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Innovative Interviews: Diving into the Fishbowl

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

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A traditional, one-on-one interview can reveal much about a candidate's experience, achievements and personality. To learn how an individual interacts in a true-to-life work setting, however, employers sometimes ask applicants to work with others to solve business-related cases, a method commonly known as fishbowl interviews. Experts say the ability to work with a team is the key skill candidates should demonstrate in such situations.

According to the Career Industry Mega Trends research study released in 2007 by **Career Directors International (CDI)**, an association for career professionals, a fishbowl interview "requires the use of analytical skills and an ability to both identify key business issues and present a structured problem-solving methodology with which to approach them."

Fishbowl interviews are usually interactive and involve an applicant paired with either a group of staff members or a group of other applicants, according to Laura DeCarlo, president and executive director of CDI. "When a group of applicants is brought together in a fishbowl setting, the employer is able to see who emerges as the natural leader and who works best with an unplanned team," she says.

The CDI report says fishbowl interviews are most common in fields such as management consulting because candidates can demonstrate how they would "actually perform in the position by using relevant skills from business acumen to problem-solving, analysis, brainstorming, strategic planning, communication and creativity."

The report also says, "The job seeker should be prepared to engage in Q&A, as the interviewer will often delve further for details and challenges. Job seekers should compose a strategic answer that shows creativity, analytical skill, business acumen and attempts to present a solution to the problem."

Strategies for Success

Candidates can outshine the competition during a fishbowl interview by using specific examples to demonstrate their experience while they work out the details of the case with their group, according to Laura M. Labovich, president of A & E Consulting LLC in Potomac Falls, Va. For example, if the assigned case were to involve the redesign of an employee benefits plan, the HR candidate could say, "When I led an employee benefits audit at a manufacturing firm two years ago, we started with an analysis of the demographics of the current workforce."

"'Tell me about a time when you...' is really what interviewers mean when they ask a question," Labovich says. "Telling a story or sharing an example shows that you've already done that job, and that you're just going to be doing it somewhere else."

"You must know who you are before going into any type of interview that involves interacting with a group," says Lin Blair, SPHR, HR project leader for Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Little Rock. She says it is important to play up personal strengths and guard against weaknesses. "If you know you are an introvert, you have to guard against not talking enough," she says.

Blair says her company's assessment center uses a fishbowl experience for management positions. Participants are given a situation and, as a group, have to resolve it, she says. Observers watch for how participants solved the problem and who took on the role of leader, she adds. "It shows how well they get things done with others and through others."

It's particularly important to understand group dynamics before a fishbowl interview occurs, Blair says. Everyone in the group should have an opportunity to speak, for example.

But Blair says women need to guard against being too polite in group interviews. She says she has observed women defer to male participants in such settings, though they never would have done so in any other circumstance. Women also tend to end their sentences on a higher note than the rest of the sentence, Blair says,

which can make them sound uncertain.

Blair says that staying current in all aspects of HR can help applicants prepare for case-related assessments such as fishbowl interviews. "Reading through situations on the **SHRM bulletin board** can give you insights into how to handle a situation," she says, particularly for those whose duties have become more specialized over time.

DeCarlo likens the fishbowl interview to some reality TV shows in which participants are placed together in teams to accomplish certain tasks. "Some people get thrown off by failing to listen to the challenge given or failing to respect others," she says. Her suggestions:

- Really listen to what's being requested.
- Be polite to colleagues and let them have their say, but don't let them take over.
- Ask lots of questions when you have the opportunity to do so.
- Don't be afraid to brainstorm out loud. Let them hear your train of thought.

"Start asking questions such as 'would we have _____ to work with?' and 'what is our benchmark?' and 'what would the solution look like?' " DeCarlo says. "You need to get information flowing from the participants."

"You're looking for a starting point," DeCarlo says. "If you already have ideas, say 'what if we were to do something like this?'"

"If you've made it to an interview for a position you are qualified for, there is a need to be able to think on your feet and share your ideas in a professional manner," DeCarlo says. "At the end of the day, companies look for teamwork."

No one should go cold into a case-related assessment such as a fishbowl interview, experts agree. "Ask the recruiter 'what kind of interview can I look forward to?'" Labovich says. "We as HR people are smart and know how to get information for our clients and employees -- we need to learn to get the same information for ourselves."

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

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