



# Foolproof Hiring: Fact or Fiction?

Ask the Right Questions  
to Get the Whole Picture

by Scott Christensen

**S**taffing is arguably the single most critical function of management. Mistakes made in the hiring process bring risk to the organization. It is difficult to recover from a bad hire and could be costly. Consider the ongoing fallout and issues that you've had with staff when one employee has exhibited toxic negativity. It could be said that nothing we do as managers is more critically important than hiring the right staff.

It is very common for managers to shortchange the time they spend in the hiring process. Market conditions will dictate whether we are able to have interviews that last for hours during multiple days with an applicant. Not all positions will warrant such an investment in time. I am known for IT staff interviews that routinely take three hours or more to conduct. Some might say I'm crazy, but I submit that it is a worthwhile investment in time to do so. In many cases, we will spend more waking hours per business day with the subordinates we hire than we would our own spouses, yet I routinely see managers complacently making hiring decisions after an interview that lasts less than an hour. I would not dream of entering into a long-term relationship without an appropriate courtship to get to know the other person and determine if we were compatible. So why do we routinely jump to conclusions in our workplace hiring practices?

In his book “Hiring Smart,” Dr. Pierre Mornell cites what he calls Mornell’s Maxim: **“The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior.”** Mornell describes a system that accurately predicts the future performance of job candidates. While at first blush this sounds like “magic,” his insights point to a realistic approach to an almost zero-defect hiring methodology.

Mornell’s approach was inspired by Tony Razzano, a master talent scout for the San Francisco 49ers and the reason for their string of successful Super Bowl wins in the 1980s. Razzano once selected a punter after observing him successfully kick 10 field goals with his shoes on and another 10 field goals with his shoes off in an empty stadium. Unfortunately, the punter couldn’t handle the pressure of rushing linemen, poor snaps and crowd noise, and he was cut after several mediocre seasons. Following this hiring mistake, Razzano changed his selection system by insisting on seeing a player in action for at least 200 plays before recruiting him. This new system resulted in harvesting Joe Montana and Jerry Rice, two keys to the 49ers winning legacy and among the finest players in National Football League history.

Mornell suggests that as business professionals we must translate the sports analogy presented in his example and apply it to our hiring situation. While we might not see 200 “plays,” we have plenty of opportunity to see “snapshots” of a candidate’s performance before, during and after the interview process. It is not the answer to one or two specific interview questions that should get a candidate the job offer, but the consistent responses to all of the questions that create the “portfolio” that makes him or her seem desirable. People don’t change much. They are either detail-oriented, or they are not. They are either people-oriented, or they are not. If we identify the skills and personality attributes that are indicators of success for the job for which we are interviewing, our goal should be to ask questions in such a way as to reveal if the candidate possesses the right combination of those skills and attributes to predict that he or she will be successful. One easy way to do this is to look closely at those around us who are the most successful for a given job role and examine what makes them so successful. Customer service skills might top my list for a level 1 helpdesk analyst, troubleshooting skills might lead the list for another role and perseverance for yet another.

## Screen Before You Call

I tend to split the received resumes into three piles (A, B, C). Those in the “C” pile are in some way not qualified or desirable, and they are not looked at again. This ideally should be the largest pile. The “A” pile should represent the “cream of the crop.” This pile should have very few resumes in it. Decisiveness at this step will allow you to limit the set of candidates with whom you will take additional steps and time. The rest go in the “B” pile, which can be tapped if the “A” pile is exhausted for any reason. I usually have 30-minute phone interviews with the candidates in the “A” pile, particularly if there are more than a handful of candidates. These are one-on-one phone calls with

candidates simply to establish if they are worth bringing in and spending the time on an in-person interview.

## Don’t Gloss Over Reference Checks

Treat reference checks as a real step in the evaluation process. Too many managers pick their candidates out in advance with an offer to hire “subject to satisfactory reference checks.” This step is often reduced to a line item check list to verify such items as schools attended and degrees conferred. We are fortunate in the legal field to be part of a small community. As the “Cheers” saying goes, everybody knows your name. Often candidates have past experience at other law firms listed on their resumé. When this is the case, and you know individuals at that firm closely enough, I suggest that you reverse the order and perform the reference check early in the hiring process — after resumé screening/phone interviews, but before the in-person interview. Who would better be able to answer questions about the candidates’ skills and attributes than someone that worked with them? Whether or not the candidates have provided specific names as references is unimportant — their reputations will precede them! A note of warning: Do not call their present employers unless they’ve specifically made it clear that it is acceptable to do so. To do otherwise could be dangerous to your health.

## Interview as a Team

I prefer to interview candidates as part of a team (usually myself and the hiring manager). While this takes more time, I think there is significant value to the process. This format allows more than one person to see the same candidate’s reactions to each question, and to see them through different eyes. It is common to have different interpretations as to the quality of individual answers to certain questions. This gives an additional level of objectivity that is not present with only one interviewer. It also forces the interviewers to stay with the program together, not easily allowing one interviewer to throw in the proverbial towel just because he or she “really didn’t like” a response. The interviewing managers learn to play questions off of one another and learn from each other, rapidly building their skills in the behavioral interviewing process.

## Ask the Right Questions

It is critical that we construct our interview processes to be successful. An important aspect of this is having the right interview questions geared toward what the applicant did and how he or she did it in their previous jobs. Interview questions such as, “Give me three words to describe yourself,” provide no substantive information about the candidate.

A favorite question of mine is, “Tell me about the single most important project of which you are the proudest in your

career.” If the response is to detail a tech support call where the candidate resolved a driver problem, I have an immediate understanding of the technical and strategic level at which the applicant plays.

It is common for candidates to respond to interview questions by “we’ing.” We’ing is responding to all questions with “we did this” and “we did that.” As the interviewer, you must immediately press candidates for further clarification about exactly what they did themselves and what they did as part of a team. This quickly establishes if the applicants had the ability to regularly tackle projects or solve complex problems independently in their previous roles. For team projects, they should be further pressed about what their roles as team members were, how they interacted with the other members

on the team, why they were chosen for their roles and not other roles, etc. This gives you insight into their relative strength compared to their team members, and provides you with a few more valuable “snapshots.”

The technique of continuing to probe ever deeper for answers to more specific questions is often referred to as “peeling the onion.” Candidates usually adapt to this technique very early in the interview process when they realize that vague responses about their job functions will be met with more detailed questions that ask for real-life examples of their specific actions. Candidates actually begin to enjoy the interview and open up in ways that are sometimes unanticipated. This happens because you are not asking questions that are difficult to answer. You are simply asking

## Questions, Questions and More Questions

We all have our favorite odd-ball interview questions to ask candidates, as demonstrated by the healthy response on one of ILTA’s E-Groups recently. Here are a few more of my favorites:

### **Do you have a computer at home, and what do you do on it?**

I have had candidates respond, “I do not have a computer because I do all of my Internet browsing at work.” Some candidates have said they own computers, but their use is limited to e-mail and a little shopping because they are usually “too tired” in the evenings to do any more computer work. Other applicants have given descriptions of the hardware devices they have running Windows, Linux and MAC O/S’s on a sophisticated home network along with detailed accounts of their last upgrade adventure. All of these answers will again provide you with a few “snapshots” of value.

### **What are you passionate about in your life?**

This question is fair play for everyone. Everyone should have an answer, and there is no wrong answer. What I’m looking for is an energetic response with examples that demonstrate a passion, whether you like aggressive downhill skiing, as I do, or you enjoy collecting coins, dolls or stamps. Candidates’ failure to show a suitable level of enthusiasm in their responses tells me something important about the candidates. If they can’t be enthusiastic about their self-chosen passion, perhaps they won’t be terribly enthusiastic about other things, including their job. A good snapshot, indeed.

### **My Dad is 70 years old. He is very non-technical. Describe the Internet to him in a few sentences.**

I love this question because it can be asked of any candidate for any position and is usually quite revealing. Answers that contain technical terms such as URL, IP address, web address, networks, domains or browsers show me that applicants probably don’t listen to or follow instructions very well, and might not be the best candidates for a customer-facing job such as a trainer or helpdesk analyst. Any candidates who can put together several articulate sentences proves to me that they can think and speak well on their feet, which is an important attribute in most IT jobs in legal environments.

### **Don’t ask “Do you handle stress well?” Ask, “Tell me about a time when an end user was extremely angry. What were the circumstances? How did you resolve the situation?”**

The response I’m looking for is two-fold. First, the candidates should be able to recall the technical details of the problems and how they were resolved, including the steps necessary for resolution. Those steps could include a response such as “I chose to depart from the established procedures and called a network engineer on his cell phone to solve the problem quickly, given what the end user had gone through. I truly felt sorry for them and felt this action was necessary.” You might find this response to be a positive or negative one, but the response will provide additional snapshots and help you decide if the candidate is a good match. **ILTA**

them to tell you stories about themselves in real life situations. Each story provides additional snapshots about exactly who the applicants are. It is not uncommon for candidates to tell me that their interview with me was unlike anything they have ever experienced before in their lives — yet it was enjoyable and fun at the same time!

## Listen, Listen and Listen More

A mistake that most managers make is talking far too much during an interview. As a general rule, you should spend 20 percent of your time talking and 80 percent of your time listening. In a tight employment market, you might need to spend some additional time “selling” the job to the right candidate, but try not to cut your listening time too short. Be attentive to even the smallest details. I once asked a programmer how his commute to the interview was and if he had any trouble finding our office. He responded that he had no trouble, he found the walk from the train station quite enjoyable and that it took 12.5 minutes to arrive at the office from the train station. This simple response gave me two valuable snapshots about him. His positive view of the walk being enjoyable told me something about his outlook on life. The fact that he timed his walk from the train station told me something about his attention to detail — an important attribute when seeking a successful programmer.

## The Technical vs. Fit Dilemma

Two fundamental questions must be answered about each candidate: “Can they do the job well?” and “Will they do the job well?” Each applicant will have a combination of technical and non-technical skills and attributes that will help answer these questions. I remember a discussion with an IT director at another firm. His philosophy was to hire the best technical candidates with almost no regard for personality, fit with the team or any other attribute. He simply hired the best technical people that he could find. When pressed, however, for the turnover ratio of his IT staff, he was forced to admit that it was terrible, more than three times that of my staff. The poor turnover ratio surely was detrimental to the productivity and effectiveness of his department. I rest my case. Certainly candidates need the right amount of skill and technical knowledge to be successful in any technology job. I focus on these areas very early in the interview. If the candidate fails this portion of the interview, I conclude our talks without investing any more time. If they are successful, we’ve already seen numerous snapshots that demonstrate they have the technical know-how to do the job.

The remainder of my interviews is spent on what I call “fit.” These are attributes that will determine if the potential new hire will do the job successfully. Questions will be geared more toward behavioral attributes such as attitude, ability to work independently, ability to work well with a team, leadership, ability to take and accept direction, acceptance of criticism, etc. It is not uncommon that the two final candidates for a job are quite different. Both will clearly possess the necessary technical skills.

Often one candidate will possess stronger technical abilities, however, while the other candidate will give a better “feeling” about how he or she would fit in with our team. While there are no perfect answers, the correct answer is always within the candidates in front of you. It’s up to you and your organization’s needs to decide which contender is the better fit.

## Take Your Time

It’s been said that **“job candidates are like paintings . . . they look great at first glance, but up close they don’t look as sharp.”** It’s necessary to just keep peeling the onion, and the answer will reveal itself to you. Take time to go through the hiring process. It’s that time that will allow you to feel comfortable that you’ve found the perfect match for your team. [ILTA](#)



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