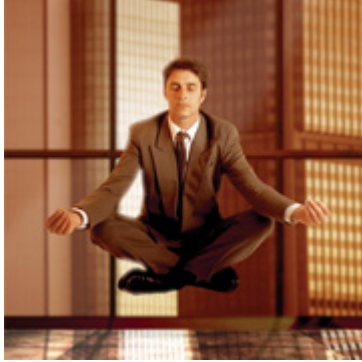


Show me your talent

Evaluating candidates through role-playing

By Marcus Miller



Most people treat an interview as a reality game, in which the employer asks questions and the candidate gives answers. Seasoned candidates hide behind their interview game face and revise or interpret their past employment history to suit the questions. On the other side of the table, the employer asks complex questions to hopefully reveal whether the candidate is right for the job. The process does little to determine the abilities of the candidate.

There is a more effective way to determine if a candidate understands the essence of the job and whether they have the innate skills, experience and personal attributes to achieve success. We have found role-plays can give insight into a candidate's technical skills and their personal charisma while under stress. This process puts the candidate into a more conducive context to gain the information you need to evaluate them.

Core challenges

Role-plays reveal whether a customer service candidate can manage the irate customer, if a sales candidate is persistent, persuasive and tenacious, or if a financial analyst can handle a curve ball that takes the interview in an unexpected direction. The scenarios are endless.

The role-playing process starts with an examination of the job. Every position has a core challenge or purpose, such as increasing revenue, improving account penetration or handling service issues. Based on quandaries or past scenarios that relate to these challenges, you can formulate a real life role-play that demonstrates the candidate's *modus operandi* for dealing with these issues.

Role-plays can take several different forms such as a unique scenario embedded in an interview or a full presentation scheduled for another time. The candidate needs adequate time to prepare and to "get into character." Start by giving them an overview that sets the stage for the encounter they will face, and invite them to ask any questions for further clarification. A simple role-play for entry-level candidates could be a hypothetical question — "What would you do if ...?" The answer will reveal their instinctive reasoning and how they balance their own convictions versus possible outcomes for the company. For extended scenarios, walk the candidate through the role-play and give them product information to take home to prepare with.

When a candidate steps into an extended role-play we have found those candidates who have a passion for the scenario behave quite differently than those who don't. People with passion demand more from themselves. They come to the task better prepared and they want to arrive at the right outcome in a clear, organized and effective manner.

In character

A major software vendor selling on-demand computer services has a well-developed recruiting process. Prospective candidates first meet with HR and line sales managers for the skills qualifications. For the next step, selected candidates are invited to conduct a role-play web demonstration to close a fictional deal with a set of C-level decision makers. Candidates are given a full packet of product information, a pre-presentation package and a written overview of the scenario they will address. They are asked to prepare a final presentation to close a new client on a major sale.

The key executives perform the various characters in the role-play through a link with the on-line presentation. Additional information and scripts that are revealed during the presentation are worked out beforehand. Every effort is made to make the candidate comfortable and free of distractions so they can focus on the role-play. We recommend that the players and applicant stay in character for the entire presentation,

treating the situation as a realistic one. In the final evaluation the hiring executives are able to see how the candidate handles objections, stress and the technical competencies required for the position.

Delivering the value proposition

Another approach to role-playing involves turning the entire sales recruiting process into the ultimate role-play game. The recruiting process is set up to parallel the typical sales cycle in which each stage of the process draws on the candidate to demonstrate the key behaviours, skills and knowledge of a senior business developer.

In the qualifying interview with the recruiter, the candidate is told what to expect and that the hiring manager will be playing the role of a buyer. The process starts with a discovery telephone interview with the line manager to determine the appropriateness of the fit. The onus is on the candidate to sell their skills and attributes, and to close for the face-to-face meeting with key decision makers.

The next step is a structured interview with lots of selling and listening, ending with a close for the meeting with the executive buyer. At the executive level the agenda is once again a structured interview with a close for the offer and negotiation phase. At each stage the candidate must move the interview process along, handle objections about skills and experience and deliver the value proposition of why they are a good fit for the position. This approach has been very successful in identifying candidates who are excellent at closing, can drive the sales process to the decision maker and who demonstrate an aggressive approach to their work.

Role-playing gets the interviewer away from vague, canned answers to precise ones, with a much clearer impression of candidates' personalities and traits. The body language, demeanor and passion of candidates reveals a lot about their true abilities and fit for the job.

Marcus Miller (Marcus.Miller@LEAPJob.com) is the president of LEAPJob, a recruiting and consulting firm. LEAPJob helps its clients build top performing sales teams.

Elements of successful role-plays

Role-play interviewing is a unique strategy to further understand the unique traits of your candidates. You will see their innate skills, judgment and knowledge in a stressful situation and determine which person best fits your job profile.

Preparation

Develop a simple outline of the scenario. Use a situation that is real and appropriate for the job.

Purpose

Focus the challenge of the role-play on the essence of the job profile. This lets the candidate demonstrate their problem-solving skills, personality and knowledge.

Job competencies

Create a scenario that has enough depth that the candidates can use their imaginations, backgrounds and experiences to express their style and approach.

Structure

Create an agenda for the role-play that is not freeform, but has a structure for evaluating and comparing the results of each candidate's efforts.

Selection

Measure the outcome of the role-play and compare the appropriateness to the job profile.

