

Principles of Peer Interviewing

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Abstract

Peer interviewing is a process for hiring employees that utilizes the people within the organization to gain a more complete idea of a candidate's appropriateness for a position. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach are discussed and follow up procedures are provided to assist organizations with employee retention and satisfaction. The approach is presented as an option for managers and supervisors to use as a tool to facilitate better hiring practices and also as a way to encourage employee commitment to the organization.

Introduction

Quint Studer, performance excellence consultant and a “fire starter” for the healthcare industry, is working to inspire organizations to hardwire excellence into the way they do business. There are many components to his plan, but according to Studer, “it all starts with selection” (2003, p.168). In today's industry, managers and their staff must have many critical skills in order to be successful. One of the basics is to build individual accountability by asking employees to participate in hiring their co-workers. This is done through a process called “peer interviewing.” Peer interviewing is a selection process where team members are allowed to evaluate job candidates and assist in their hiring. Many successful companies such as Motorola and IBM use this process (Pentilla, 2005). It is not a process that a company would want to implement unless they had trained their leaders and assured that all individuals involved were medium to high performers (Studer, 2003).

Effective Interviewing Teams

Effective interviewing teams are representative of the organization, the work group, and the position being filled. Frase-Blunt (2001, p. 72) offers advice for interviewing teams, “Look for diversity in age, race, etc., but also look [for differences] in thought, geography, and maturity. Blend newcomers with old-timers.” Successful peer interviews start with trained interviewers. Training should focus on gaining an understanding of the selection process, developing performance standards, listening to briefings on illegal questions, drafting behavioral- based questions, and learning interviewing techniques. Many of these types of training workshops exist and can be conducted by internal or external facilitators (Studer, 2003; Allen & Thrasher, 1998).

Organizational Fit

It is important to understand that the manager should only present peer teams with candidates whom they would like to see hired. Candidates also need to be sufficiently briefed and informed so that they may be prepared for a potentially new interview experience (Frase-Blunt, 2001). The experience can change or reinforce the candidate’s opinion about the company. One candidate who was interviewing for an open Information Technology (IT) position at Amazon.com said, “We learned plenty about each other, and the experience reinforced my opinion of the company as a very structured place full of smart people. I saw that clearly for myself” (Frase-Blunt, 2001, p. 77).

Advantages to Peer Interviewing

Advantages to peer interviewing are numerous. With this technique, most of the employees that will have constant contact with the new hire will already like the person. Employees will also feel more comfortable when it comes time to start working with the employee because they know they have confidence in the new hire’s abilities. Personal credentials of new employees can become evident during the peer interview (Montgomery, 1996). This goes beyond the written resume and gets at subtleties of the candidate’s style. Evaluating the “softer” elements such as body language, how things are said, and reactions to difficult questions will go a long way toward identifying how this person will fit in and perform with the group (Montgomery, 1996). Peer interviews can also help develop a sense of cohesiveness among interviewers (Allen & Thrasher, 1998). Participation in peer interviewing allows employees to have ownership in the selection process. This

has been shown to decrease turn over rates because they have a vested interest in making sure the person offered the position will be successful and stay on long-term (Pentilla, 2005).

Disadvantages to Peer Interviewing

There are some disadvantages to the peer interviewing process and times when it is not always the most appropriate method. Teams may experience problems when there are several qualified candidates and only one open position. Also, time spent preparing for and conducting peer interviews can become too much for employees when they have a lot of other responsibilities (Allen & Thrasher, 1998). When an individual is asked to leave a company, a team interview for their replacement may not be in the best interest of the candidate. Often times, emotions can run high if they are involved in the reason the previous person was terminated (Frase-Blunt, 2001). Other disadvantages include loss in production time due to employees being away from their job during the interview process and the intimidation factor for the candidate when a panel of several people interviews them.

The Studer Way

Quint Studer (2003) takes the peer interviewing process one step further. His steps to success start before the application is even filled out. Potential employees can be asked to sign an agreement expressing the core values and performance standards of a company. This agreement ensures that the employee knows if their behaviors align to those of the company. This way, potential employees who cannot accept or live with the performance standards know there is a disconnect in advance and can choose other career opportunities.

To ensure that the interview team shares the same understanding about what they are looking for in a candidate, Studer devised a decision matrix that emphasizes key criteria for the position and key attributes needed. The decision matrix can be critical to a successful hire as it ensures consistency and accuracy when questioning potential candidates. It is particularly effective when the potential candidate comes from inside the organization and may already have relationships built with the interviewers, but emotional decisions are more difficult to make when using this method.

Behavior-Based Interviewing

Behavior-based interviewing is also a critical component in conducting peer interviews. The best way to determine how an employee will conduct his or herself in a future job is by looking at past behavior (“It’s not your grandfather’s”, 2005). Teams select their questions (based on the decision matrix) prior to the interview. This method allows a manager to collect responses and formulate a decision based on a consistent format. Managers must trust their employees’ decisions and should support any candidate that is recommended (since they only allowed qualified candidates to be interviewed in the first place).

Traditional behavior-based interviews are said to predict a successful candidate about half the time (Frase-Blunt, 2001). Team-based interviewing can help to develop unified and cohesive opinions that are thought through and based on multiple perspectives, rather than one individual’s opinion. Teams can relate to and understand how each candidate can fit in with the corporate culture and what kind of qualities would make them successful.

Continuing the Relationship

Once the right employee is hired, relations with peers do not end. Studer (2003) outlines a critical component to hardwiring excellence into all employees that also helps with employee retention rates. New employees meet with the manager again on their 30th and 90th days of employment. Four questions are asked during those meetings that focus on key areas and opportunities for growth for both the new employee and the manager. First, the employee is asked how his or her role in the workplace compares to what was said during the interview. Next, the employee is asked what the company is doing well and who has been the most helpful. Following this question, employees are asked what kinds of things were done at their previous job that could make the new job better. Finally, employees are asked if they are uncomfortable with any part of or person associated with the job and if that might cause them to consider leaving. Any suggestions or considerations should be followed up on and taken very seriously. This process facilitates an open line of communication and ensures that the employee knows that the company values them as an individual as well as their opinions. This process has been shown to significantly decrease employee turnover rate among all participating organizations (Studer, 2003).

Conclusion

Evolving workplace cultures call for educated and experienced workers. Peer interviews allow a company to hire the right people at the right time. Hiring the right people ensures the success of any organization. The process of peer interviewing allows an organization to not only hire the most qualified person for the job but also the person who is the best fit for the organization's goals and other personnel. Providing the peers with an opportunity to handpick the people they work with can strengthen the current employees' commitment to the organization and create a community atmosphere that facilitates optimum productivity. Continuous refinements will need to be made to tailor a peer interview team to meet the needs of each organization.

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