

CAREERS & RECRUITMENT

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Stick to principles of selection

Companies recruiting for staff in a candidate-rich market must take care to make the right choice, writes Gareth Naughton

Doing a job interview is up there with the driving test and getting married as one of the more daunting experiences in life. What most people don't consider is that giving an interview can be just as nerve-wracking.

Do it right and you have secured an asset for your company. Get it wrong and you could actually cost your company money and lose the best candidate for the job. Preparation, good listening skills and an ability to put others at ease are all key to a conducting a good interview.

Preparation

Just as you would expect a candidate sitting in front of you to



Adrienne O'Hare, manager of To Be Training: 'It is absolutely critical to have prepared and to put people at ease'

have done some research on your company and the role that they are applying for, you should also make sure that you are adequately prepared to conduct the interview, said Mairead Fleming, director,

Brightwater Recruitment. "Read the CV inside out and know the candidate's background before they come into you. It is common courtesy to show the same preparation that you expect from them, so

make sure you are not literally scanning their CV while they are sitting in front of you," she said.

Part of your preparations should be establishing what the job entails and the skills required, and putting together a list of questions designed to get as much relevant information as possible from the candidate. However, you should also be prepared to let the interview take its natural course.

"Do not be so focused on the questions that you want to ask that you are not listening to what they are saying. You need to be able to pick out points that you can follow up on, and you have to be prepared to go down different avenues," she said.

This is particularly important in cases where a panel interview is taking place. Often panelists can go in with a very rigid idea of what they need to ask and the structure means that they don't listen to the candidates. They may, in fact, be over-prepared.

"There is a balance there. You have to be able to pick up on something that the candidate says that is relevant and, if you need to go down a different angle, you have to be flexible in

your approach to be able to do that," she said.

Nerves can also cause interviewers to concentrate too much on what they themselves are doing and fail to pay attention. Listening is vital if you want to get the best out of your candidates.

"Interviewers can be almost self-conscious. That can get in the way of conducting a really good interview because they can be too focused on what they have to do as well. They are as nervous as the candidates. It is not a natural thing. If you are a team leader in an accountancy division, you are not an experienced interviewer, yet you are expected to be able to conduct it and that is tough. Practice it – it is so important to get that right," said Fleming.

Building rapport

It is up to the interviewer to make sure that the candidate is totally at ease. While it might seem like the way to go is to employ the aggressive interview style used by Gavin Duffy when he is helping Bill Cullen to cut the deadwood on The Apprentice, treating candi-

dates like that does you no favours. The interviewer who marches into a room and barks "talk" at a candidate is doing a disservice to the candidate and the company, according to Adrienne O'Hare, manager of To Be Training.

"You are being interviewed as well – the company is also being assessed so it is important to show courtesy. What is that individual saying about the culture of the company and the level of respect they have for people? It is absolutely critical to have prepared and to put people at ease. If you don't know how to do it, go and get training," said O'Hare.

If someone feels comfortable enough from the very start of the interview, you are likely to get more out of them and a better, more rounded idea of who they are as a person. In truth, all candidates will come with their "game face" on and it is up to you to see passed that.

"If you put them at ease and build a rapport with them, the candidate is going to be more relaxed and show more of their character. They will be in a position to communicate their skills more effectively. You are not going to get rehearsed an-

RECRUIT briefs

Job opportunities on the rise

October saw the first year-on-year rise in professional job opportunities for seven months, according to a report from recruitment firm Morgan McKinley.

There was an 11 per cent month-on-month increase in new professional roles coming on to the market last month, according to Morgan McKinley's Irish Employment Monitor.

The report also found a 34 per cent increase in job vacancies compared to the same period last year. The number of people looking for opportunities had steadied, the report said, with a 9 per cent drop in available candidates.

"Overall, sentiment in the Irish professional jobs market is slightly reserved yet positive," said Karen O'Flaherty, Morgan McKinley's chief operations officer.

"The US singled out Ireland for handling austerity measures effectively, following a recent IDA mission led by Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation Richard Burton. Investment prospects for the country – especially in the life sciences, medical devices and financial services sectors – are strong."



Karen O'Flaherty, Morgan McKinley

Employers ignoring overtime

The majority of Irish professionals are receiving nothing in return for their overtime, a survey by recruitment consultants Robert Walters has found.

A total of 600 professionals took part in the survey, and were asked how their employer recognised the overtime hours they worked.

Some 62 per cent said that they got no recognition for extra hours worked. The situation has improved mildly in comparison to last year, when 66 per cent of respondents reported no rewards for overtime.

Of those who are rewarded, 12 per cent were paid overtime while a further 13 per cent got time off in lieu. The remainder saw their extra work recognised through career progression while a tiny percentage received gifts from their employers.

"The days of working nine-to-five are long gone. With the majority of Irish professionals working longer hours for no extra remuneration, employers demand more out of existing staff in a downturn, and many would expect their employees to complete their workload irrespective of standard working hours," said Louise Campbell, managing director of Robert Walters Ireland.

Law must be followed in interview situations

While the interviewer's primary focus should be on ensuring that they find the best candidate for the job, they must also comply with the law, said Mary Connaughton, head of human resources development with employer's group Ibec.

"You need to have a clear process in place around organising and running good interviews, so that you get what you need. There would be a number of steps that an interviewer has to go through, so that they do it in an effective and compliant way. This is quite a regulated area, in terms of protection against discrimination," she said. Ibec runs training courses giving participants a step-by-step guide in how to conduct interviews. The first thing to do is to establish a job description and person specification. You should be clear about the job you are recruiting for and the skills, education and experience needed and any extras that might be preferable.

"A lot of the decisions you make about what kind of questions you ask, or whether you have got the right person, comes back to whether or not they fit those basic job requirements," Connaughton said.

Once the applications are on your desk, and you have whittled them down for interview, schedule a limited number of interviews per day because the process can be exhausting. You also need to make sure that you are adequately prepared.

Get up-to-date on equality legislation, to ensure that all lines of questioning are non-discriminatory. Settle on the structure and format of the interview before candidates arrive, as well as areas up for discussion.

"You need to be consistent about it, so



Mary Connaughton, head of human resources development with employer's group Ibec

ensure that you ask the same questions of all candidates. That way, you are getting the same information and you can make better comparisons. It is also fairer, and we

'Notes should reflect what the candidate says'

would know from case law that it is important to be able to show that you have treated each candidate equally. If an interviewer can show that it is part of the job and that they asked it of everybody, they can show that it is not a discriminatory question," she said.

Stick to competency-based questions probing

the candidate's experience, and look for contrary evidence to get a fully-rounded picture of the candidate. Try to avoid obscure or irrelevant lines of questioning such as "Who would you invite to a dinner party?", designed to catch interviewees out. "You would have come across that a few years ago but, nowadays, because there is so much emphasis on having a consistent process and asking comparable questions, it happens less and less," Connaughton said.

"We wouldn't recommend it. For most jobs, unless there is a reason that a candidate would have to deal with very awkward situations that would throw them, then there is no point in creating a false situation at the interview."

Be clear about the nature and requirements of the job during the interview so, for instance, if overtime is a key component, make sure that candidates are aware of that. It is also very important to take accurate notes during the process, and to have a proper evaluation system in place to deal with each candidate immediately after you have concluded their interview.

"Notes should reflect what the candidate says, rather than opinions or observations. You should have a scoring key with all the different competencies required, and they should be scored on those as soon as they go out the door. Don't wait until you have interviewed ten people and then score them, because that is where the bias comes into play," said Connaughton.

Finally, once you have completed the process and selected the successful candidate, wait until they have cleared reference and medical checks before making an offer of employment.

working WEEK

Simon Hunt established De Vere Landscapes in Dublin in 2003. A grounds maintenance contractor, the company offers landscaping services to commercial clients in the Leinster region, including property management companies, self-managed developments and event management firms. It has four full-time staff.

What are the main responsibilities of your job?

I manage the business on a day-to-day basis to ensure we provide clients with the best possible service and value-for-money. I also focus my time on looking for new opportunities to grow and diversify the business.

For instance, I am currently importing a significant amount of de-icing rock salt and have seen high levels of demand from businesses and property management companies which are preparing early for another cold winter.

What are your primary professional motivators?

To build a business that is

known for its quality, reliability and highly capable, friendly staff. One that provides an excellent service at a competitive price, while maintaining the highest standards.

How would you describe your work style?

I am proactive and have a keen eye for detail. I like to lead by example and there is nothing I would ask my staff to do that I wouldn't be willing to do myself.

What rates as your best business decision to date?

When I first established the business, the focus was very much on the design and build of bespoke garden projects. To ensure a regular cash flow through the early years I decided to take on a couple of maintenance contracts for apartment complexes.

The best decision I made at that time was to change the focus of the business to concentrate on the landscape maintenance side of things and to grow the business in that direction.

What is the most valuable professional lesson you have learned?

The importance of building and maintaining good relationships. In the tough times



Simon Hunt: 'The old adage of cash is king has never been more applicable'

we are going through, strong business relationships will be key and it is important to be flexible and to go that extra mile.

Who do you most admire in Irish business?

I really admire Tony Durkan, chairman of BM Durkan. During the formative years of De Vere Landscapes, he acted as a business mentor for me and still does. It was his advice to take on

a couple of maintenance contracts in the early years that has brought us to where we are today.

What are your expectations for Irish business in the months ahead?

The old adage of cash is king has never been more applicable. A business can survive without profits for a year or two, but if you don't have cashflow and if you can't pay

your bills, then you're finished.

What is your ultimate professional goal at this point?

To continue to provide clients of De Vere Landscapes with a quality, value for money service that is second to none. We are constantly evaluating our performance to ensure that we meet our customers' needs – offering the right service for them and their budget.