

Interviewing the 'professional' candidate

Have you met the ideal person for the job? Or have you just encountered a highly coached, interview-savvy candidate? Here are tips and strategies to help assess the true qualities under the surface of the slick, 'professional' job seeker

By **MICHAEL GRAVELLE**

No one should knock the initiative of a well-prepared job candidate. But there is a big difference between an eager, industrious interviewee and a stage-rehearsed job candidate who has mastered the interview process.

The ability to rub through the veneer of the "professional" job candidate is critical for any hiring manager looking to fill a position.

A whole industry has emerged to provide coaching services and products that make people "experts" on the receiving end of a job interview. From self-help books to online resources (See page 20 sidebar, "The interview expert's Web"), the trend has spawned a generation of smooth and savvy job candidates.

Perhaps Canada's foremost "pro" candidate is the infamous John Davy who landed a job as CEO at a New Zealand broadcasting company with a totally fabricated resume and without a shred of relevant job experience. What went wrong? What methods might you employ to avoid this kind of fiasco or, at least, limit your vulnerability?

Spotting the pro can be made easier by reinforcing the traditional candidate assessments — the interview and the resume — with methods that are more difficult to manipulate.

There are three proven ways to avoid getting fooled by a pro: get-



ting a second look at the candidate through behavioural testing, reference checks and performance-based testing.

Get a second look at the candidate through behaviour analysis

People are wired to make snap judgments. A recent study by the Uni-

versity of Toledo showed that a group of interviewers had, for the most part, made up their minds on a candidate within 15 seconds of meeting the person. That's by the time the candidate had settled into the chair.

Most HR professionals recognize that the interview, regardless of how structured it is, only reduces,

rather than eliminates, subjectivity. Professional candidates are fully aware that they are being subconsciously judged on the ability to develop rapport and create a favourable first impression. They take full advantage of this. Interviewers need to get a second, inde-

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Pros make good first impressions

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pendent opinion.

Objective measures, such as pre-employment testing help provide a more scientific assessment of tough-to-evaluate qualities like leadership style, personality fit and adaptability. "A key interview challenge is to get beyond the gloss of a well-prepared interviewee," says Tanya Pyne, corporate recruiter for Aon Canada in Toronto. "Behavioural assessments help us do this." Pre-employment behavioural testing is common practice in organizations that require objective analysis and accountability in corporate decision-making. According to *The HR Scorecard* (by Becker, Huselid and Ulrich), a survey of 400 publicly traded U.S. companies found the top-performing 10 per cent were more than seven times as likely to use a validated behavioural pre-employment test than the bottom 10 per cent.

Senior managers, who often pride themselves on their gut instinct, are particularly vulnerable to the pro. I once worked with the vice-president of a Canadian consulting firm who insisted we shelve all the other resumes following a home-run interview with the "perfect" candidate for a sales position.

It took a bit of convincing, but the company finally agreed to run a behavioural assessment on this star candidate prior to making an offer. While this individual accurately presented herself as confident, self-assured and knowledgeable, the evaluation indicated she was also likely to be extremely impatient, particularly with subordinates and support staff. This information was useful to help shape questions in reference checks.

Not only was this personality trait borne out, it proved to be a lia-

bility: A former employer admitted that although she often exceeded her quotas, her condescending attitude frequently soured relationships with her team and damaged long-term customer relationships.

Conduct pre-emptive reference checks

Many managers despair at the difficulty they have getting detailed references from past employers. Although "name, rank and serial number" references are certainly a sign of the times (see www.hrreporter.com, select "Search" and enter article #2543), the stated intention to check references can be effectively leveraged to increase the integrity of candidates' responses.

Ask candidates early on who they will be providing as references. Make it clear you are not requesting permission to call the references at this stage, but simply want an idea of who they will be. Be skeptical of candidates who will not be providing the names of former supervisors.

Another way to keep the pro candidate in check is to link questions to references. Say something like: "That's a great example of how you saved the company money by developing a new process. By the way, just for my records, who were you reporting to at that time?"

An added benefit to this approach across the board is that candidates will be less likely to embellish responses if it appears you are going to validate their success stories later on.

Give them an assignment

Work samples are found to be among the most valid predictors of performance. Rather than having candidates paint rosy pictures of how they would handle a task, why not actually have them perform it as

part of the hiring process?

The task need not be complex. A distributor I work with gives prospective sales candidates a selection of product brochures. For the final interview, each is asked to deliver a sales presentation to a panel. An insurance company claims manager gives job candidates 15 minutes to review two case files and make recommendations on an action plan. At a construction company, prospective electrical engineers are asked to interpret a blueprint and comment on a design layout.

An important caveat to this tip: be realistic. An ambitious tech start-up recruiter I know drew up a problem-solving quiz that pegged candidate after candidate as failures. When it was suggested that the same quiz be given to the firm's top performers, guess what: most failed.

Run a task past a few experienced people on the team to see

how they do. And be sure to run it by legal experts to ensure the quiz is job-related and non-discriminatory.

Stay a step ahead

By using these tools to enhance objectivity, interviewers can elevate themselves to the level of expertise of the most savvy candidates. Remember, this isn't to say a well-rehearsed candidate should necessarily be ruled out — the person may indeed possess the qualities you seek. But flushing out the pro candidate minimizes the gap between the person who showed up to the interview and the person who will show up for the job.

Michael Gravelle is vice-president of The McQuaig Institute, a Toronto-based company that helps organizations make better selection decisions through behavioural assessments and interview training. He can be reached at 1-800-387-5455.

The interview expert's Web

A sampling of the tools and resources today's professional job-seekers are using to charm HR

Here's a look At Web sites job candidates could use to prepare themselves to impress you.

www.references-etc.com: Just one of several online services that allow job candidates to pre-screen what references will say about them. For US\$49.95, the company will call up a list of references, posing as a prospective employer.

www.asktheinterviewcoach.com: For \$8 a pop, Toronto-based interview coach Ken Sproul will prep interviewees by answering one pressing question by e-mail. For \$52 he answers unlimited questions, conducts a mock interview and provides access to a copy of the Sir Principle, a booklet containing his formula for "winning" the job interview.

www.interviewcoach.com: Based in the San Francisco area, Carole Martin is interview coach for Monster.com and author of the self-help workbook *Interview Fitness Training*. A virtual "practice interview" reviews responses to classic behavioural interview questions, such as: "Tell me about a time when you had

to sacrifice quality in order to meet a deadline?"

Sample answer: "The stronger the deadline the harder I work. I recently had a job where I had to work weekends on a rush job because of a deadline. Deadlines aren't moveable, my work schedule is, so I just extended myself further to meet the deadline. I blocked out a schedule for each part of the job, allowing time for editing and reworking. The job was not only on time, but it was almost error free. I may make a mistake in a rush job, but I try hard to work smart and fast. This is what I find most challenging about this work."

www.pharmaceuticalinterviewquestions.com: This Houston-based Web site aims to help people break into the lucrative field of pharmaceutical sales by revealing the "secrets" of industry recruiters. Sample contents: "The amazing 'Lazy Job Seeker's 9-Step Shortcut' to creating a knockout interview presentation in just minutes. (How to quickly and easily turn what you know about your current job and the job you want into a white-hot slide show that gets you hired.)"

Six signs you might be dealing with a pro candidate

- Do responses sound "canned," peppered with jargon and lacking specifics?
- Are the candidate's greatest successes at companies that no longer exist, reporting to managers who cannot be tracked down?
- Has the candidate visited your Web site, referring frequently to information gleaned there, whether

relevant or not?

- Does the candidate compliment you on your interviewing skills?
- Does the candidate use body mirroring — mimicking your body language and expressions?
- Did your receptionist find the candidate "slick" or "pushy?" Remember, pros may let their guards down outside of the interview room.