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Peer Interviewing

Peer interviewing — including members of the work group in the hiring process — is a vital first step to ensuring success for new employees.

It builds cohesive teams by allowing the group to determine if the candidate is the “best fit”. When you empower your staff in this way, they tend to select the person who will not only enhance the organization, but also function as a true team player. After all, nobody knows the job or culture better than existing staff. It is an expectation at UVA Medical Center to conduct peer interviews for every vacant position.

Value for the Organization

Peer interviewing improves retention and reduces avoidable turnover, enabling us to invest dollars into other important initiatives. Because a well-orchestrated interviewing experience leaves candidates with a positive impression, they are more likely to select us as their employer of choice.

Value for Employees

When coworkers have a voice in the selection process, they are more inclined to take responsibility for a hiring decision. Since they have a vested interest in their co-worker’s success—after all, it is their own decision at stake—the team will work to ensure that the new person receives the necessary training and support. More importantly, by valuing the group’s perceptions and knowledge, the process builds community, strengthens employee commitment, and facilitates optimum performance.

Peer Interviewing

- Generates “buy-in”, promotes teamwork, and enhances employee engagement
- Makes staff feel accountable to one another
- Keeps avoidable turnover to a minimum
- Creates a favorable experience for the prospective employee

Value for Candidate

Candidates can assess the job realistically by meeting the people who actually perform it daily. They can ask questions and express concerns that they may hesitate to voice in a more formal one-to-one interview. By becoming familiar with the specifics of the job and culture, they can make more informed decisions about moving ahead or opting out of consideration.

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How to Conduct Successful Peer Interviews

STEP 1: Select a Peer Interview Team

Not everyone has the experience, skill, and desire to be an effective peer interviewer. When selecting employees to participate, look for:

- Enthusiasm and knowledge about the department and the organization
- Both new and tenured employees for balanced perspectives
- Diversity in age, gender, race, etc.

Verify the amount of interviewing experience each employee has had in the past. Employees who are not experienced and comfortable with the interviewing process should not participate until they have been properly trained (See Step 4: Reviewing Best Practices).

STEP 2: Come to an Understanding about the Job

Review the current job description with peer interviewers, paying particular attention to:

- Will the person be expected to supervise others?
- Does the job involve autonomous decision-making?
- What specific technical skills does the job involve?
- What specific performance skills does the job involve?
- With what people/departments does this job interact?
- Does the job involve direct contact with patients?

Click for the Peer Interview Checklist — A guide to help hiring managers prepare employees for the peer interview

Do not wait for the candidate to ask; determine as a department what might be helpful information. You may wish to provide a brief overview of the organization, including information that will help applicants remember the UVA Medical Center. Focus on what is unique about our organization and what UVAMC provides employees:

- Organizational goals
- Uteam meetings
- Tuition assistance program
- UVA Care Connection
- Employee discount programs
- Community outreach

Technical skills require specific technological/clinical expertise, for example, the use of specific machines or equipment, use of specific computer skills, etc.

Performance skills support and enhance the job. They are often interpersonal activities that the department/organization has identified as important, including accountability, customer service, teamwork, etc.

When having this discussion with your team, differentiate between basic job requirements and those items considered to be "nice-to-have". For example: If the job requires a bachelor's degree, it is acceptable to look for people with a master's degree, but, because the advanced degree is not a requirement, it cannot be used to screen out candidates with only a bachelor's.

STEP 3: Select Interview Questions and Evaluation Methods

Although people are capable of change, the best predictor of future performance will typically be an individual's past behavior. Behavioral-based interviewing can reveal specifics about past job performance. Identifying the interview questions on the front-end helps to bring consistency to the process and ensures that interviews focus only on what is truly important for the job. Click for a list of sample questions. There are a variety of methods for evaluating an interview. The most legally defensible method is to establish an objective, standardized rating system to measure each candidate's responses against acceptable responses. It is important to record and maintain this documentation because it:

- is required by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), and
- helps to keep the interview team on track and focused.

Once the appropriate questions have been identified and entered into the Decision Matrix, assign a "weight" to each question on a scale of 1-3, based on the importance of the competency being covered. For example: A department looking to hire an Administrative Assistant may decide to weight a question about multi-tasking as a "3" since it is a vital part of the role. Conflict management, on the other hand, might be rated as a "1" since it is not essential to the position.

Click for a list of sample questions.

Click for the Peer Interview Decision Matrix.

STEP 4: Reviewing Best Practices

**Avoid Direct and Indirect Questions relating to:

- race, religion, color, sex, national origin,
- age, political opinion or disabilities
- illnesses, diseases, hospitalizations, physical limitations, prescribed drugs, drug addiction or alcoholism
- arrest records – prior convictions are handled by Human Resources
- credit ratings or financial data
- personal topics (date of birth, marital status, number and ages of dependents, child care issues, family plans, height and weight, birthplace, previous addresses, etc.)
- memberships in clubs, societies, organizations, churches — unless specifically job-related

** Not an all-inclusive list

Event — Action — Result

- What was the situation? (EVENT)
- What did the candidate do? (ACTION)
- What was the outcome? (RESULT)

If the peer interviewer does not hear all three components, he/she should ask follow-up questions to understand the candidate's involvement. This is called probing. It is impossible to know what issue the person might raise and how you might need to probe to learn more. However, it is helpful to understand probing and how to probe. The following are some key phrases that may help:

- Tell me about a specific time in which...
- Tell us exactly how you dealt with the situation.
- It will help us gain a better understanding if you can describe the outcome.
- What did you mean when you said...
- What did you learn?
- What did everyone else do?
- What else can you remember about that situation?
- What eventually happened?
- Looking back, what would you do differently now, if anything?
- Compare this to what others have done.
- What did your supervisor say/do?

To show interest and demonstrate understanding during the interview, encourage the team to practice paraphrasing — summarizing what has been said in your own words. This allows the candidate to add clarification and it shows that you are listening.

Peer interviewers also need to pay attention to a candidate's non-verbal communication. Communications expert Albert Mehrabian's analysis of typical face-to-face communications showed that non-verbal communication has an enormous impact on the understanding of the messages sent by an interviewee. His results were:

- Words alone–7%;
- Voice tones–38%;
- Body language–55%.

Non-verbal messages are much less likely to be under conscious control and are therefore harder to disguise. They are often difficult to interpret and care needs to be taken in analyzing such messages e.g., a candidate may fold arms as he/she is cold, not necessarily because he/she is being defensive.

STEP 5: Coordinate Logistics

Now that you have covered the interviewing best practices, it is time to prepare for the actual event. Make sure that you properly communicate the details for the following:

- Application materials: Each interviewer has a copy of the candidate's application materials (i.e.; resume, cover letter, application, etc.) several days in advance.
- Interview date: If possible, schedule a date and time that is conducive to everyone's schedule. Communicate details as early as possible in case special arrangements need to be made.
- Location: The interview should be conducted in a private location. If one is not available in your immediate work area, try to schedule a conference room or borrow space from a neighboring department. Remove any potential distractions from the area (i.e.; phones, clutter, pictures, etc.) and rearrange the seating to create a relaxed and welcoming environment.
- Schedule: Make sure that the interview schedule has been properly communicated to all parties. Determine ahead of time who will hold what role, who will transition the interviewee to another location or person, etc.

It is important to reach a consensus regarding the flow and structure of the interview. If this is not decided on the front-end it could leave candidates with a poor impression of the department/organization.

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STEP 6: Conduct the Interview

Include the following elements in your discussion:

- Introductions: Discuss how the group will greet candidates and make them feel at ease — typically through small talk about a non-controversial topic such as the weather.
- Summary of Strengths/Weaknesses: Allow time for the candidates to summarize their strengths and weakness. This will provide insights which may lead to follow-up questions.
- Questions: Determine who will ask which questions and how the group will probe for further clarification. It is difficult to predict how a candidate will respond, but it is a good idea to allot a certain amount of time for each question. This helps to keep you on track and makes for a more structured process.
- Position Overview: Up until this point in the interview, the candidate has been selling him or herself. Now it is time for the team to sell the organization/department. Decide on what information will be shared with the candidate. How will the team describe the position? What will you say about the organization and the department?
- Candidate Questions: Ensure that the group understands the importance of giving the candidate an opportunity to ask questions. As a team, discuss the types of questions you might expect so that everyone is fully prepared.
- Closing the Interview: Regardless of how the interview goes, the team should convey appreciation to the candidate and be prepared to explain next steps without making any commitments about employment prospects.

If the team consists of inexperienced interviewers, role play a couple of times before the actual interview. You can also invite the peer interviewers to observe your next interview in order to model effective techniques. The more you practice, the more confident the team will be when the actual interview occurs.

Evaluate the Candidate

The key to evaluating candidates is to know the job and fully understand in advance what the department is looking for. If your team followed the previous six steps, evaluation should not be a challenging task.

The interviewers should take brief notes during the interview, but the majority of their documentation should occur after the fact. Do not allow the group to discuss the candidate until each interviewer has completed his or her evaluation. This will help to prevent them from influencing one another's opinions.

To generate the candidate's overall evaluation score, the interviewer(s) will need to add up the individual scores for each question. Simply multiply the assigned weight for each question by the score awarded to the candidate. For example: If multi-tasking was assigned a weight of "3" and the candidate scored a "5", then their overall score for that particular question would be "15".

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Below are several common biases that the group should try to avoid:

- **Stereotyping:** Forming an opinion about how people of a given gender, religion, race, appearance, or other characteristic think, act, respond, or would perform the job—without any evidence that this is the case.
- **Inconsistency in questioning:** Asking different questions of each candidate leads to a skewed assessment of who would best perform the job. Questions designed to get particular information about a specific candidate are only appropriate in the context of a core set of questions asked of all candidates.
- **First impressions:** An interviewer might make a snap judgment about someone based on their first impression—positive or negative—that clouds the entire interview. For example, letting the fact that the candidate is wearing out-of-the-ordinary clothing or has a heavy regional accent take precedence over the applicant's knowledge, skills, or abilities.
- **Negative emphasis:** Rejecting a candidate based on a small amount of negative information is a common occurrence. Research indicates that interviewers give unfavorable information about twice the weight of favorable information.
- **Halo/horn effect:** The "halo" effect occurs when an interviewer allows one strong point about the candidate to overshadow or have an effect on everything else. For instance, knowing someone went to a particular university might be looked upon favorably. Everything the applicant says during the interview is seen in this light. ("Well, she left out an important part of the answer to that question, but, she must know it, she went to XYZ University.") The "horn" effect is just the opposite—allowing one weak point to influence everything else.
- **Cultural noise:** Since the candidate wants the job, she or he may provide the words the interviewer wants to hear, even if those words are not entirely truthful. For example, an applicant might say that he has no problem reporting to someone younger, or working in a team setting, when this is not the case. Interviewers should prepare questions that probe for specific examples and stay away from questions that elicit "yes" or "no" answers.
- **Nonverbal bias:** Undue emphasis might be placed on nonverbal cues that have nothing to do with the job, such as loudness or softness of voice, or the type of handshake given.
- **Contrast effect:** Strong(er) candidates who interview after weak(er) ones may appear more qualified than they are because of the contrast between the two. Note taking during the interview and a reasonable period of time between interviews may alleviate this.