

USE THEM TO SUPERCHARGE YOUR HIRING

THE HIRING SECRETS OF Google™



PAUL ENDRESS

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Recruiting at Google: Searching for Solutions that Work

With the economy slowly showing signs of recovery, many HR departments are starting to increase recruiting efforts to fill positions that have been left unfilled as well as newly created positions. While some organizations have dedicated recruiting departments, smaller companies often end up spending more on recruiting costs per hire compared to larger ones. HR advisory firm Bersin & Associates' survey found that large companies spend an average of \$1,949 per hire, while smaller organizations spend roughly \$3,665 per new employee. These numbers do not include training costs which the survey found were about a third of what recruiting costs were.

So while many companies are investing in finding the “right talent”, they aren’t doing much with them once they find them. This approach leaves many HR Managers banking on the “right talent” to be in it for the long haul so retention rates stay high. The question is how do you know the “right talent” is right for your organization? Is your organization’s recruiting process yielding results that make sense?

Google was getting really bad results from their recruiting and took action to solve the problem.

Recruiting the Best or Recruiting Mess?

Internet giant, Google, Inc., asked that very question. The company receives over 1 million resumes per year. Needless to say, recruiting at Google is kind of big deal. In 2013, Google was ranked 4th on Payscale’s list of U.S. companies with the shortest median employee tenure of 1.1 years. This was quite an alarming number considering the company’s recruiting budget was one of the largest in the world in 2005. Google was left searching for answers. It was unlikely that the short tenure of Google employees was related to compensation or benefits. In fact, the benefit package available to Google employees is often regarded as some of the best around. On-site medical care, fully paid 18 week maternity leave, and a decade long death benefit for spouses or domestic partners of Google employees are just a few of the perks available. Compensation is definitely competitive including a 10% raise for employees across the board in 2010. Even with all of these perks, something wasn’t adding up.

According to a case study conducted by Dr. John Sullivan, Google’s employee to recruiter ratio was hovering around 14: 1 at that time. Google’s recruiting process had become the thing of legends as hopeful candidates took the internet to share the details of the grueling and

somewhat strange interview process. So just what did the process entail? Interviews, interviews, oh, and possibly a few more interviews.

Candidates seeking employment with Google could face up to 29 interviews before receiving an offer. Yes, that's right, 29. Wondering what questions could possibly be left after the fourth or fifth round of interviews? To start, candidates needed to be very certain of their GPA. In the past, a candidate's GPA and performance in college—a top college that is, (state schools need not apply), held a lot of weight in Google's selection process. Candidates with decades of experience were asked to dust off the old transcripts.

In 2009, a candidate for a legal department interview with over 20 years' experience noted on Glassdoor.com, that a Google interview sought to verify her GPA with comments like, "are you sure your GPA is over 3.0 because we get a lot of people and find out later they don't have even a 3.0". The candidate noted that there was a great deal of emphasis put on her performance in college with little interest in her lengthy professional career. The old Google recruiting process also favored brainteasers to weed out candidates.

Many hopeful applicants passed through the doors at the company's Silicon Valley headquarters armed with academic accolades and a well-crafted professional summary only to be faced with questions like:

- Why are manhole covers round?
- How much should you charge to wash all the windows in Seattle?
- How many golf balls can fit in a school bus?
- Explain the significance of "dead beef".
- How many times a day does a clock's hands overlap?

Alyson Shontell recounted her interview experience for an Associate Product Marketing Manager position with Google for *Business Insider*, as a "nightmare". Shontell noted how her 3.6 college GPA seemed to be regarded as average at best by the Google hiring team. Her interview experience in 2009, included some of their infamous brain teasers that the recruiter even described as "strange" before posing each question. Shontell didn't make the cut after the second phone interview which challenged her to determine whether the number of college graduates seemed high compared to the number of people in the nation. Needless to say, the experience was a negative and didn't bode well for Google on the internet.

Lessons Learned

So what do questions like these say about the performance of a potential employee? Very little--in fact posing questions like these doesn't prove much more than a candidate can quickly solve a completely irrelevant problem. A quick solution is not always the best course of action for many of the issues an employee may face in the workplace. Furthermore, these questions gave candidates little opportunity to demonstrate the action they would take in scenarios related to the position.

Dismal tenures and a hefty recruiting budget prompted Google's senior V.P. of People Operations, Lazlo Bock, to search for answers to the company's recruiting plight. After reviewing the employee performance, tenure, and recruiting practices, Bock concluded that the brainteasers were "a complete waste of time" and "don't predict anything". Oh, and that GPA from the 1980s? Well, according to Bock, that wasn't a great indicator of on the job performance either. The company conducted a study that compared interview scores to job performance and found "zero relationship" between the two.

Searching For Answers ...In All the Wrong Places

Bock had identified the problems in the Google recruiting process. Clearly, double digit interviews, the resurrection of old college transcripts, and useless brain teasers, were not serving any purpose to the company other than wasting time. Not only were they wasting time, the average one year employee tenure was costing the company in more ways than one.

While brainteasers that had little or nothing to do with the job or the company seem pointless, certainly there was some purpose initially intended in asking them. Like many companies, Google knew they wanted to identify certain performance factors in their candidate screening process but just didn't know the right way to go about it. While these questions may have sought to determine a candidate's problem solving and critical thinking skills, they lacked correlation to the skill set needed to complete the job effectively.

Questions That Count

Armed with data demonstrating an irrelevant recruiting process, Google sought to develop an applicant screening process that helped the company select candidates that not only fit the company's culture but also could potentially support the goals and mission of the organization. Google's new recruiting process would no longer be based on useless mental challenges. Instead the company would employ recruiting techniques to determine learning ability, leadership potential, humility, and more. After dedicating so much time in evaluating candidates based on fictional scenarios, why did the company decide to focus on these

assessments? Bock told the *New York Times*, the company needs “emergent leaders” with an ownership mindset that drives problem solving—to solve a real problem that is.

Research has shown that the most effective interview techniques utilize behavioral based questions that require the candidate to answer and justify how they would approach an issue or task. The purpose for these questions is found in actual tasks or issues an applicant would likely face while on the job. In Google’s case, they received a lot of answers to questions that didn’t demonstrate how an applicant’s professional background or experience would support the needs of the organization. This disconnect was quite possibly the greatest flaw in their recruiting practices. Since determining that many of the techniques Google was using provided little insight into the work practices of candidate and no indication of future performance, the company has revitalized the recruiting process to utilize questions that provide some indication of potential in the areas the company values the most.

The new recruiting process heavily relies on behavioral based assessment questions within a standardized and uniform interviewing format. Bock recognized a need for the company to return to a more streamlined and uniformed process in order to eliminate recruiting tasks that simply were not effective. While Bock’s approach is not anything necessarily new to the recruiting industry, the execution of Google’s revised recruiting practices is applicable and easily implemented for most small and medium organizations as well.

Connecting the Candidate to the Company

What Works for Google

Google's new recruiting practices still seek to identify candidates that fit the organization's culture. The culture at Google is often referred to as "googleyness" by company. Google describes their working environment as one that encourages workers to be themselves, think outside of the box, and fosters collaboration with others. Behavioral based interview questions enable Google to assess candidates' responses in relation to how well it fits the "googleyness" working environment.

In addition to considering the working environment, the company also considered what qualities they were seeking from a potential employee no matter what the position. For Google, the merits that mattered most included cognitive ability, leadership potential, humility and ownership. Now the company seeks to find those candidates that have growth and development potential not only in their field but as a future leader as well. The company's new approach spends less time grilling candidates about their GPA and devotes more time uncovering how a candidate will respond when faced with adversity, challenges to their ideas, and ownership of their work. According to a Glassdoor.com review, some of the behavioral based questions that have replaced the brain teaser questions include:

- Why are you interested in working at Google?
- Tell me about a time when you overcame a challenge in the workplace?
- Have you ever improved the efficiency of a process/task at work?
- Tell me about a time when you spoke with a dissatisfied client and what did you do to appease them?
- How would you handle a conflict with a team member?
- Have you ever gone beyond your work requirements to help a team member?

By replacing academic performance evaluations and brain teasers with behavioral questions, Google is able to determine how a candidate is likely to react in relevant situations. In certain cases, there may not even be a "right" answer. The answer that most closely aligns with a solution that would support the organization the best is likely to hold the most weight in terms of a performance predictor. Including questions that requires a candidate to demonstrate their behavior and reactions allow them to demonstrate role related knowledge along with how the candidate thinks when solving problems.

This new approach also provides a more positive experience for the candidate as well.

According to another Glassdoor.com interview posting, the candidate described the process as

“great” noting that Google was “really helpful” during the process as well as “patient” and “kind”. Michele Spanuolo, another Google candidate hopeful described her experience as

“completely technical and straight to the point. He asked me several technical questions about security from the beginning, and I really appreciated that, because it made me feel confident and motivated. The questions were logically linked and I could tell that the interviewer was actually enjoying the discussion. My interview experience with Google has been really awesome, so thank you Google for that! Everybody has been really kind to me, and the questions have been very challenging and stimulating - I enjoyed every single minute there. I could tell that the interviewers were all very smart, stimulating and open to discussion. I received positive feedback by the hiring committee in exactly two weeks after the on-site interview.”

Accounts like these demonstrate how an effective interview process can encourage candidates to feel at ease with the process and highlight what they can offer an organization at the same time. Unorganized or unstructured interviews can be detrimental for both the candidate and the company. Google was able to improve their hiring process for both their company and candidates by examining their needs and clearly defining those to candidates.

Practical Practice

Companies should take the time and put pen to paper when it comes to identifying their unique working environment and what professional qualities lend to the company’s success. Much of this information can be found by examining the company’s culture. What if a company lacks a defined culture? HR leaders should look to the organization’s mission and vision statement for inspiration. What goals is the company trying to accomplish? How does this role support those goals? What qualities are required to be successful in this role?

For companies with limited recruiting resources, the training of managers and other members of personnel in behavioral based interviewing is an easy and economical way to improve the interview process. Behavioral based interviewing not only supports better candidate

assessment, it also helps companies avoid recruiting pitfalls that can cost the company money. Developing a behavioral interview includes the following steps:

Complete a Job Analysis

Job analysis requires an evaluation of the required skill set and behaviors to perform a job successfully. This evaluation will provide the foundation for behavioral interview questions.

Connect Job and Behaviors

Connecting required skill sets with behaviors relative to the position and the organization will provide guidance on how well a candidate's response will fit the needs of the organization. At this point, questions should be developed to capture how a candidate's responses align with organizational needs.

Develop a Response Ranking System

It's important to know how to evaluate the responses received from candidates. By developing a standardized ranking system, applicants can be evaluated uniformly based on the requirements of the position and organization.

Train Others

An effective recruiting process requires training. Any staff members who will be participating in the recruiting process should be well versed in the interview process and knowledgeable on how to evaluate candidate responses. It's also important for them to understand the role they are interviewing for and the needs and mission of the organization.

A Bit More of Behavior Based Interviewing

The behavior based interview relies on the idea that behavior does not significantly change over time. Past performance can provide some insight into what to expect in the future. For employment purposes, asking questions that require candidates to draw on past experiences and their reactions enable employers to better understand potential future performance. The most effective way to connect performance to a job is to understand the core competencies of the role. Core competencies will be specific to the job as well as the organization.

Competencies unique to the organization are behaviors that support the goals of the company and its culture. No matter what the job is, organizational core competencies relate to every

position with the company. Core competencies specific to a position focus on the behaviors required to be successful in a particular role.

Examples of core competencies include:

- Analytical skills
- Work Ethic
- Flexibility
- Leadership Skills
- Results Driven
- Customer Focus
- Multitasking

Behavioral based questions require candidates to respond to open ended questions to demonstrate how they have performed or responded in the past. Their response not only illustrates behaviors to expect in the future but also the level of their job knowledge and skill set. It's important to encourage candidates to provide specific answers rather than generalities. Ultimately the goal is to have candidates provide responses that discuss the circumstances that required them to take action, the action they took, and the results of their action.

While research confirms that behavioral based interviewing is an effective tool in evaluating candidates, it's important to remember that it is more effective in a structured interview setting. Unstructured interviews are less connected to the specific requirements of a job and generally consist of a basic overview of the candidate's previous work experience and education. While it possible to gain understanding of an applicant's background with this approach, it does not provide much evidence of future performance. Structured interviews required candidates to expand on their answers which provide a better sense of how they could potentially respond in similar situations. A structured interview offers a greater level of consistency and makes it easier to match candidates to the needs of the position and the organization.

When evaluating your current recruiting practices, it's important to determine if you are not only asking questions relevant to the specific position but also ones relevant to the organization. Does you interview process capture the right information for your organization? Behavioral based interview questions and assessments provide a greater indicator of future performance compared to other appraisal tools like education evaluations and brain teasers.

Google learned that while many could bring the skill set required for a position, their ability to get behind the top initiatives of the organization were lacking. Candidates should be assessed on not only if they can do the job but if they can do the job in a way that propels the company

in the direction it's moving in. Evaluate if the interview is a positive experience for the candidate. By providing a more positive interview experience, candidates feel more at ease to answer questions honestly. An interview process that fosters candid answers from applicants enables the company to better assess potential performance.

Have We Met Before?

What Works for Google

The old interview process at Google could have a candidate meeting with representatives from the company upwards of 20 times or more. Upon review of this practice, Google determined roughly four interviews enabled them to evaluate a candidate successfully enough to make an informed hiring decision. Any additional meetings rendered little to no return for the time and resources the company invested. After all, if the interviews being conducted were effective, why would so many be needed? Google found that by improving the quality of their interviews they could reduce the quantity of them. Current employees can get back to work which improved productivity and the candidate experience became a more streamlined process.

Practical Practice

Interviews require time and resources. It's important for companies to reap the benefits of an effective recruiting process without being bogged down by its complexities. Find the number of meetings with a candidate that produces the confidence required to make an appropriate hiring decision. For Google, four interviews told them most everything they needed to know. For other organizations, the number of meetings may be more or less but it's important to identify what the right amount is and stick to it. Often times managers can get stuck in "analysis paralysis" when it comes to candidate selection. Generally interviews that include effective behavioral based questions as part of a standardized interview process should limit the number of meetings required.

Let's Get Together...And Hire Someone!

What Works For Google

Google is committed to finding the right talent. For this reason, they review every resume they receive even though in any given year they may receive more than a million. The recruiting process typically begins with two phone interviews. The first interview serves as a screening tool and is conducted by a member of the recruiting department. During this time candidates receive a brief overview of the position and the interview process. If a candidate successfully answers preliminary questions regarding the position and their related background, a second phone interview is scheduled.

Often the second phone interview is conducted by someone in the same or similar position to the one the candidate is being considered for. By connecting candidates with current employees already in the same role, Google is able to provide the candidate with a clear picture of what the job will entail and the opportunities and challenges that may arise. Google is also able to better assess candidates in this way because a current employee may have better

insight into what solutions are feasible for a particular role compared to a representative in HR or a manager whose tasks are unrelated.

If a candidate is invited to interview onsite, they typically will meet with four or five people during that time. At Google, interviews typically last around 45 minutes. While many candidates regard the process as similar to a conversation, those involved in the Google interview process record their feedback on a standardized form which is later submitted to the hiring committee. According to Google, the hiring committee is composed of senior managers and directors along with employees with solid experience related to the open position. This approach supports Google's organizational effort to hire people that are able to collaborate well on multiple levels within the organization.

Recruiting at Google is essentially everyone's job at some point. Every potential offer goes before a member of senior level management for review. Why? Well, "googleyness" matters to Google. Their hiring efforts focus on selecting candidates who will likely be joining the organization for the long haul. It's important to them to hire individuals who can be successful in their working environment and who can help the company reach their goals at the same time. By including executive leaders in hiring decisions, each level in the organization takes ownership in the recruiting process.

Google considers ownership of one's work to be a vital quality for its employees. Executive involvement in recruiting insures a commitment to foster employee development at every level. Before anything can become official, compensation is approved by the compensation committee and one final stamp of approval comes from a top Google executive. Clearly this process invokes a great deal of checks and balances amongst impacted departments within the company. While this can appear extensive to some, for Google, this approach increases the vested interest of current employees and promotes the organization's culture in positive way.

Practical Practice

Organizations should strive to develop a structured and streamlined process that channels resources to positively support the recruiting process. By standardizing the interview process, it's easy to set clear expectation for both candidates and supporting staff. Phone interviews are a good way to screen applicants without wasting valuable time and resources. The phone screen provides a great opportunity for companies to educate candidates about their process and expectations as well as provide additional background information about the position.

Who participates in the interview process is equally as important as the process itself. Google's approach which includes employees currently in the same or similar role in the interview process is an excellent way to assess how well a candidate's skill set will fit a particular role.

This exercise makes the onsite interview an effective assessment tool in identifying candidates that will meet the needs of the organization. For some organizations it can be difficult to “rally the troops” when it comes to interviewing. It’s important to convey the significance of the each person’s role in the interview process and how it ties back to the overall mission of the organization. Some managers may be required to be “sold” on the idea of contributing to the recruiting process. In these cases, it’s important to remind them how an incompatible candidate can impact the organization and their department specifically.

While it may not be feasible for all organizations to have executive level management review every employment offer, organizational leaders should try to generate participation from different management levels when possible. Identify the key employees or department that will be most impacted when filling a position. If an organization’s culture already fosters a collaborative environment, incorporating recruiting and hiring decisions into the mix is easily accomplished.

Do Stay in Touch...Won’t You?

What Works for Google

Even the most streamlined recruiting process can take time. Scheduling conflicts, deadlines, and approval processes can dictate just how long the process can last. Google recognizes that their process can be lengthy and that candidates can grow restless waiting or status updates, or worse lose interest. Reviews on Glassdoor.com, indicate the process from start to finish average four to six weeks in length. For this reason, the company works hard to keep the lines of communication open with candidates and updates them regularly on their progress.

Practical Practice

It’s not uncommon to lose a top candidate due to a lengthy interview process. Candidates may receive other offers, lose interest, or assume the company is no longer interested in them. The best way to avoid the agony of “the one that got away” syndrome in recruiting is to keep candidates posted on their status in the process. This can be as basic as an e-mail or a more personal connection like a phone call. Either way, by touching base from time to time, an organization can gauge the level of interest the candidate has as well as expedite the process when needed. More often than not candidates are willing to delay accepting an offer if an alternative offer is in the works.

Putting It All Together

Effective recruiting strategies can definitely impact an organization in a positive way. Google’s previous hiring practices did not support the needs of the organization or enable them to effectively assess candidates. Recognizing a flawed process was only the first step in improving and revitalizing recruiting at Google. The organization understood that in order to cultivate a

workforce that fit their needs, they had to define what they consider “success”. For Google, success is coming up with solutions in new and innovative that involves a lot of great people along the way.

The best candidates can only be identified by companies who know their own identity. “Googleness” defines the Google culture and provides a compass to recruiting the right people for the right jobs. Organizations should build their recruiting practices on the foundation of their mission and long term goals. Once aligned, recruiting goals can easily be met by enlisting the investment of others within the organization.

Factors that influence potential future success are not necessarily found in puzzles and transcripts. Behavior may be the best indicator of future performance in most cases. Google calls upon staff members at many different levels within the organization to consider behaviors and skills together so that everyone is working toward building a better Google. Behaviors may hold the greatest weight when it comes to forecasting the future based on the past. Organizations can solve many of their recruiting dilemmas by simply searching from the inside.

Putting This To Use In Your Organization

1. Evaluate the results that you are getting from your current recruiting process.
2. Determine exactly what is required to succeed in a job.
3. Create standardized questions that elicit this information.
4. Develop a standardized ranking system for the answers that you receive to the interview questions.
5. Make sure that appropriate executives are involved in the hiring process.