

# KinheadPartners Perspectives

## INTERVIEWING 401

### ZERO DEFECTS HIRING - Some Tools

Best people win, so a critical executive skill is the ability to find and hire “best” talent. There is no reason for a performance bell curve in any business group. They are either all great people functioning at a high level, or they aren’t. To ensure consistency in hiring great performers and avoid hiring mistakes, there are just a few issues to be aware of and evaluate.

In our experience, executives generally feel comfortable with their interviewing style and skills, and rely on their own intellect and instincts to intuitively catch issues not specifically addressed and identified in the interviews. The danger lies in casual and general interview discussions, allowed to unfold as they will, without an interview plan or specific objectives.

The goal should be Zero Defects in hiring, yet in many companies, there is little evidence of a process, a method applied consistently as with any other process, to ensure that the right information is gathered and evaluated every time. Fortunately, putting a process in place, for yourself, your group or the entire organization, is simple and straightforward.

Interviewing is not complicated, but people and organizations are. And for years now the US corporate executive failure rate (as identified in two national surveys we track) has been in excess of 40% in the first 18 months. This is an embarrassing statistic, especially for organizations that are process-driven in most other areas. And the cost of those failures is staggering.

In the case of commercial talent – our world – general managers and marketing and sales leaders are professional presenters and therefore skilled interviewers, very capable of selling themselves effectively and avoiding potential negatives. But getting the right information required in interviewing these people is less an issue of technique, as it is of knowing in advance what you want to learn, then asking questions directly to get that information. The highly skilled interviewer will gain valuable insights, but so will the prepared interviewer.

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### **An Assessment Approach**

It can be useful to consider four aspects of assessing talent – fit for position, fit for organization, long term fit, and quality of candidate. Fit for position is straightforward enough, given a well thought-out and well-written job description. We can provide a template to help build a process for writing job descriptions to ensure all critical issues are included. Position description documents often spell out minimal qualifications, when they should focus on the qualifications of the “best” talent available for the particular position. And we think they should contain first year performance expectations to stimulate discussion during interviews.

Fit for the organization is less clear, because corporate culture is the biggest talent-killer of all. While hiring executives know their organizations and have a strong sense of the culture and what kinds of people do well there, it can be helpful to have that information in written form that can be referred to when evaluating candidates for key positions.

When thinking of long-term fit for the organization, most of us tend to focus on how much runway a candidate may have ahead of him or her - the promotability factor – and companies generally do a good job of thinking those issues through. The other side of the long term fit equation, and equally important, often does not get the attention it should, and this has to do with whether the company has the appetite and ability to meet a top candidate’s long term challenge needs. The question should be asked, “Can we keep him or her?”

Hiring executives should understand a candidate’s personal growth goals – where he wants and expects to be in 3 or 5 years – and then make a brutally realistic evaluation of whether the organization can or will get him there. If not, then the company will lose the candidate as soon as he realizes his goals cannot be met. This is especially true given today’s global demand for “best” talent.

Candidate quality is more complex, and we could fill pages with adjectives describing the ideal candidate for key positions, but that hardly constitutes a repeatable process. In interviewing and assessing candidates, we can’t know all there is to know about the individual, because the variables are infinite. But we can ensure that we cover the most important bases with each person we interview, so that we have enough of the right information to be comfortable there will be no surprises. Given a reasonable and insightful list of factors to assess in the individual, and a similar list of

corporate culture issues that might rule a candidate in or out, or impact performance, we can eliminate costly hiring mistakes. At the very least, these two lists can help us cover bases in second interviews not addressed in the first round. This is simple, easy to build and execute and enforce downstream in the organization, and it ensures consistency in interviewing and information-gathering on key candidates.

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### **Some Factors to Consider**

We pulled a list of specific attributes we consider critical from our assessment process, and listed them below with our thinking on each. This is by no means comprehensive, and includes just assessment points that are often overlooked or misperceived. This can be helpful when referred to during or after each interview you conduct.

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### **Drive**

Drive is always the first principal, especially in evaluating commercial talent, because driven people find a way, and can overcome voids in their skill sets and background. Understanding why an individual is driven to succeed is equally important, because it helps shape a manager’s style and interactions with others. And this knowledge can help you anticipate

and manage the new hire. We prefer to see more to an individual's motivation than just a competitive nature, or raw ambition (desire for wealth, power or status), because these are sometimes accompanied by negative or controlling behaviors and authoritarian management styles.

### **Intense Resolve/High Personal Standards**

As obvious as this seems, there are some surprises here. We want individuals who will settle for nothing less than excellence and peoples' best work, but a tendency towards perfectionism is counterproductive. Perfectionists tend not to delegate, and can be unreasonably demanding of staff when they do. To know what to expect on the job, it's important to understand an individual's concept of a job well-done.

### **Intellect**

Once again, what appears to be a simple issue just isn't so. "Best" talent is always bright, but truly gifted people intellectually can be poorly suited to many business situations. The super-bright can lack frustration-tolerance, be impatient and abrupt with those less quick than themselves, think and talk faster than many people can follow, and because they can see what is theoretically possible, they may aspire to goals impossible to meet in a typical corporate setting, with its inherent inefficiencies.

A Hay Group study a few years ago indicated that the super-bright do not succeed in great numbers, and that some of the other traits mentioned here were far more causative of success in business. Divisional CEOs were shown to possess (versus other managers) 2x in self confidence, 2x in achievement orientation, 7x in self-control, 3x in empathy, and 3.5x in team work ability. Yet they were only slightly more analytical and conceptual. The difference was in understanding feelings, motivating and managing emotions in

themselves and others, in greater self-awareness and self-control and greater social awareness.

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### **History of Hiring Great People**

What is a manager's concept of "best", and where does he source talent? Be sure to assess a manager's *hiring* track record – the quality of the people he has hired in the past. Try to get a sense for how a manager will build his team, with what kind of people, and ask for specifics. Even human resources leaders often neglect this important measure. Ideally, our managers should be hiring stronger people than themselves, and this happens most often when dictated by a specific mandate from on high.

### **Self-Insight**

Effective executives know themselves. They can hire the right advisors and put the right people in the right chairs because they understand their own skill and talent deficiencies.

### **Humility**

We have a strong preference for low ego needs in executives. Ego puts self before the organization, and often fosters self-promoters. Those with significant ego and power needs may be rigid or authoritarian, and have poor listening skills. Nobody has all the answers and it's best to avoid those who may think they do, in favor of others better suited to teaming and collaborative environments.

### **Genuineness and Authenticity**

Consider whether there is any artifice in a candidate's presentation of him or herself. Do you believe all he has said? Is there a BS factor or can you take what he says at face value? Does he discuss shortcomings candidly? Does he volunteer opinions or play it safe in the interview? Is his style direct and does he have the courage to show you who he really is, or is he mentally editing what might be his normal responses? Is there one persona for public consumption and another off the job? It's difficult to have comfort hiring without knowing who a candidate really is.

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### **Strategic and Creative Thinking**

I suspect none of us are born to strategic thinking; it's a function of training, and this is the basis for our strong bias (in commercial leaders) for business school training, early experience with powerhouse marketing organizations, or both. We look for evidence of disciplined and imaginative thinking focused on those leverage points that will best achieve business goals. Commercial leaders today must be able to see the entire system of value creation from end to end, and to understand the interdependencies within the chain. And they must especially be able to envision a variety of future scenarios very different from the present. This requires setting aside, at least temporarily, conventional wisdom, industry formulas and current operating assumptions.

### **Personal Balance**

Driven, talented people are always work-centered, subordinating other parts of their lives to work demands. And for the most part this works well for their employers. But too much imbalance in the work-life area or evidence of a personal life in disarray will

impact performance eventually. Well-adjusted people perform better, manage themselves better and tend to have better personal insight.

It pays to spend some time exploring the personal side with candidates to understand who they are off the job and how they manage other parts of their lives. This gives you insight into personal values and beliefs, and how an individual prioritizes.

### **Ownership**

Effective executives may take credit for successes, but they also own failures fully. No business career is without failure. Look for candor in response to tough issues and interviewing questions, and watch for excuses and blaming.

### **Personal Warmth**

People enjoy working with likeable people, approachable people, people they can trust, who listen well, have balanced perspective, and who generally care about their associates. This makes for strong team players and leaders, as opposed to individuals who may be aloof or otherwise inaccessible.

### **Track Record**

We want leaders who have *personally* made a difference in past assignments. It is important to get beneath the surface in discussions on past performance, to challenge specific track record claims when you have doubts, and ultimately to verify those claims in reference checking. During boom years, executives may do well without having any real personal input. The trick is to ask for and understand how much an individual's personal work contributed to project, group or market success. Market share gains and revenue growth can be attributed to a price increase or a poorly-managed competitor, for example. Ask candidates to tell you about the difference they personally made and how successes were achieved. If the right answers aren't

forthcoming, keep asking until you are satisfied with the response. Having to probe too much for straight answers tells a story of its own.

### **Flexibility (in the face of uncertainty, ambiguity and change)**

Never have we faced so much uncertainty. Forecasting has become a short-term exercise, and globalization has added tremendous complexity to nearly every business of any scale. Imagination and willingness to change have become new executive requirements.

### **Optimism and Outlook**

Evaluating a candidate's basic outlook can lead to insights. Look for a realistic optimist, who focuses on opportunities rather than obstacles. He will stay on the offensive but defend effectively, and he will expect and get positive outcomes. Beware the defensive posture and mindset. Pessimism is contagious.

### **Resiliency (frustration tolerance)**

In any business, battles will be lost and discouragement can be debilitating, especially in a poor business climate. Ask candidates about the toughest parts of past positions, and stay on topic long enough to understand how he or she bounces back from short-term setbacks. If unsure, ask how the individual deals with discouragement. It's amazing how few people can resist the truth when asked directly, no matter how damaging their answer might be.

### **Discipline and Prioritization**

Given a relentless work load, success is very often a matter of attending to today's few critical priorities.

### **Multiple Business Cultures**

Candidates with just a single employer in their background present us with a dilemma. Transitioning to a new company is always challenging, and we prefer evidence of transition success. An individual who has

proven himself repeatedly, in different environments, is more likely to adapt and transition quickly and easily. Many single-culture candidates, especially those who have been with one company for a long while, do not transition well, and their resumes very often show two or more short stints after leaving an employer of long-standing.

In the same vein, an individual looking to transition from a very large company to a significantly smaller one raises the additional issue of whether he or she can function with less support and fewer resources.

### **Passion**

We are best at what we feel strongly about. Find passion in a candidate and you will probably also find vision and the ability to share that vision effectively and convincingly.

### **Clear Thought Processes**

We tend not to think in these terms with respect to candidates, but the value in doing so is that this focuses on issues that might seem minor but can be symptomatic of real performance issues. This trait covers a lot of ground, from candidates drawing wrong conclusions, to failure to finish one subject before moving on to another, to randomness in discussions, over-talking or the opposite, providing incomplete answers to questions. Most of us in business conversations are respectful of our own time and the time of those we engage, so we are succinct, providing just the information needed, getting to bottom lines and closing out subjects as quickly as we can, then moving on. This is effective communications, and not every executive is capable in this area. Ask yourself if the candidate you just spoke with was clear, direct and brief, yet thorough and complete in his communications and communication style.

In commercial leaders, analytical skills matter. In problem solving, the analytical mind starts with the objective, yet it's amazing how many

executives fail this simple test, and jump to knee-jerk suggestions for solutions. Consider presenting a business dilemma to candidates and ask them how they would *approach* solving the problem (as opposed to how they would solve it).

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### **The Dark Side**

This is something to think about after an interview. Did you pick up any evidence of derailing behaviors, of unusual insecurity or other emotional issues that might impact performance, or leadership capability? There are effective CEOs out there that don't do well in this measure, and manage to compensate in some way, but employing such an individual can be a project.

### **Ethics and Trust**

You either trust an individual or you don't. In the case of key direct reports, it can be helpful to ask yourself if you would be comfortable leaving the show in his or her hands if you had to take an unexpected leave.

Two other points are worth mentioning with respect to a zero-defects hiring process. The first is my observation that in many cases, ineffective people are hired despite knowledge of deficiencies. In simple words, the company hired them anyway. Remember, there is always another candidate!

Secondly, as a final quality check, make reference checks count. Be sure that the individual checking the references has the

training to do so effectively and be specific with him or her on issues you want more information on. Press for insights, have track record claims verified and be sure he or she delves into areas of concern. If need be, do them yourself. It's time well-spent.

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