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## Using the Panel Interview to Save Time and Increase Accuracy

By Lou Adler, June 21, 2007

If you want to increase assessment accuracy and save time, conduct more panel interviews. These are much better than an all-day series of one-on-one 45-60-minute interviews. When organized properly, panel interviews help everybody involved learn more about the candidate, even weaker interviewers, if they just observe. Panel interviews also provide a great means for subordinates to get involved in the hiring process. Subordinates should never conduct one-on-one interviews, since they usually are trying to work for someone they like, so they focus on the wrong issues. For another, they're rarely objective, and worse, many of them are weak interviewers. A panel interview overcomes all of these problems. However, I didn't always believe this strongly that panel interviews were that good of an idea.

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In the early 1990s, the CEO of a well-known restaurant chain, and a potential client, asked me about panel interviews. "They're intimidating, cold, a poor recruiting tool, and unwieldy," was my instant reply. The CEO looked at me and said, "That's too bad, because that's all we use here, and if you want the CFO search, you'll have to use them." Without hesitation, and because at the time this would have been our biggest assignment, I indicated that I was willing to try. You should, too. They're a great tool. I was totally wrong. We went on to place about six executives with this company over the next few years using panel interviews as the standard.

As long as they're organized well, [panel interviews](#) provide a truer picture of a candidate than the one-on-one interview.

Here's why:

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- They're more objective since there is less personal interaction. It's hard to chit-chat during a panel interview, which is a good thing, since chit-chatting is a waste of time.
- You have a chance to think more about the candidate's responses since you're not the only one asking questions. This increases the validity of the assessment. In most one-on-one interviews, you're often thinking about what you're going to ask next, rather than listening to the candidate's answer.
- You don't make instant judgments about the quality of an answer while the candidate is answering because others are asking for clarifying information. This is one of the reasons one-on-one interviews aren't very effective. More in-depth responses are possible when others are helping with the fact-finding.
- It's a great way for subordinates to meet the candidate without the typical awkwardness. Since it's less of a personality-based interview, their hidden agendas stay hidden.
- Strong candidates like panel interviews as long as they're well organized and if the candidate is not put into an intimidating situation. With a panel interview, you'll also see more of the candidate's true personality, especially if most of the follow-up questions are about how accomplishments were achieved.
- It saves time. It only takes three or four people one to two hours to conduct a complete interview versus a whole day.
- It allows weaker interviewers to be involved. This is especially important if the weaker interviewer is the hiring manager. I often lead the panel interview for my clients if the hiring manager isn't a strong interviewer.
- The assessment is more accurate and consistent. Since everyone is using the same information to make an assessment, consistency is achieved. If the panel interview is led by someone who conducts a comprehensive performance-based interview, the information obtained is extremely insightful. This is something the other interviewers couldn't have obtained on their own.

### How to Organize and Conduct a Panel Interview

The panel should include no more than three or four people. Otherwise, it can be both intimidating and unwieldy. One interviewer should be the leader, and everyone else is in a support position. This is critical. Too many panel interviews go awry as everyone competes to ask their own questions. While all of the interviewers need to be involved throughout the interview, the difference in the two roles needs to be very clear.

**The Primary Interviewer:** This person leads the panel session, acting as the host and describing to the candidate how the interview will be conducted. During the actual panel interview, the primary interviewer will ask the basic questions and follow up with some fact-finding. Only the primary interviewer can change the topic or the focus of the question.

**Secondary Interviewers:** Every other member of the panel interviewing team is in a support role. However, they should be active during the interviewing, asking for examples and clarifying information. These people help the primary interviewer peel the onion by following up the main questions with questions like, "Can you give me an example of what you mean?" "When did that happen?" and "What were the results?" Organized properly, this type of panel interview follows a very natural flow and reveals a great deal of useful information.

It's okay if one of the secondary interviewers becomes a primary interviewer for a different question or for a different section of the interview. For example, someone can take on the primary responsibility for a question addressing a job-related technical accomplishment while someone else can be the primary interviewer for a different accomplishment, like team or management focus. If this type of shift is made, plan ahead of time to minimize any confusion. In

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this case, make sure that everyone else takes a support role asking for clarifying information.

Make sure all interviewers have read the [performance profile](#) for the job before convening. Make the thrust of the interview a discussion of the candidate's major accomplishments. It's okay to ask the candidate to come prepared to discuss a few of his/her most relevant major accomplishments. This will improve the information exchange. As part of this, ask the candidate to be prepared to cover individual contributor, team, and management projects. You should conduct a [10-Factor Candidate Assessment](#) right after the interview to capture everyone's comments.

During the dot-com boom, one of my manufacturing clients excluded a great candidate for an operations management position because he was too chatty during the first interview. My client got put off by this superficial banter, most likely caused by initial nervousness. Our client was a typical entrepreneur - bright, fast-paced, prone to making instantaneous decisions, and strong-willed. These are not the traits of good interviewers. The candidate was top-notch, though; a perfect match for the entrepreneur to build the solid infrastructure to maintain his fast-growing import and distribution company.

We didn't want to let this one die, so we arranged a panel interview with one of my associates leading the session. There were about four people in the room, but we orchestrated the questioning. It lasted about 90 minutes and covered everything, focusing largely on comparable past accomplishments dealing with rapidly changing environments. The candidate passed this more grueling session with flying colors. After a subsequent three-hour one-on-one interview with the CEO, the candidate was offered the position and accepted. During this interview, they created the operations plan and budget for the next 12 months. A few months after the person started, our client called to thank us for intervening and indicated that the candidate's job performance is top-notch, as expected.

The only potential problems with panel interviews are that they can be intimidating to the candidate. Describe the format of the session a few days beforehand to ease the candidate's fears. During the interview, use a round table or seat the candidate in the middle of a long table. The candidate will feel like one of the team this way. Don't make it seem like an interrogation. It's better to be low-keyed by requesting more information in a neutral tone of voice.

As long as they're properly organized, panel interviews are great for increasing assessment accuracy. Try one using our [two-question performance-based interview](#) for even better results. Before you know it, you'll be making fewer hiring mistakes and hiring better people.

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