that are required for a job, rather than simply assuming that someone with a certain job title on his or her resume "has what it takes." In an organization, for instance, the VP of marketing may oversee a set of product managers and therefore have relatively little day-to-day involvement in specific pricing and promotion decisions. An individual with the same title in a different organization may spend most of the time on precisely these issues. Think through the skills required, and probe in the interview.

Company experience The kind of knowledge and skill an individual has is often determined not only by the industry and function in which that person has worked, but also by the particular company. Recruiters think of certain large companies as being less-attractive breeding grounds for management talent for small companies because, for instance, ". . . everything is done by committee. You can't order a box of paper clips without a meeting. People from there have a tough time making decisions and living with them." Executives from large firms are used to a level of support and resources that is often unavailable at a smaller company.

The culture of the particular company also makes a difference. Certain firms are known for breeding "team players," others for more individualistic managers. Some companies put a lot of

emphasis on financial analysis, others less so. If you know the industry well enough to know the culture of the companies from which you recruit, you'll have a distinct advantage.

Level of responsibility The "level" of position, or the level of responsibility an individual has had, is another dimension of experience. There is a natural tendency to look for a candidate whose experience is "at or near" the level of the position being filled. But, what determines level? Number of reports? Dollar value of activity being managed? In fact, level has most to do with the scope of decision-making responsibility: the degree of decision-making autonomy possessed by the individual regarding the critical issues that drive the business. As division manager, did the individual select the products to be offered, their price, the marketing strategy? Direct a dedicated sales force? Or have responsibility for a much narrower range of decisions? It is true that someone who has had practice making particular decisions is likely to be able to "hit the ground running" and perform at the level required by the position more quickly. If you're willing to invest the time and energy working with someone, however, you can often bring that person up to this level fairly quickly.

Desired experience—in terms of industry, function, and level—can be inferred only from a thorough analysis of the specific duties and responsibilities of the position. It is critical then, to think through and to use this list to suggest the kind of background that is required. It is often the case that a candidate will not know everything—and will not have done everything—required for the position. The issue then becomes, "Can the candidate learn what is needed, and how long will it take?"

Personal Factors

While particular background and experience are important prerequisites for certain jobs, they are by no means sufficient. Background and experience help determine whether an individual will know *what* to do, but they suggest very little about *how* a person will go about fulfilling those responsibilities. That is, education and experience don't address the *personal* qualities that an individual in the position should have in order to be successful. As an example, consider the case of a general manager (GM) of a division who is hiring a research and development director. The GM may well have a style that would be described as "results-driven and accountability-oriented." And this style may work well with the sales vice president and finance vice president who have a similar style and who can measure their performance on a short-term basis. But, it would be a mistake for the GM to conclude that this style "works" and, therefore, that someone who is like their other subordinates (and—not coincidentally—like the GM) would be a good fit with the R&D position. An analysis of the R&D role may well reveal that the key dimensions of the job involve creating an environment for teamwork, risk-taking, collaboration, and creativity. The personal qualities required to achieve this are likely to be very different from those required to instill accountability in an organization.

In *Getting Behind the Resume*, Jim Kennedy offers a framework for thinking about these personal factors. This framework highlights

- Intellectual ability;
- Personality; and,
- Motivation.

Each of these will be discussed below.

Intellectual Ability

Most of us would agree with the assertion that "being smart" helps people perform well in a managerial position. Certainly, if "smart" means the ability to sift through large amounts of information and comprehend its meaning, to frame problems and analyze data to help resolve them,

to communicate complicated arguments or concepts effectively, then it is easy to see why these skills are of value. These are all tasks that most managers must perform in the course of their work. In the managerial setting, intellectual ability has several dimensions:

Analytical ability Analytical ability is the ability to take a problem and define it, break it up into its components and understand them better—often via the use of data—then put the pieces back together in a way that points toward a possible solution. For instance, a company might be earning a poor return on its assets. One analytical approach would be to define the problem as "too many assets" and begin an investigation of how inventories, working capital, and plant and equipment can be reduced in order to decrease the amount of assets at work in the business. Another approach would be to define the problem as a "profitability problem" and begin an investigation into how margins could be improved. In all likelihood, the best approach is to consider all these alternatives—and others as well. But, if the problem is framed narrowly or incorrectly, a less-than-optimal solution will result. Moreover, the ability to determine the information required to resolve these issues, obtain it, and then make sense of it, all involve analytical skills.

Creative ability All jobs require creative ability, some more than others. Creativity is useful not just in design or advertising positions, but in all sorts of managerial jobs. It may translate into an ability to generate strategic options, come up with new product ideas, or solve operational problems.

Decision-making style People vary in their decision-making styles. Some are extremely structured, analytical, and fact-based—the epitome of rationality. Others rely more on intuition or gut. Some can make decisions easily and quickly, while others put them off, ponder, and never really get comfortable making a decision at all. Some depend on consensus, others strictly on their own analysis and opinion. It's critical to figure out what style is required for success in the specific company and position.

Personality

Personality is an important—if not the *critical*—essence of a person. If you think about your friends, the qualities that determine whether you like or dislike someone are almost always elements of personality such as patience, humor, or a caring nature. For people we know well, we can often describe their personalities in detail. And in observing the behavior of these people, the intimate connection between this behavior and their personality is often clear to us. For example, the generous, patient, caring sister-in-law who is always the first to show up and the last to leave at any time of family crisis; the loud, obnoxious uncle who can be counted on to complain about how well his steak is cooked and to make a scene if the check is totaled incorrectly; and, the skeptical, controlling boss who wants to see a copy of every piece of correspondence that comes in to or leaves the department.

The reason why personality is such an important factor in the hiring process is because *behavior* is so often *intimately* linked to personality. Because an individual's personality is relatively stable over time, that person's behavior is relatively predictable. From a hiring perspective, personality it can provide a valuable insight into how someone is likely to behave on the job.

There are various classification schemes that have been developed by psychologists and others that attempt to define personality types and categorize individuals according to them. In *Managing for Peak Performance*, Alan Weiss describes a useful framework for considering personality traits and the behavior related to them.

This framework (presented in modified form below) includes four basic personality traits that every individual is assumed to possess, to a greater or lesser degree:

- *Dominance:* The drive to exert one's influence over people and events;

- *Extroversion:* The drive to interact socially with others;
- *Patience:* The drive to pace one's activity slowly; and,
- *Formality:* The drive to conform to established rules and structure, which in turn leads to an emphasis on thoroughness and detail.

According to this framework, an individual's behavior can be classified according to whether it suggests a high or low emphasis on this personality trait, as shown in the table below.

Personality Traits and Observed Behavior

Personality Trait	Observed Behavior			
	Low emphasis on trait			High emphasis on trait
Dominance	Timid	Mild	Vocal	Forceful
Extroversion	Retiring	Following	Initiating	Dynamic
Patience	Anxious	Impatient	Steady	Unhurried
Formality	Uninhibited Undisciplined	Independent	Careful Cautious	Perfectionist Detail-Oriented

In order to determine what personality type is most appropriate for a given position, you need to think about

- The set of tasks that will be performed in the position, and what traits will translate into good performance; and,
- The personalities of superiors, peers, and subordinates, as well as their styles of management.

In most cases for instance, a controller would ideally be relatively high on the patience and formality traits. This would translate into careful, cautious, detail-oriented behavior. In the case of a controller who is going to be in a relatively independent role, however, a higher score on the dominance trait would be desirable, since this type would be more willing to set out his or her own agenda. On the other hand, the controller who will be working for a very strong-willed CFO would be somewhat lower on the dominance trait. For a sales manager, high dominance and extroversion are probably important. For a creative director, high extroversion and low formality are likely to be desirable.

There are a large number of firms that offer "personality testing" services to business organizations, and many companies use these tools in the hiring process. This is a complex issue that will not be explored in this note. However, we can often make accurate inferences regarding individuals' personalities from our own observations of behavior, from what people say about themselves, as well as from what others say about them and their performance in prior positions.

Motivation

Given a certain level of mental ability and a particular personality, the final factor that influences an individual's success on the job is motivation—how much effort the individual is likely to apply to the task at hand. Again, we know from experience that the "best" team doesn't always

win, that sometimes success is "1% inspiration, 99% perspiration." Jim Kennedy suggests that motivation is a function of several factors:

Goals Most people have personal goals. If there is a clear connection between successful performance in the position and the achievement of those goals, then motivation is likely to be stronger than it would be absent that connection. For example the cost accountant who wants to become a controller or CFO will be more motivated to learn about a breadth of issues and to perform well in order to advance.

Interests If people are doing things that they are genuinely interested in and enjoy, their motivation is improved. Thus, a salesperson who just doesn't like talking to people is likely to be less successful than one who does. An individual whose favorite hobbies involve wine and food is likely to be more interested in and spend more time and effort on the introduction of a new cooking magazine than is someone who likes publishing as a business but is personally more interested in sports.

Energy We all know people who we would describe as a "bundle of energy" and others who slog through the day and seem continually tired. People with a high energy level simply have a greater reserve of resources to draw on. They can deal with the demands of their personal lives and still have enough energy left over for a demanding job. Having identified these more internal factors, however, it's important to note that external factors play an important role in actually motivating people. The leadership and feedback provided by a superior—or the environment of a supportive team—can all have a large influence on the degree of motivation actually experienced.

In attempting to draw a correlation between all of the factors discussed above and success, it is important to insert the phrase "all things being equal." For instance, even though we talk about an individual with a high energy level doing better on the job, this is only true when compared with other individuals of similar intellect, personality, and experience. It is the very fact that "all other things" are seldom equal that makes hiring decisions particularly difficult ones.

Summary

The framework we've been discussing can be summarized as follows:

Factor	Position Requirements	Individual Characteristics
Background Factors		
Education		
Experience		
– Industry		
– Function		
– Company		
– Level		
Personal Factors		
Intellectual Ability		
– Analytical		
– Creative		
– Decision making		
Personality		
– Dominance		
– Extroversion		
– Patience		
– Formality		
Motivation		
– Goals		
– Interests		
– Energy		

Given this framework for understanding the factors that are important, the next step is obtaining the information to evaluate candidates along these various dimensions. The following portion of the note discusses techniques that can be used to elicit the kind of data required for an informed judgment.

The Job Profile

The above framework is used to develop a job profile, which describes not just the position but the *type* of person who is required to fill it.

The job profile should have the following elements:

- *Position Title:* This describes the basic function and level of the position.
- *Duties:* A description of responsibilities, tasks, and scope of the position.
- *Context:* A description of the organizational context and culture in general, and any specific elements of the context that are important influences on the position.
- *Education and Experience:* The knowledge, skills, and experience required.
- *Intellectual Capabilities:* The particular analytical, creative, and decision-making skills required.
- *Personality Characteristics:* The particular personality traits believed to relate to good performance in the position.
- *Motivational Characteristics:* The goals, interests, and energy levels likely to correlate with success in the position.

Here is an example of what such a description might look like for a corporate purchasing manager position:

Sample Position Description

POSITION TITLE: Corporate Purchasing Manager

DUTIES: Responsible for planning, organizing, directing, and controlling all aspects of the corporation's Purchasing Department. Supervises a staff of 34 full-time employees and processes more than $100 million in procurement transactions annually. Has primary responsibility for interpreting, restating, redefining, and proposing improvements in existing policy and for proposing new policies for purchasing. Report to VP, Finance and Administration.

CONTEXT: Purchasing Department has a strong commitment to excellence and views the needs of its clients as critical to its success. Goals are prioritized after careful assessment, and leaders involve others in the implementation of these goals. Information about decisions and events is openly communicated. Employees are encouraged to further their own professional growth and development.

CRITERIA:

- Education and Experience
  - General knowledge of corporate supply process
  - Working knowledge of traditional, nontraditional, and state-of-the-art purchasing methods
  - Knows application of EDP systems to the supply process
  - Working knowledge of standard purchasing policies and procedures
  - Experience administering complex financial processes and budgets

- Intellectual Capabilities
  - Analytical and decisive
  - Good written and oral communication skills
  - Strong problem-solving skills

- Personality Characteristics
  - Forceful, able to resist pressure
  - Detail-oriented, inclined to analyze cost data and follow procedures
  - Good social skills, able to work collaboratively with other departments

- Motivational Characteristics
  - Results-oriented
  - High-energy level

Example based on Jim Kennedy, *Getting Behind the Resume*, pp. 75-6.

The Interview

Having gone through the exercise of defining a position properly and culling resumes that suggest the appropriate background and experience, a subset of candidates will emerge as sufficiently attractive to warrant interviews. For many recruiters, the best determinant of future success is past success. Yet, it is also true that, from the information on their resumes, most people appear to be successful. The art is in figuring out how to dig behind the resume to get the facts so that you can form your *own* opinion about the success pattern of an individual.

The agenda for the interview should be to verify and expand on the information regarding the candidate's background and experience (as suggested on the resume) and to elicit sufficient information to draw some conclusions about the personal factors that will influence the candidate's performance in the position.

The first step is setting the tone. You want candidates to be comfortable not only because it will make the time spent together more pleasant for them (and for you) but because a candidate who is comfortable is less likely to tell you what he thinks you *want* to hear and more likely to tell you what he *really* thinks and feels. Thus, a few minutes of conversation on comfortable ground—where you volunteer some personal information to make the candidate comfortable doing the same—is time well spent.

Experience and Education

The interview is the *only* opportunity to probe the personal factors, and thus, the majority of time should be spent on this front. However, it's a good idea to probe some issues related to the background factors. One reason for this is that the abbreviated format of the resume cannot convey

all of the relevant data about a past position and the experience gleaned from it. Another reason is that candidates often try to put the best possible light on every experience in their background.

Recruiters suggest asking candidates in detail about the responsibilities they had and how they translated into the tangible measures of success. So, for instance, as a probe into the resume statement "led division to 40% profit growth in 1992," the following example suggests questions that would elicit a more accurate picture of the accomplishment:

Recruiter: How large was the division when you assumed responsibility?

Candidate: 26 people.

Recruiter: What had the level of profits been in 1991?

Candidate: $1 million.

Recruiter: Did you have P&L responsibility for the division?

Candidate: I was the general manager.

Recruiter: What positions reported to you?

Candidate: Sales, marketing, and a controller.

Recruiter: What about manufacturing?

Candidate: Manufacturing was centralized—the divisions were just responsible for sales and profit.

Recruiter: And profit was with respect to a transfer price?

Candidate: Yes.

Recruiter: What kind of actions did you take that led to the 40% profit increase?

Candidate: I increased sales by opening a new branch office in the midwest.

Now, opening a new branch may well be a real accomplishment, and if you are trying to hire someone to grow a business with this approach, the skills are undoubtedly useful. But to increase profits in a (small) division in this way is obviously a very different task than spearheading an in-depth analysis of a large product line to determine how margins can be improved. If the latter set of skills would be a critical component of success in the position for which you were hiring, it would be a mistake to infer this ability simply from the phrase in the resume.

The Personal Factors

Once you begin the portion of the interview devoted to understanding the personal factors, it is a good idea to have a specific agenda but to be flexible in response to what you learn during the course of the interview. Without specific objectives, it is easy for the resume to become the de facto agenda. In his book *Getting Behind the Resume*, Jim Kennedy suggests a model for the interview that includes several elements:

- *The Topic Opener:* This is a broad question that forces the candidate to organize and prioritize a lot of information and construct an argument. For instance, "Tell me about your current job?" would be a good topic opener.

- *The Self-appraisal Question:* These questions ask the candidate to get behind specific information offered in their answer to the topic opener, and to explain their own views and opinions. Thus, a candidate who responded to the above topic opener with a detailed description of a leadership role with a project team that had successfully recast the business planning process could be asked, "What was it about your leadership style that allowed you to achieve this?" These questions force candidates to present a sense of their personal qualities.

- *Situation-based Questions:* These questions are the most specific and typically occur near the end of the topic being explored. They put candidates in specific situations where they are asked to describe how they might behave in certain situations, and how they view themselves relative to specific tasks, situations, and decisions that are representative of those encountered in the position.

Each of these areas will be explored in more detail below.

Topic openers Topic openers focus the candidate on a particular experience in their lives, usually a block of time suggested by the resume—a job, educational program, and so forth. These questions typically begin with the phrases "Tell me about . . ." or "Describe . . . or "I'd be interested to learn about . . .," all of which give the candidate sufficient running room. It's important to leave the question open-ended and not focus in on what *you* think are the particularly interesting dimensions of the experience. For instance, the question "I'm interested in learning about your last job, and how you think it prepared you for a general management position . . ." narrows the question to the point where the candidate may leave out a lot of interesting information.

There is of course, a danger in the open-ended question. Candidates may feel as though they have to convey every little detail of the time period in question. If a candidate starts describing each and every detail of the experience, you've learned something valuable about that person's ability to sort through facts, prioritize, and construct an argument.

Open-ended questions typically begin with "what," "when," "how," or "why." Thus, a question like, "What do you enjoy most about your present job?" or, "What are the most important goals you are working toward in your current job?" are good questions because they force the candidate to organize and prioritize, and in so doing, present clues about the intellectual factor—the candidate's intelligence and analytical ability. For instance, candidates who can consistently organize information in a hierarchical way—giving a general response, following it up with specifics, and then move back to another general remark—are presenting good evidence of their ability to organize and analyze information.

Self-appraisal questions Self-appraisal questions are used to follow up on the issues raised in the candidate's response to the topic opener. Thus, if the candidate talks in detail about successfully introducing a just-in-time manufacturing system in the job currently held, a useful self-appraisal question would force the interviewee to focus more on the personal factors related to that success. A series of questions in which the candidate is asked to describe the specific thinking and behavior that generated the results described would give the interviewer useful insights into the candidate's intellect and style.

Typically, in response to a topic opener, the candidate will discuss tangible accomplishments and activities: "I manage a group of 12 professionals . . . we increased sales 55% over the previous year . . . I lead a team that introduced the most successful new product in the division's history. . . ." The self-appraisal question asks the candidate to go behind the facts to reveal a sense of the behavior

that lies behind them. Thus, the question: "What particular qualities of yours lead to this successful product introduction?" If the candidate responds, "We brought the sales force in for two days of training and really got them on our team, supported them with all of the right information and promotional material, got them really enthusiastic and pumped up . . .," then this suggests that the candidate is sensitive to people issues and is an enthusiastic team player. The response, "I went out and interviewed dozens of customers and analyzed the information and discovered a market niche that no one else had identified . . .," sounds like a bright, analytical person, but someone who is more of an individual contributor. Clearly, one would not make a definitive judgment about an individual's personality based on one such response, but patterns will usually emerge. One can further probe and ask, "Why do you think you were successful in identifying this market niche?" or, "Why do you think you were able to generate enthusiasm on the part of the sales force?" and get even more information about specific behavior and that person's own self-perception.

This raises the issue of how accurate individuals' own assessments of their behavior are. One way of thinking about this is as follows: In an interview, people will usually describe behavior and traits that they believe to be attractive. Thus, someone who describes "pounding my fist on the table and telling those jackasses I wasn't about to accept their excuses" may not *actually* be as confrontational as this self-description portends. But, these people clearly believe that such behavior is positive and attractive or they wouldn't be describing it to you in an interview (where they are presumably trying to make a good impression). Thus, they are likely to try to behave this way—and are certainly more likely to behave in this manner than someone who says, "I sat down and explained why their problems were making it difficult for me to meet my commitments, and I asked them what they thought they could do to improve the delivery schedule." Thus, self-appraisal questions allow the interviewer to make better judgments about how someone is likely to *actually* behave.

Situation-based questions Situation-based questions are the most specific and typically occur near the end of the topic being explored. They put the candidate in specific situations and ask that person to describe how she or he might behave.

Jim Kennedy (114) describes four types of situation-based questions:

- *Problem Situation:* These questions ask the candidate to deal with a particular problem. Ideally, the problem should be one that is likely to come up in the course of the particular position. Thus, if the position involves managing creative people, one could ask: "How would you deal with a person who seemed to have a creative ability but didn't seem able to channel that ability into results?" Or, in the case of a product manager: "How would you deal with an advertising agency that wasn't producing good work?" One executive asks candidates: "Tell me all of the ways that you can think of to prove to me that the light in the refrigerator goes off when you shut the door." He believes that the number, variety, and originality of the answers to this question tell a lot about a person's creative abilities.

- *Continuum:* These questions put the candidate in the position of assessing themselves along a continuum. It's important to define both ends of the continuum in a manner that could be seen as positive. Thus, patient vs. tense is very different than patient vs. demanding. The second really forces the candidate to think through the situation.

- *Comparison:* These questions require the candidate to take a position on two different situations, one of which is important to the position. Thus, the question, "Would you rather work in an environment with externally set deadlines, or one where you can set your own deadlines?" will reveal interesting information about the candidate, assuming that the candidate does not know the particular demands of the position in question. If the candidate would rather set the

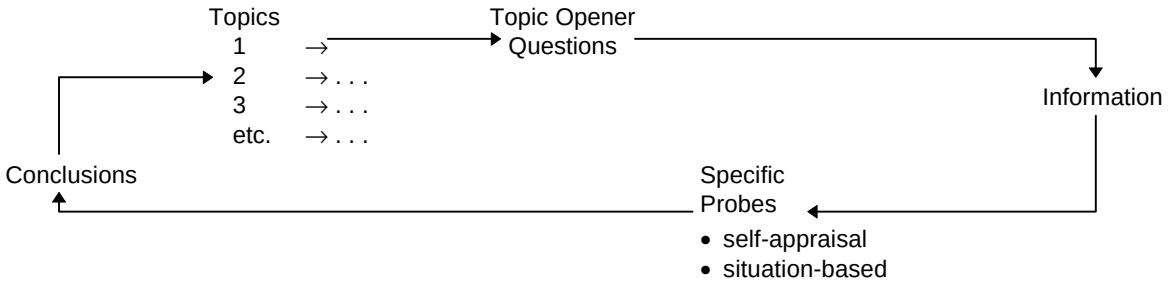
deadlines, but the job requires meeting deadlines set by others, you can then ask a follow-up question that conveys this fact and ask if and how the candidate would handle the situation.

- *Future Assessment:* These questions ask the candidate to make a projection his or her performance in the position or company in question. The answer reveals interesting information not only about the candidate, but also about the candidate's understanding of the job. Thus the question, "If you are hired as vice-president of manufacturing, and we talk about your job a year from now, what do you think you will look back on as your most difficult challenge?"

These questions progressively focus on what was discussed during the topic opener. When a particular topic has been covered to the interviewer's satisfaction, another broad topic opener question is asked, and the process repeats itself.

The diagram below presents this model in graphic form:

Interview Model



Source: Based on Kennedy, p. 119.

By having an agenda and specific objectives for the interview, the interviewer remains in control of the interview. Without such a framework, candidates are free to control the interview, talking about the topics that *they* wish to cover and never allowing you to make an assessment of the more personal factors that are so important.

Reference Checks

Reference checks are a critical piece of the hiring process. They allow the interviewer to cross-check perceptions and fill in gaps in the picture of the candidate. It is important to talk to more people than the candidate suggests as references. Thus, when talking to a candidate about his/her job experience, ask "Whom did you report to?" about every job. This will result in a *complete* set of names, rather than simply the ones the candidate offered. It's a good idea to get references from three levels of people—the candidate's peers, subordinates, and superiors. Of course, one must respect the confidence of the candidate. It would be inappropriate to call an individual's current boss, for instance, without gaining prior approval to do so.

There is a perception that "references are worthless" because individuals are afraid of the legal consequences of saying anything bad about a candidate. Yet, experienced recruiters report that they have no trouble eliciting valuable information from references. The key is to ask good questions, and to follow up with detailed probes. Ask references about a candidate's style and character, as well as strengths and weaknesses. Typically, even if the candidate was a poor performer, the reference will feel more loyalty to the candidate than to some anonymous voice over the phone. The key is to ask probing, specific questions, rather than open-ended ones. Thus, "Did Jack do a good job managing his department?" is likely to elicit less information than "What was Jack best at? What did

his subordinates like best about him? Least? Are there any jobs that you would be uncomfortable seeing him in? What kind of job/culture/environment would best suit Jack?" Ask how the candidate ranks among all the people that have held this position in the company or among his peers.

Recruiters differ on the timing of reference checks. Some will check before presenting a candidate to a client. Others will check after the candidate has been selected by the client but before the individual has been told that he or she is the preferred hire, and others will check after the candidate has been informed of the decision. In this last scenario, it is safe to say that the person doing the reference check views it as a perfunctory exercise, attempting only to verify that the candidate is not a mass murderer. If that recruiter believed that there was a significant chance that the reference check would turn up information that reflected negatively on the candidate, the recruiter would not have informed the candidate that he or she had been selected.

Summary

"Hiring good people is one of the most significant contributions a manager can make to an organization's success." We all say the words, but relatively few people behave as though this were true. How many interviews have *you* been in where it seemed as though the interviewer was looking at your resume for the first time while asking the questions? Like anything, the process takes an investment of time and effort to do properly. But it's an investment that is well worth making.

This is particularly true in the case of the small and rapidly growing enterprise. There are several reasons why:

First, growth demands that new employees be added at a rapid rate. In small firms, even *one* new employee may represent a high rate of growth in percentage terms.

Moreover, growth will force a restructuring of responsibilities: Senior executives must delegate duties as they take on new work; the firm will reorganize its operations as it learns more about how to accomplish its work and as a higher volume of activity make standardization and specialization possible. This environment of change places a premium on hiring people who can quickly take on new and increased responsibilities.

Finally, in the young and growing enterprise, every new hire sends an important signal about the firm's values and culture. Employees will be sensitive to the kind of person who is hired, to decisions about promoting from within versus recruiting externally. People will try to "read the tea leaves" to learn how the organization is changing. They are correct in doing so, because hiring decisions *do* have a tremendous impact on the organization. Your hiring decisions *will* send a message about what you value and where you want to lead the organization. Be sure you are sending the signals you want to communicate.