

CHAPTER 21

Getting a Job

Asking the Right Questions

Companies that eschew personality tests rely on a variety of techniques to get revealing responses from candidates.

by Pamela Mendels in New York

During a job interview six months ago, Roopa Mehendale Foley came up with a well-reasoned analysis. That's one reason why she's now vice-president for product development at New York City-based e-commerce outfit Dash. The company didn't hire a consultant or use a formal personality test, however. It turned to the time-honored approach of using probing questions, getting Foley to solve puzzles and react to real-world situations.

Indeed, for every employer that relies on personality tests, three or four others use in-house techniques—some of them quite sophisticated—to size up potential new hires. Take Task Masters, a New York City-based time- and space-management company. Owner Julie Morgenstern, the author of two management books, likes to find out if candidates are capable of quickly picking up on the company's strategy. So she routinely asks them to describe the mission and key goals of their last two employers. A deft description shows Morgenstern that a possible recruit will most likely “be tuned into the way we do business,” she says.

“**DRILLING DOWN.**” Howard D. Leifman, human resources chief at career-advice site Vault.com, relies on a method that's increasingly popular with recruiters: behavioral-based interviewing. Leifman asks candidates to discuss past job achievements and problems—how they produced a large increase in sales or handled a disagreement with the boss—and take him step-by-step through their behavior at the time. “You keep drilling down to what they did and how did they do it. And that will be an indication of future performance,” he says.

Other employers zero in on what candidates inadvertently disclose about their work attitudes. William DeMario, a senior vice-president in the Burbank (Calif.) office of AOC, a national financial staffing company, is one boss who likes it when

candidates bring up money as a major reason they are applying for a job. That's because he hires many salespeople who work in whole or part on commission. DeMario says he takes a remark along the lines of “I want to make a good living” as a signal that the applicant is motivated to sell.

Meanwhile, interviewees at goRefer.com, a New York City-based sales-referral site, can kiss the opportunity goodbye if they jab their former employers harshly. That's a flag to hiring managers that candidates “are looking at us only because they are unhappy somewhere else,” says PR Manager Kenneth D. Madigan.

GoRefer also measures candidates by a more unusual yardstick—their SAT scores. A candidate with stellar results doesn't necessarily get the job, but good scores are a bonus, according to Madigan. “We feel that a smart person can learn quickly,” he says.

QUICK, THINK! Roopa Foley didn't have to reveal her SAT scores. But during a four-hour interview at Dash that followed routine resume queries, she did have to answer questions seeking to determine how she deals with tough problems. At the e-commerce outfit, candidates for senior positions are evaluated in good measure on their ability to think on their feet.

Depending on the job they are applying for, applicants might be handed a two-men-on-opposite-shores/one-boat-between-them-type brainteaser or asked the approximate number of gasoline stations in the U.S., with an explanation of the method used to arrive at the figure. (One possible solution: Start with the U.S. population of about 250 million, estimate the number of gas stations per 10,000 Americans and do the math.)

Dash COO Jason S. Priest says interviewers aren't looking for a correct answer so much as a glimpse into how candidates think and react to a challenge under pressure. Do they get flustered? Or are they stimulated and willing to ask their own questions? “What we want to see is how they struggle through a problem,” he says.

SCORING POINTS. Foley, 30, didn't flinch when she was asked a typical Dash question: What effect will the Internet have on the U.S. Postal Service's business? “My initial reaction was: Hmmm. That's a good question,” she says. In her response, she hit on the major points. She speculated that e-mail would significantly reduce snail-mail traffic but that the post office could benefit from an increase in parcel

deliveries as more people ordered goods online—
a job-snagging answer.

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