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Innovative Interviews: Speed Dating Meets Recruiting

By **Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR**, *September 2007*

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Companies seeking new ways to efficiently cull through quantities of candidates may decide to try the recruiting equivalent to speed dating-speed interviews. But a good first impression alone won't get a candidate a second "date," experts say. To master this type of interview, candidates must be able to quickly sell who they are and what makes them a perfect match for the company.

Speed interviews offer companies a great way to save time by creating opportunities to consider a lot of candidates in a shorter amount of time, says Laura DeCarlo, president and executive director of **Career Directors International (CDI)**, a professional association for career professionals. To be successful, candidates need to give the interviewer insights into their experience that will take them beyond a surface impression.

Like speed dating, "a typical speed interview meeting could include up to 10-15 job seekers, each of whom move along to a new interviewer at the commencement of a bell," according to the Career Industry Mega Trends research study released in 2007 by CDI. But speed interviews are still a fairly uncommon practice, according to the study, which reports that just 2 percent of HR professionals surveyed use speed interviews.

"With the advent of new technologies, interviews have taken some different shapes and forms, but the traditional elements remain," says Laura M. Labovich, president of A & E Consulting LLC in Potomac Falls, Va., who contributed to the CDI report. "The classic interviews still happen," she says, particularly at smaller companies. "Larger companies may do speed interviews or job fair interviews."

Labovich says speed interviews are used when companies are hiring large numbers of workers in similar jobs. "I don't usually see HR positions filled in bulk; they are usually one-off positions," she says. However, she says, the speed-interview method could be used to streamline the process if a group of hiring managers and decision makers could be brought together at the same time as a group of candidates for the same HR position.

Ready for Anything

An organized record of job experiences-good and bad-can help candidates prepare for tough interviewing situations, according to Lin Blair, SPHR, HR project leader for Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Little Rock, Ark. "Keep a record of behavioral situations so you can talk about situations where you have had to demonstrate leadership or show results, she says. "Give specific examples."

To prepare for speed interviews and other networking opportunities, applicants should develop a 30-second elevator speech, Blair says. "It's important to succinctly and quickly describe who you are and what your strengths are," she says. "What are three words a co-worker would use to describe you?"

Labovich suggests that candidates touch on the most critical aspects of their experience when they have a chance to speak. They need core messages that define who they are and what differentiates them from the competition, she says.

Although candidates might think a quick list of titles is the best way to describe their experience in a speed-interviewing situation, Blair disagrees: "It's not your title. It's what you've done and what your strengths are that are most important," she says.

"You can live in your body your whole life but that doesn't mean you are going to know how to market it," DeCarlo says. Anytime job seekers go into an interview, they should have planned a few "sound bites" about their key strengths, achievements and success stories, she says. Ultimately the interviewer wants to hear an answer to "tell me why I should pick you," she adds.

DeCarlo stresses the importance of planning responses to questions that come up in most interviews. "Telling a quick story to emphasize a response can help cement how you know something," she says.

Prioritizing Key Messages

Labovich says HR people might feel a need to rush through a speed interview because they can see themselves in the interviewer's place.

As a result HR candidates should always discuss their most relevant experience first when time is limited, Blair says: "If you have been a generalist and you are seeking a position that is more focused, you need to lead with that kind of experience."

"Companies want to know what you've done and been successful at-or have learned from," Blair adds. "It's very important that you know who you are and that you keep track of the things you've done and can put them in bottom-line or business terms." The ultimate goal of the speed interview is to make sure applicants impress upon the interviewers their core skill set. But Labovich cautions candidates against trying to over communicate. "Speed interviews tend to involve casual exchanges," she says, so candidates should be a bit more laid-back in their responses.

"Speed interviews favor a more outgoing personality," Labovich says. "People who are on the shy side are not going to naturally do as well unless they prepare in advance."

In the end, Blair says applicants should always remember the basics -- to smile and be prepared with good questions -- no matter what type of interview takes place.

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is online writer/editor for SHRM.

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