



INTERVIEWING

for Performance

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More and more companies are seeking to hire people who have experience with certain industries, specific applications or tools, or even specific style guides. To support these hiring efforts, managers should be prepared well in advance of the interview with basic information about the position and the desired behaviors of the perfect employee. This article shows managers how to define performance criteria, create an interviewing tool to evaluate candidates, design questions to identify the candidate's expected performance, and anticipate actual performance rather than identify a skill inventory.

Required Competencies

Your first step is to define what your team needs to be successful. Whether

you are creating a team from scratch or filling an open position, you need to determine which skills are needed and which you can realistically expect to find in a single individual.

Let's say your team has a junior writer, two senior writers, a graphic designer, an instructional designer, and an editor. Assume that you've already analyzed which roles your team needs to play in order to accomplish its goals. You have qualified people in all these roles, but one of your senior writers is retiring. You might be able to take on a new person with skills anywhere from those of a junior writer to a senior writer, but you decide to base your decision on applicant resumes and interviews. You might be able to promote your existing junior writer or find a qualified senior writer.

Let's assume the open position entails the following:

- Developing and maintaining a variety

of technical and user documentation, including end-user support and internal process documentation

- Analyzing and organizing tasks necessary to complete technical communication projects
- Proactively supporting project goals by maintaining a positive work environment, encouraging collaboration, and remaining open to new ideas
- Working independently or on a team

The person you hire will be expected to perform these duties every day. Let's say that about 85 percent of the new hire's time will be spent on development and maintenance tasks, and about 15 percent on analysis. From the analysis of your team, you determine that the person who fills this position needs the following experience and competencies:

- At least three years' experience writing and editing system or end-user

documentation. (Note that you have listed both writing and editing—can you realistically expect one person to do both exceptionally well?)

- At least five years' advanced experience using MS Office, including *Word*, *Excel*, and *PowerPoint*.
- At least one year's experience using Adobe *FrameMaker*.
- At least two years' experience using TechSmith *SnagIt* and Macromedia *Fireworks*.
- A plus for one or more years' experience with Macromedia *RoboHelp*.
- Demonstrated excellent communication, interviewing, and interpersonal skills.
- Strong customer focus and an understanding of how documentation is crucial to customers' success.
- Demonstrated ability to work independently and as a team member.
- Demonstrated skills in decision making, problem solving, innovative thinking, and dealing with ambiguity and conflict.
- Bachelor's degree, preferably in English or technical writing.

You might decide that the right person for this role is probably more experienced than a novice writer, but is not a senior-level writer with people or project management experience. You want this person to have room to grow within the company. Notice also that you have not indicated a specific typing speed. From experience you may have found that the most competent typists are not necessarily good writers, and vice versa. Be prepared to discuss typing speeds during the interview if you're unsure about the candidate's skills in this area.

Think about which competencies or experiences are negotiable. Will your company allow you to be flexible? For example, will you be allowed to hire a candidate with ten years' experience but no degree? Are you willing to forego the need for formal college education? Does a candidate who has experience in Adobe *Photoshop* but not Macromedia *Fireworks* have knowledge that can be applied to your desired tool? Or does the candidate understand only the rote steps of specific activities? This type of

negotiation must be considered prior to interviews so you can be prepared to ask useful, probing questions.

Reviewing Resumes

Your first scan of the resume should let you know which requirements the candidate meets. For example, you can review the employment history and see that the candidate has at least three years' experience writing and editing system or end-user documentation. You may be able to see that he or she has experience with specific tools. You should be able to determine whether the candidate meets the educational requirements for the position. For areas where the resume is not explicit, you must ask specific questions to ensure that the candidate has the skill level you need.

Next, scan the candidate's cover letter and resume. You have asked for excellent communication, interviewing, and interpersonal skills. Does the letter or resume have grammatical errors? If a summary or career objective is presented, how well does the candidate structure ideas into comprehensive sentences? Did the candidate even prepare the resume, or did an external company create it? If the resume is presented from a recruiting firm that may have edited it, be prepared to ask for a copy of the original.

When scheduling an interview, ask the candidate to bring samples of previous work. This allows you to review the candidate's grammar and sentence structure. During the interview, be sure to ask about the extent of the candidate's participation in creating the samples. Did the candidate format a subject matter expert's writing, write from a summary or flesh out a topic based on use of an application or process, or simply edit the document?

Preparing Questions

The position description includes terms such as *developing*, *maintaining*, *analyzing*, and *organizing*. You defined competencies within the requirements, including teamwork, customer focus, and skills in specific tools. You must prepare for the interview with specific questions focused on a candidate's ex-

perience and knowledge of each area, and look for verbal cues indicating that the candidate has the competencies you need.

Teamwork

For example, to evaluate the candidate's aptitude for teamwork, you might ask the candidate to share an experience where he or she cooperated with others to achieve a common purpose: "Describe a situation where you had to share information or resources with others on the team who needed help."

This question allows the candidate to describe any situation from his or her experience. If you're not satisfied by the candidate's answer, follow up with more probing questions, such as the following:

- How did you handle the situation?
- What led you to take that approach?
- What did you learn from that experience?
- How have you used that learning?

Each of these questions forces the candidate to explore the experience in detail, allowing you more insight into the candidate's abilities.

So, now what? How do you know if the candidate has the experience you need?

Try creating a form that contains your initial question, your probing questions, and an area to jot down notes. To help you determine whether a candidate is open to teamwork, include a scale such as the one in Figure 1. During the interview, listen for evidence of the candidate's teamwork abilities and mark the area within the scale where the person's experience falls.

Suppose the candidate answers, "I was working on a project where I had to share information within the team while coaching a team member on where to get additional information. The other team member found additional research and came back with some striking differences in methods, so we worked together to alter an existing process to use some of the new information."

In this response, the candidate displays sharing of information and openness to change. There may be no

evidence in this response that the candidate values others, but the willingness to coach another employee on where additional information can be found is a trait you would want in your team.

Try to create one question for each competency that will allow the candidate to discuss him- or herself. This type of question places some pressure on the candidate by requiring specific details and allows you to evaluate the candidate's verbal communication skills. The form helps you create a structured questioning process, which ensures that each candidate is treated equally and fairly. In addition, your human resources or legal department can review this form for compliance with corporate policy.

One drawback of using this form may be that it restricts your ability to omit and add questions. However, you can always add more probing questions based on tangents the candidate may introduce—just be sure to document these additional questions and the answers in your notes section.

Customer Focus

The person you hire will need to keep customer needs and requirements paramount when making decisions. You want the candidate's experience to prove that he or she has taken personal ownership of customer problems and can differentiate between the customer's wants and needs. A question for this area might be, "Tell me about a time you formed and maintained an ongoing relationship with a customer," or "Tell me about a time you had to deal with an unreasonable request from a customer. How did you react?" You could use the same probing questions listed in the section on teamwork.

The scale for these questions might look like Figure 2.

Commitment

When you want to know about a candidate's commitment and ability to follow through with tasks, you might ask, "Describe a situation where you were given multiple priorities," or "Tell me about a time when you were in a situation in which no clear accountability or leadership role had been assigned." For

Figure 1

Aptitude for Teamwork	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Strives for win/win	Takes stand on every issue
Shares information	Talks around issues
Values other people	Stays in comfort zone
Open to change	Resistant to change

Figure 2

Customer Focus	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Works with customers to develop realistic plans	Inward focus
Achieves business objectives	Lacks understanding of business
Focuses on providing efficient and cost-effective services	Low customer knowledge
Understands business drivers and climate	Slow to react

Figure 3

Commitment	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Steps in and takes charge/assumes leadership	Dodges responsibility
Assumes a supporting subordinate role with an existing team lead	Hangs back
Identifies problems, then fixes	Attacks people, passes blame
Goes beyond status quo	Seeks the easy way out

Figure 4

Multitasking Skills	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Takes initiative/assumes leadership	Dodges responsibility
Displays flexibility	Hangs back
Identifies problems, then fixes	Attacks people, passes blame
Goes beyond status quo	Seeks the easy way out

Figure 5

Tool Skill Level	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Candidate discusses a high-level problem	Problem beneath skill set required
Clearly identifies issues and effort to accomplish task	Hangs back/talks around issue
Takes initiative to learn more	Stays in comfort zone
Ability to apply knowledge	Lacks understanding of application
Acknowledges limitations; sought assistance when needed	Passes blame

Figure 6

Knowledge of Online Help	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Cites comparison of at least two types of communication (HTML, tri-pane, computer-based training informational database, embedded, standalone)	Lacks understanding of online communication
Understands business issues and constraints	Lacks understanding of business use
Displays conceptual thinking	Confused about concepts

Figure 7

Analytical Ability	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Displays analytical or critical thinking	Confused about types or analysis
Displays technical knowledge	Unable to communicate
Identifies problems, then fixes	Passes blame
Displays initiative	Dodges responsibility

these questions, your scale may look like Figure 3.

Multitasking

You want the candidate to be capable of working on multiple tasks at one time. To probe the candidate’s skills in

these areas, you might ask, “Describe a situation where you had to handle more than one project at a time.” Following are potential probing questions:

- What was your role?
- What resources did you need or use?
- What risks did you take? Did you feel

comfortable taking that risk? Why or why not?

- What was your key contribution?
- What were your results?
- Was the customer satisfied?
- What lessons did you learn?
- How have you used that learning?

Your scale may look similar to Figure 4 for your questions about commitment.

Tool Usage

For tool competencies, you want the candidate to have experience with MS Word. If you want a demonstrated knowledge of the tool but have no way to test the candidate, you could ask, “Rate your skill level with MS Word 2000 on a scale of one to five, with five being the best. Discuss a situation where you had a problem with formatting a document to explain your rating.”

For this competency, use the same probing questions you used for skills and knowledge. You want to determine whether the candidate will be the person in the office whom everyone goes to for information. Did the candidate take risks—that is, did he or she take time away from a project to explore a new area of competency? If so, was the customer satisfied in the end? Or, after hours of exploring, did the candidate give up and call the help desk? Was too much time taken to explore, or not enough? Try the scale in Figure 5.

You identified knowledge of *RoboHelp* as a plus. Considering that there are other online documentation tools, focus on the candidate’s ability to analyze situations and make appropriate recommendations for online documentation sets. The candidate may need knowledge of documentation tools and the ability to analyze customer needs and requirements. Ask the candidate, “Describe a time when you recommended a client develop online documentation and why.”

Use the scale in Figure 6 and the same probing questions you asked to evaluate tool usage, possibly supplemented with the following: “Why did you choose that recommendation? What criteria did you consider? What did the customer end up doing?”

Analytical Ability

You want a candidate who can perform technical analysis and make appropriate judgments and recommendations. Try asking the following question: “Describe a situation where you had a documentation problem or request that led you to perform a technical analysis to determine a solution.” Use the same set of probing questions and consider the scale shown in Figure 7.

Technical Interviewing Skills

If the candidate may have to conduct technical interviews, you might ask, “Tell me about a time you prepared for a client interview regarding a new documentation project.” Your scale might look like Figure 8.

Attitude

You should also create a list of appropriate questions to help you understand the candidate’s attitude and motivations:

- Why are you interested in this position?
- What contributions do you feel you can make? (Alternatively: Why should I hire you for this position?)
- What do you want to achieve (personally) from this assignment, besides money?
- What would your past managers say about your computer skills?
- What is your major weakness when dealing with clients?
- What is your major weakness when dealing with teammates?
- How do you respond when you see a teammate not holding up his or her

end of the project and the manager seems to make no effort to resolve what you see to be a team-breaking situation?

Questions like these allow you to explore areas not associated with performance but that help you learn what you can expect from the candidate.

You can concentrate on the performance of the candidate in past positions to assist in preparing a mental picture of how this person will perform on your team.

Performance Interviewing Standards

However you define your interview questions, most human resource leaders will tell you that it is always good form to ask all candidates the same set of basic questions so you can compare candidates in a constructive way and maintain proof that you treated all candidates equally. You can concentrate on the performance of the candidate in past positions to assist in preparing a mental picture of how this person will perform on your team.

In some environments, team interviews are appropriate. Provide each member of the team with a copy of the form containing questions and scales so that each person within the team understands what you are seeking and why. Then, after each interview, meet with your co-interviewers to discuss the responses and their interpretation of those responses.

Evaluating

After the interview, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did the candidate ask probing questions to understand what you asked?
- Did the candidate refer to a set of prepared questions after you concluded your questions?
- Did the candidate display good verbal communication skills?
- Did the candidate display confidence?
- Did the candidate display knowledge of the technical communication field?
- Did the candidate display the ability to get along with co-workers?
- Did the candidate display maturity?
- Did the candidate display creativity?

All Set

Preparing your interview questions based on the performance you desire allows you to use hypothetical and open-ended questions. Using job-related questions allows you to evaluate the candidate on job-related knowledge and skills, education, and work experience. If you come prepared with the right questions, your interview should result in the information you need to select the most qualified, knowledgeable, and productive new team member. ①

Figure 8

Technical Interviewing Skills	
High	Low
5 ————— 4 ————— 3 ————— 2 ————— 1	
Reviews related literature/existing docs	Seeks the “easy way”/no risk
Outlines assumed needs/creates tentative layout	Relies on client to provide all information
Develops interview guide/questions to ask	Displays negative past interviews

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