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Chapter

Introduction

■ BACKGROUND

Although they are used in nearly all selection processes, face-to-face interviews coupled with personal and/or business references are the *least accurate predictors* of future job performance.¹ As illustrated by the interview provided later in this chapter, you can easily see why. This dreadful statistic is further borne out by the experience of many human resource professionals and various investigations on the subject. Among the many reasons cited for this ominous situation are the following:

- Ineffective analysis of the candidate's background.
- Inappropriate selection strategies used in the decision process.
- Confusion and lack of clarity regarding expectations.
- Ignoring the fact that the successful candidate must have a very steep learning curve.
- Irrelevant job description and/or skill set.
- Failure to ensure that the values of the candidate and the organization mesh.
- Forgetting to ascertain whether the selected candidate has the capacity to learn.

Studies from the U.S. Department of Labor indicate that 50% of all new hires leave the job within the first six months.² Many quit because the position turns out to be something other

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than what was described (sold) to them in the interview. Some leave because they object to how they are being managed. Others are relieved of their duties because they prove themselves unfit for the jobs for which they were hired. Moreover, no amount of training seems to be able to correct a poor hire. At an average salary of \$50,000 year, companies pay astronomical sums for their hiring errors (see Table 1.1).

According to studies from the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina, 50% of the senior executives hired today will fail in their new positions.³ Generally speaking, however, these individuals will remain with the organization, forcing their staffs and colleagues to work around their inefficiencies. Even though a combination of methods may be used to make the selection (e.g., testing, personal interview, and psychological profile), the final determinant and principal criteria used to differentiate the successful candidate from all the others are usually the following:

- The person who will best fit into the culture.
- The candidate who will most likely be approved of by the key decision maker.

It is the mission of this book to rectify these dreadful statistics. The personal interview can and should be an accurate predictor of future job performance if preceded by a precise analysis of the position and impeccable, thoughtful preparation prior to the interviewing event. The process advanced in this book contains three basic steps:

1. Analyzing the core responsibilities of the position.
2. Determining what skills, knowledge, experience, attributes, and competencies are needed to meet those responsibilities.
3. Generating appropriate questions that, when answered, will provide solid evidence of the candidate's possession or lack of the required qualities.

All the analysis and preparation must be done prior to speaking with a single candidate. In this way, the basis for the interview becomes the requirements for the position rather than the candidate's resume and background.

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Table 1.1 The Price Tag on Turnover

The U.S. Department of Labor statistics indicate that 50% of all new hires leave their jobs within the first six months. At an average salary of \$50,000 year (for a supervisory candidate or a junior-level engineer), you may be throwing away a great deal of money on hiring errors that should not have happened.

The categories and percentages shown in this table are based on a study done by The Society for Human Resource Management; the actual financial data is based on a yearly salary of \$50,000 a year for a candidate who does not require relocation.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Percentage of Salary</i>	<i>Cost in Dollars</i>
Cost of inadequacy of the new employee (12 months)	[46%]	\$23,000
Cost of assistance by coworkers closely associated with the new employee (12 months)	[33%]	\$16,500
Cost of declining productivity of departing employee (1.5 months)	[6%]	\$3,000
Cost of shift of attention from the work to the departing employee by coworkers (11% over 1.5 months)	[2%]	\$1,000
Cost of leaving the position vacant or functioning with stopgap measures (13 weeks)	[50%]	\$25,000
Cost of processing both the departing employee and the new employee by human resources department	[3%]	\$1,500
Cost of recruitment (newspaper ads, agency fees, etc.) and screening of applicants by human resources department	[10%]	\$5,000
Cost of operating department time in processing and orienting the new employee (49 hours)	[8%]	\$4,000
Cost of relocation		\$0
Total cost		\$79,000
Ratio of costs to average salary		1.58

Source: Douglas Phillips, "The Price Tag on Turnover," *Personnel Journal (Society for Human Resource Management)*, December, 1990, pp. 58-61.

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This book describes a logical, intelligent, repeatable strategy that is easy to apply. It is a system that recognizes the following:

- As a hiring manager, you want to spend a minimum amount of time on the interview.
- Whatever system you use must generate superior results every time it is used.

This book will demonstrate that all you need is 10 good questions and 40 minutes to do the job.

■ YOUR USUAL STRATEGY FOR HIRING

When you are involved in selecting people for key positions on your own staff, your primary concern is to hire *failure-proof candidates*. Perhaps you feel that the success or deficiency of the selected candidate may have a considerable effect on your own career.

Because the process of selecting the right person for the job is based on a process of risk aversion, the most attractive candidates are probably those whom you have observed in other positions, perhaps as temporary workers, trainees, or summer interns. Should this method fail to uncover a suitable candidate, you may try asking close friends and colleagues whose opinion you trust to recommend possible candidates. Should these efforts fail to locate an appropriate candidate, you will attempt to look for candidates whose background and experience indicate that they have handled similar tasks and activities in prior jobs. Your assumption is that if the candidate did it before, surely he or she can do it again for me.

During the actual interviewing process, you will evaluate candidates on items that may not have very much to do with the requirements for the position, such as the following:

- School attended and grade point average attained.
- Whether the candidate articulates a knowledge of function specific task skills (i.e., uses the appropriate jargon).
- The candidate's level of interpersonal skills.
- Whether the candidate displays good communication skills.

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In so doing, you are ignoring the characteristics that can point you to the successful candidate.

■ KEY ITEMS FOR LONG-TERM SUCCESS

The following three items are not generally considered in the interview process but actually prove to be the most important of all in terms of long-term success:

1. The candidate's ability to learn.
2. The candidate's values.
3. The candidate's cognitive ability.

The Importance of the Candidate's Ability to Learn

Organizational impatience is a by-product of the short-term mentality that plagues most of society today. Therefore, a candidate's ability to learn and learn quickly becomes critical to his or her success. It used to be that people had a honeymoon period of one year in which to assimilate themselves into the inner workings of the organization and make some decisions about how they wanted to shape their jobs. For today's lucky candidate, that period has been compressed into a few weeks at best. Not only do the new hires have precious little time to grasp the job, they are expected to produce results almost immediately.

The Importance of the Candidate's Values

There must be a commonality of conviction between the candidate's personal values and the values cherished by you and the organization. Such concerns are not usually addressed in the interviewing process, but only after hiring has taken place. Then it becomes a major issue. Values are a key component of strategic thinking and problem solving. They determine how the organization wants its people to make decisions. When it becomes apparent that the values of a person differ with those of the organization, the person is generally pressured to resign.

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The Importance of the Candidate's Cognitive Ability

It is a rare event for an interviewer to consider the depth of a candidate's wisdom and acumen. Yet this is another area that becomes an important factor in long-term job success. Any experienced candidate has made his or her share of mistakes. When competent candidates make mistakes, however, they acknowledge, accept, and attempt to learn from them. Candidates who reject their mistakes by blaming others or stating that their organization was at fault do not have the capacity to learn. They have never accepted responsibility for their mistakes; in their mind, they don't make mistakes. Therefore they have nothing to learn from those negative situations (except that other people don't know what they're doing). If given a responsible job, they will most likely fail at it.

When an employee acts, two capacities are utilized: the technical ability to do the work (the necessary knowledge and skills) and the thinking (decision making) about how to do it. The latter involves an overview or structure of concepts that is used to evaluate situations and guide actions. Such a structure is the result of prior experiences—particularly failures. The experiences and learnings have been incorporated into a thought process that the person uses to evaluate future situations and guide future actions. A candidate who is highly skilled at decision making will demonstrate a well-developed and evolving overview about what he or she is doing and how various work challenges should be dealt with.

An astute interviewer should ask candidates about their blunders, examine what they learned from them, and how what was learned influenced later decisions. Desirable candidates look at a mistake as feedback rather than as a failure, regard every job assignment as developmental, and seek out challenging opportunities where the pressure to learn will force them to grow professionally and stretch their capabilities.

Why a Candidate's Level of Intelligence Is Critical

Often the perfect candidate (in terms of skills, experience, etc.) is hired and, as inconceivable as it may seem, within six months, it becomes apparent that the person hired doesn't have the right skills to handle the position. The reason is that, whereas the job description used to delineate the vacancy con-

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tained information regarding specific tasks, title, compensation, desired personal characteristics, and reporting relationship, there was precious little information regarding competencies, sagacity, expected results, and future needs. The selected candidate, therefore, was actually hired on the basis of a finely tuned job description that reflected yesterday's needs.

The skill set of the selected candidate, therefore, became immediately obsolete and meaningless in terms of future needs. Moreover, there was probably no attempt to ascertain whether the candidate could, if the situation required it, recast and retool him- or herself in order to adapt to a changing environment. With so many organizations transforming themselves these days, there is no question that the candidate of today must be able to do the same, or be out of a job tomorrow.

■ THE CHALLENGE

The big question then becomes what you should be looking for in candidates that assures you that they can handle the job at present but which also shows that they are equipped for tomorrow's responsibilities—responsibilities that are not yet known. Such a candidate exhibits the following qualities:

- Has broadly based rather than narrowly specialized knowledge.
- Knows many strategies and techniques within the discipline.
- Believes in the same values the organization admires.
- Is a fast and perpetual learner, resilient in the face of failure.
- Demonstrates flexibility.
- Looks at change as a challenge rather than as a disaster.
- If going into a leadership role, has superior management skills.

As the hiring manager (i.e., the person who needs a new employee), you start the process by providing the human resources department with a vague description of what you want in a candidate. It then becomes the task of the human resources department to provide you with a short list of suitably talented candidates from which to choose. Obviously, the human resources department cannot do a competent job without an

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adequate and clearly delineated description of the specific skills and experience you require. If all you tell the human resources department is that you “need another pair of hands in here before the end of the month,” and from that they produced an appropriate short list of candidates, the interviewing process will invariably break down at this point.

As a typical manager in today’s world, your life is a running battle with inherited troops and their marginal competencies and/or bad attitudes. You may well understand the importance of prudent hiring. You may acknowledge that the workforce is the lifeblood of your organization. You may realize that it is impossible to manage effectively without being able to hire effectively. However, you will also insist that you have no time to devote to preparing for an interview.

If you do not prepare, however, your interview might proceed something like the one that follows. The interview includes many of the most common mistakes likely to occur in a typical off-the-cuff interview. The tragedy is that an inappropriate person will be hired as a result of this interview.

■ A TYPICAL INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Hi! Glad you could come in to see us today. I’m George Winggit. I manage this section. [*Extends hand*].

Candidate: Hi. I’m Nancy Doall. Nice to meet you. [*Extends hand*].

Interviewer: So . . . make yourself comfortable. Did you have any trouble finding us?

Candidate: No, not at all. Your assistant’s directions were very clear.

This is a nice way to start the interview—an attempt at rapport. The candidate, however, needs to know how the interviewer intends to conduct the interaction. Rapport is not about making friends with the candidate. Neither is it about playing psychologist to the candidate’s anxiety. Establishing rapport is

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accomplished by stating at the onset of the meeting how the interview will be structured. The interviewer might say, "At Junkit Manufacturing we try to match a person's strengths to our job needs. Now in order for me to assess whether we have the right job for you, I need to know something about you. I need to know about your previous job experiences, maybe something about your goals and career plans, and maybe a little about how you spend your nonwork time. Suppose you start by telling me about your responsibilities at Lowe Bidd Construction."

Interviewer: Good. Good. I'd just like to take a few minutes here to refresh myself on your background. [Looks at the candidate's resume] So, I see here that you live about 20 miles from our facility.

Thirty seconds into the interview, it becomes obvious that the interviewer has not prepared himself for the discussion. He is forced into using the candidate's resume as the springboard for the interaction rather than a meticulously developed job specification or list of requirements.

Candidate: Yes. I'm not far away at all.

Interviewer: Good. Good. And I see here that you graduated from Dummer Thandirt University.

If the interviewer begins the process by examining the candidate's resume and then asking questions that relate to the resume information, the interviewer has created a moving target as the basis for the interview. Every interview, then, is about the candidate's resume rather than the requirements of the position. The job requirements, however, are what should provide the foundation for the interview. Only then is it truly possible to evaluate one candidate versus another.

Candidate: Yes.

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Interviewer: So did my niece. She has lots of good memories of the place.

Candidate: I really enjoyed my years there, too.

Interviewer: She spoke of a bar just off campus—the Dungeon, I think she called it.

Candidate: Oh yes. That was the campus hangout.

Interviewer: Do they still sell those huge roast beef sandwiches for three dollars?

The interviewer has become a victim of the “halo effect.” This happens when the interviewer finds something in the candidate’s background that matches something in his or her own (such as attending the same university or having grown up in the same town). That similarity gives the entire interview a golden glow so that, when negative information surfaces, the tendency of the interviewer is to play it down or ignore it.

Candidate: Probably. Your niece must be a recent graduate because they were only a dollar fifty when I was there, and that was 10 years ago.

Interviewer: Ruth—that’s my niece—applied for a waitress job there to help with college expenses, but the Dungeon refused to hire her.

Candidate: I understood that the Dungeon had an agreement with the university not to hire any of the students.

Interviewer: Oh really? Perhaps Ruth wasn’t aware of that. She thought they didn’t hire her because she looked so young.

Candidate: What was Ruth’s major?

This conversation is wasting both the interviewer’s time and the candidate’s time. Moreover, it has nothing whatever to do with discovering whether this candidate is a good fit for the vacancy.

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Interviewer: She started out in science—chemistry or biology, I think. In her third year she switched majors and went into prelaw. Now she's at Columbia University Law School.

Candidate: Your family must be very proud of her. Law is a great profession for a woman. It's hard to believe that just 20 years ago, there were very few female lawyers and today . . .

Interviewer: Yes, that's true. I see here [*looks at the candidate's paperwork*] that your major was marketing.

The interviewer keeps repeating the information on the resume or application. This wastes everyone's time, but it is an excellent ploy for someone who is not prepared to conduct an interview. Unfortunately, such an approach may signal the candidate that the organization has no real interest in him or her.

Candidate: That's right.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy that?

This is a useless question because it provides no substantive information. A better question might be, "What was the most significant concept you learned from your marketing studies?"

Candidate: Yes. It was very interesting.

Interviewer: So how did you happen to apply for this job?

Candidate: I have always heard great things about the company, but it was really your newspaper ad that intrigued me.

The interviewer should ask, "What have you heard about us?" or "What was it about our ad that intrigued you?"

Interviewer: This company has always enjoyed a great reputation because of what it offers its employees. We

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have a very generous benefit package that is presented in a menu format.

The interviewer is selling the organization too soon. Telling the candidate all the things that interviewer believes make the position challenging, rewarding, advantageous, and exciting will not make it attractive to the candidate no matter how enthusiastically the interviewer imparts the information. The only way to find out what excites a candidate about a job—any job—is to allow her to tell her own story.

This allows each employee to tailor their benefits according to their own individual needs. For example, I have a benefit package that includes a 401(k) savings plan, health care coverage, and life insurance. My assistant's package contains tuition reimbursement, AAA coverage, and membership in a health club. I don't know what your plans are for your own career but the best thing about working here is the formalized mentor program. Every new employee is given the opportunity to work closely with one of our senior executives. In other words, you will not be just another cog in the wheel here.

Here is an excellent opportunity to ask the candidate what her career plans are, what she is looking for in a job, and how she would know his firm could offer her that kind of challenge. The interviewer might say, "What are you looking for in a job?" (or looking to avoid) and "How would you know that we could provide you with that kind of opportunity?"

You will have the continued support of a senior person whose sole function will be to help you with such things as experience options, career choices, educational opportunities, and so forth. Promotions and raises are made on the basis of both performance excellence and the willingness

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to take risks. That last item I think is the most unusual of all.

The most common error interviewers make is talking too much. The most important skill in interviewing is listening. The only time the interviewer can listen to a candidate is when the candidate is speaking. Talking too much (more than 20% of the time) is a sure way to fail in obtaining any meaningful information.

Should you take a calculated risk in your job and things not work out—as long as you can justify your decision—you will not be penalized, reprimanded, or castigated. In fact, risk takers are valued here. We believe that risk taking is what keeps us ahead of our competition.

Candidate: That's absolutely amazing.

Interviewer: It certainly is. That's what makes us so special. It states in your resume [*looks at the candidate's resume*] that you have been employed by Lowe Bidd Construction as a . . . "Buying Specialist"?

Candidate: Yes. That's right.

Interviewer: What exactly is that? Your resume says you examined building contracts and arranged for the purchase of any unique specialty items that were specified in the documents.

The interviewer continues to waste time by repeating the information on the candidate's resume. A better approach might be to ask, "Walk me through what you did as a buying specialist."

Candidate: Yes. That's right.

Interviewer: Were you involved in price negotiations and bargaining? Did you act as a purchasing agent for the company? Were you responsible for selecting vendors? What about commonly used items that were not specifically stipulated in the contracts?

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Here the interviewer asks several related questions at the same time. Most candidates, when faced with multiple questions, will only respond to the last one in the series. The others go unanswered. Because the first question in the string is generally the most critical one, the interviewer fails to obtain significant information. A good question might be, "Tell me about your experience with price negotiations."

Candidate: We had our usual suppliers for those items.

Interviewer: In your resume it states that you manage others. How many people do you actually supervise?

Candidate: I have one permanent employee, and from time to time when the work is especially burdensome, they give me another person on a part-time basis.

The interviewer fails to follow up on the candidate's interesting use of the word burdensome. An effective follow-up question might be, "Burdensome?"

Interviewer: So you do know how to supervise others?

Candidate: Yes.

Interviewer: And supervision will not present any problems for you?

This is a useless series of questions because it does not provide any substantive information.

Candidate: No problems.

Interviewer: In this job you will have a staff of four. Will that present any difficulties for you?

If the candidate wants the job, she must answer affirmatively, "No problems."

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Candidate: No. Not at all.

Interviewer: What did you like best about your job with Lowe Bidd?

Candidate: Well, I'm a very independent person, and at Lowe Bidd they left me pretty much on my own.

Interviewer: So you like to work without supervision and make your own decisions?

Here the interviewer makes an assumption. This is not what the candidate said. There are no facts on which to base this impulsive inference. It would be more effective to ask, "Please give me an example of how you operated independently at your previous job."

Candidate: Yes, I do.

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself a self-starter or someone who needs a managerial nudge every now and then?

Candidate: I am definitely a self-starter.

This question does not give worthwhile information because it telegraphs the desired response. Moreover, the answer, although obvious, is not (or cannot be) checked for truthfulness.

Interviewer: That's good, because we value self-starters and independent thinkers.

Here the interviewer might have said, "Give me an example of a situation at Lowe Bidd where you had to be a self-starter."

In this position, negotiating with our suppliers will be a critical part of your duties.

It is a major mistake for the interviewer to say anything that might be interpreted as a commitment for employment. He should have said, "a critical part of the duties in this position."

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As a manufacturing operation, what we pay for parts often determines our profit margin. This is quite different from what you did at Lowe Bidd. Do you think you could handle it?

Candidate: Yes, of course.

Interviewer: So negotiating won't present any problems?

This sequence of questions serves no purpose except to take up time while the interviewer is mentally engaged in devising his next question. Without adequate preparation—which includes a preselected battery of questions—the interview will probably contain many such irrelevant questions to hide the fact that the interviewer is preoccupied with question generation.

Candidate: Well, my boss thought I was pretty good at it.

Interviewer: How do you feel about your negotiating skills?

Candidate: I think I am a very good negotiator.

Interviewer: I figured as much. You look the part.

Candidate: Do I?

Interviewer: Oh, yes. You have that straight-in-the-eyeball look, along with a firm, confident voice. I take it that you did negotiate with suppliers on price.

Interviewers too often make impulsive conclusions and generalizations based on a candidate's physical characteristics. It shows how interviewers' biases may work against them by influencing them to hire a candidate based on appearance ("looks the part"), verbal facility ("thinks well on their feet"), apparent values ("sounded honest and forthright"), or superficial behavior ("looked me straight in the eye").

Candidate: Well . . . um . . . err . . . now and then.

Interviewer: What else did you negotiate on?

Candidate: Most often on terms, sometimes on delivery dates, and once in a while on shipping costs.

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Interviewer: So negotiating will not present any problems for you?

Here is another assumption followed by an obvious hesitation by the candidate (known as “free information”) that should be followed up. The interviewer might ask, “Tell me about your favorite price negotiation strategies” or “Describe a particularly challenging negotiating situation.” He needs to obtain a clearer picture of what and how she actually negotiates. The question he used is useless.

Candidate: No.

Interviewer: What about human relations?

Candidate: I beg your pardon?

Throughout this interview, there are abundant examples of poor sequencing of questions. This one is particularly noticeable. When an interviewer’s questions jump from area to area, the result is superficial data from many areas of the candidate’s background but no in-depth knowledge of any one area.

Interviewer: What I mean is, how do you get along with all the people you work with—not just the suppliers and customers, but internally, especially with coworkers and upper management?

Candidate: I never had any problems. We all got along well.

Interviewer: Did you ever have a conflict situation with any of your coworkers?

Candidate: Well, umm, no, not really.

Here, the candidate gives an evasive response that should be pursued. This question should have been, “Tell me about a time when you had a conflict situation with a coworker. How did you handle it?” The difference is between reaching for the

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candidate's actual experience and finding out if the candidate knows the textbook answer. The interviewer has not discovered anything about the candidate's ability to manage conflict.

Interviewer: Suppose you did have a conflict with someone; how would you handle it?

Candidate: I'd go talk with the person and see if we could work things out.

Interviewer: We go to great lengths to ensure that every department works together for the good of the company. We regard cooperation and teamwork of critical importance here.

Candidate: I think that's very important too. At Lowe Bidd, my boss used to say all the time that interdepartmental cooperation was job number one.

Interviewer: Are you a team player or do you consider yourself as more of a loner type?

This question gives no worthwhile information because it telegraphs the desired response. If the candidate wants the job offer, she must affirm that she is a team player. A question such as, "What responsibilities do you believe you have toward your peers in other areas of the company?" might bring forth interesting information. After the candidate answers, a good follow-up question might be, "How were those responsibilities carried out?"

Candidate: I think I am a very good team player.

Interviewer: That's good. Your success here will depend on that. Was there anything you particularly did not like about your job with Lowe Bidd Construction?

Here the interviewer has again said something in a way that might be construed as a commitment for employment. This is
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also another example of poor sequencing of questions. Without designing a structure beforehand that controls the flow of the exchange, the interviewer skips from one topic to another, gaining only shallow information about the candidate's experience and abilities.

Candidate: Nothing really . . . except that . . . well . . . there are always times when tempers get short because there's more to do than one can possibly accomplish within the allotted time frame.

Interviewer: But that's a part of every job, isn't it?

Candidate: It doesn't need to be if everyone would just do their job and make a little effort at being organized.

Interviewer: I think you're absolutely right about that. For some people, however, being organized is almost impossible.

Here the interviewer gives the candidate evaluative feedback. It is not the function of the interviewer to hold up his or her end of the conversation by commenting on, agreeing with, or disputing what the candidate has said. The interview is not a social event; the interviewer's opinions are of no concern here.

Candidate: I'm a very organized person. I plan my work carefully so that every detail is handled in an orderly manner and each project is completed on time. It really bothers me when other people's lack of planning puts me under pressure.

Interviewer: How did you handle that kind of pressure?

This is a good question.

Candidate: I just did my job. If it was necessary, I just worked overtime. But everything was completed when it was supposed to be.

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Interviewer: Did you talk to those people who created the problem?

This is a good follow-up question.

Candidate: I didn't want to make matters worse. If I made them angry, they could make things very difficult and unpleasant for me.

This very interesting response should be thoroughly examined. It may have a bearing on how the candidate typically handles conflict. The interviewer fails to follow up by asking, "How do you determine which difficult situations require you to speak up?"

Interviewer: What was the most difficult part of your job with Lowe Bidd Construction?

This is a good question.

Candidate: Client specification changes.

Interviewer: I thought you didn't interact directly with customers.

This is a good follow-up to gain clarity on what was said.

Candidate: No, never directly, but sometimes clients would make changes to their contract specifications after everything had been negotiated and purchased. Making those revisions created a ton of extra paperwork, to say nothing of the problems it created with the suppliers, especially if they had already started production of the items I had originally ordered. Believe me, it was a mess.

Interviewer: But you took care of it.

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Why not ask the candidate, "How specifically did you handle such situations?"

Candidate: Yes. I had to. That was my job.

Interviewer: We consider our suppliers every bit as important to the success of our business as our customers.

This is information the candidate does not need at this point.

We try to build long-term relationships with both groups. We will happily make a supplier our exclusive source on a particular part if they give us both their best price and a product that meets our specifications. Our customers make us their sole source when we show that we offer a quality product—in other words, a product that meets their specifications.

The interviewer is talking too much.

When problems occur with either group, it is critical that we resolve the issues without alienating either party and, of course, without putting the company in a financial hole.

Candidate: That's really interesting. At Lowe Bidd, we were encouraged always to shop around for the best price.

Interviewer: Did you ever visit any of Lowe Bidd's construction sites?

Here is another poor transition.

Candidate: Yes. Once in a while.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy that?

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This is a useless question because it doesn't generate any useful information. A better question here would be, "What did you learn as a result of your site visits?" or "What purpose did your site visits serve?"

Candidate: Yes, I did. It was always very interesting to see how the items I had purchased for the building actually got incorporated into the final product.

Interviewer: Well, unfortunately, you won't be able to identify the individual parts you negotiate for in our finished products. Everything's internal. However, you will be expected to visit the production lines frequently to get a feel for how everything comes together. The line foreman can then show you what happens when we get parts that don't quite meet specifications.

The interviewer is talking too much. Here again is an imbedded assurance of employment.

How would you feel about that?

Candidate: Sounds great! I'm sure I'd enjoy that very much.

This is another question that serves no purpose except to take up time. The question telegraphs the desired response; if the candidate wants the job offer, she must answer in the affirmative.

Interviewer: I've seen the name of the company at many commercial building sites in the city. Was Lowe Bidd involved in other types of construction?

This is another bad segue. In addition, the new topic doesn't add any information to the evaluation process.

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Candidate: You mean like private homes?

Interviewer: Yes.

Candidate: No. Just commercial.

Interviewer: How long have you been with Lowe Bidd?

Here we have a series of direct questions that limit the amount of information received. They also discourage the candidate from speaking freely, prevent the interviewer from learning how the candidate thinks, and, when used back-to-back, make the exchange seem like an interrogation rather than an interview. Moreover, the answers to all of these questions can probably be found on the resume.

Candidate: About 11 years. It was my first job out of college.

Interviewer: Have you been in purchasing all that time?

Candidate: No.

Interviewer: How long have you been in the purchasing role?

Candidate: Just the last three years.

Interviewer: What did you do before that?

Candidate: I sort of ran the office operations.

What does "sort of ran the office" mean? This interesting comment needs to be explored.

Interviewer: It states on your resume [looks at the candidate's resume] that you are looking for a "better opportunity"?

Candidate: Yes. I want something more challenging, and your position sounds like something I would find both challenging and rewarding.

Interviewer: What made you decide that your present position no longer held any challenge for you? Did you suddenly feel that things were becoming routine? Did you ask your boss for more challenging assignments? Did your job change recently?

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The interviewer has again asked several related questions at the same time. When faced with multiple questions, the candidate will invariably respond only to the last one in the series. Generally, the first question in the series (an open-ended question) is the most important one, and it goes unanswered.

Candidate: Yes, it did.

Interviewer: How did it change?

Candidate: The federal restrictions and building codes regarding fire safety and such have created more standardization requirements on the kinds of items I was in charge of purchasing.

Interviewer: Did that mean you had fewer sources from whom you could purchase items? Or was it that there were fewer specialty items that could be specified in the building contracts? Or was it that you had to determine whether the specialty item designated actually met code?

These are multiple-choice questions for which the interviewer has furnished the candidate with a handy laundry list of possible responses. Because it is the interviewer's population of responses, one can't be sure what the candidate's real answer is.

Candidate: Mostly the second—fewer items could be designated.

Interviewer: Why did you find the job less rewarding? Was it because you had a decreasing amount to do? Was it because you had fewer opportunities to make decisions? Or was it because you feared your job might be eliminated?

Candidate: There was less decision making.

Interviewer: Here's an interesting question for you. Suppose you went to the North Pole for six dark months of solitude. You would have all the provisions

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necessary to sustain life, but you could take only three personal computer disks with you. What three would you take and why?

Many interviewers have a “magic question” that they like to ask. Such questions, when answered, are supposed to provide penetrating information regarding the candidate’s psyche, personality, and general attitude toward life. This is such a question. It is really an excuse for not doing the difficult investigative work an effective interview requires.

Candidate: The Holy Bible for inspiration, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for mental stimulation, and something on exercise and fitness to help keep me physically fit.

Interviewer: We all have strengths and weaknesses. Tell me about your weaknesses.

This is a favorite question for most interviewers. It actually says, “Please give me a reason for not hiring you.” A bright candidate would have to be an idiot to respond to that question honestly. What candidates usually do is pick a strength that they think the interviewer values and talk about that in semi-negative terms. A better question might be, “What do you consider your greatest strengths to be?” followed by “Where do you feel less competent?”

Candidate: People tell me I’m relentless on details; that I overdo it sometimes.

Interviewer: Do you think you overdo it?

Candidate: No. Never. It’s what they pay me to do. That’s my job—making sure that all the items specified in the contract are purchased exactly as the contract stipulates. My coworkers are not held to the exacting standards that I am. They just don’t understand.

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This comment should be followed up. A good question might be, "Please give me a specific example that illustrates how your standards were exact while the standards of others were not."

Interviewer: I'm delighted to hear that you are detail oriented. Attention to details will be critical in this job. As you may already know, in manufacturing, one part that is just a little too large or a wee bit too small may make the entire product fail. Sometimes, a supplier will try to push a part on us that doesn't quite meet spec.

The interviewer is talking too much.

They may even offer the parts to us at a reduced price. The person in this job must be able to refuse those parts without alienating the supplier. There aren't many suppliers who make the parts we use, so we have to be careful how we say "no" when parts don't meet spec. Do you think you could handle that kind of thing?

This is another question that provides no worthwhile information. If the candidate wants the job offer, she must answer in the affirmative. The interviewer should ask, "When a supplier did not meet your expectations, how did you handle that situation?"

Candidate: Absolutely!

Interviewer: Suppose you had a supplier that wanted you to accept a load of parts that did not quite meet spec. How would you handle that?

Candidate: I'd tell him we could not accept the shipment and risk jeopardizing our production. However, if it did happen again, I'd look for another supplier.

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Interviewer: Would you threaten him with that?

Here the interviewer misses a great opportunity to role-play with the candidate, where the interviewer takes the role of the devious supplier.

Candidate: Probably not.

Interviewer: Did situations like this happen to you at Lowe Bidd?

Candidate: I really wasn't dealing with those kinds of specifications. My suppliers might want me to accept brass-plated fixtures when the contract specified solid-brass fixtures. One time a supplier offered me a give-away low price on ceramic tile when the contract specified a particular brand of linoleum.

Interviewer: Did you present the option to your boss or the client?

Candidate: No. I didn't have any dealings with the clients. I just made sure that what was specified in the contract got purchased.

Here is the second example where the candidate had an opportunity to use some initiative and step beyond the narrow boundaries of her job to negotiate or problem solve. Once again she chose not to do so.

Interviewer: Well, do you have any questions for me?

Candidate: Yes, I do. Does this job require knowledge of accounting procedures?

Interviewer: Well, you know, I'm not sure. I don't think so. You would be expected to understand exactly what we need and how much we should pay in order that the finished product can be competitively priced. That way we can make a reasonable profit on it.

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The interviewer is not 100% clear on what a candidate for this position must have (competencies, knowledge, or skills) in order to be successful in the job.

Candidate: Would I be told what that price was?

Interviewer: Not exactly. You would be working with our suppliers, our engineering team, and of course the production manager. It would be a team effort to secure the best part for the lowest price.

Candidate: A team effort? That sounds . . . um . . . quite . . . um . . . challenging.

This is free information and should be followed up with a question such as, "What do you think would be especially challenging about working that way?"

Interviewer: You've worked on teams before where all members participated in the decision-making process, haven't you?

This is a poor question as illustrated by the response to it. A more effective question might be, "Describe a situation where you worked on a team where decision making was involved."

Candidate: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Do you prefer working alone or in a team?

Candidate: Well, it all depends on the task involved. Some tasks are most effectively handled by one person. Other tasks are better handled by a team.

The candidate did not answer the question. The interviewer did not follow up. An appropriate follow-up question might be, "Give me an example of a situation where you were working with a team on a problem that might have been better handled by a single individual."

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Interviewer: Do you have any other questions?

Candidate: Yes. When do you expect to be making a hiring decision?

Interviewer: Probably by the end of next week. However, if you do not hear from me or human resources by that time, please feel free to give me a call. I want to thank you very much for coming in to see us today. I am very impressed with your background and experience. I do think you would fit right in here, but I still have several other candidates to interview.

The interviewer should not say anything that could be interpreted as a commitment to hire.

Candidate: Thank you very much for the interview. I shall look forward to hearing from you.

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■ NOTES

1. David DeVries, "Executive Selection: Advances but No Progress," *Issues and Observations Newsletter* (Center for Creative Leadership) 12, no. 4 (1992):2-5.
2. Reported by Edward Betof, *Just Promoted! How to Survive and Thrive in Your First Twelve Months as a Manager* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).
3. Melvin Sorcher, *Predicting Executive Success: What It Takes to Make It in Senior Management* (New York: Wiley, 1985); David DeVries and Randall White, "Making the Wrong Choice: Failure in the Selection of Senior-Level Managers," *Issues and Observations Newsletter* (Center for Creative Leadership) 10, no. 1 (1990): 1-5; DeVries, "Executive Selection."

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