

Questions relating to personal attributes preferred: Survey

Candidate interviews should focus on organizational growth

BY AMANDA SILLIKER

WHEN DAVID Gordon is interviewing candidates for his public relations firm in Toronto, he always asks about their interests outside of work. He tries to get a sense of what their “broader world” looks like, the kind of people they really are and if they would fit in with his team of adventurous, outgoing and enthusiastic employees.

“If I interview somebody who is getting into PR because they like to read a lot and that’s all they really like to do, it might not be the right place for them,” said Gordon, who is the managing partner at Cohn & Wolfe. “My saying is, ‘If you’re shy, don’t apply.’ To our industry, to my team, that’s an important thing.”

Gordon’s approach is reflected in a recent survey that found questions that provide insight into a candidate’s personal attributes are among those favoured by chief financial officers (CFOs). Of the nearly 300 Canadian CFOs surveyed by Accountemps, 50 per cent said questions relating to personal attributes are their go-to interview questions.

“Resumés can fill you in on a person’s progression, experience and technical knowledge but they don’t give you insight into how the individual and their character and personality can potentially fit into the organization,” said Mike Gooley, regional vice-president of Accountemps in Toronto.

Questions relating to personal attributes can help determine what an individual will contribute to a workplace, said Brian Duggan, president of Marathon Human Resources Consulting Group in Dartmouth, N.S. Attributes are fairly consistent over time and they are a good

indicator of how a candidate goes about his work, he said.

Company-specific questions came in second, found the survey, with 27 per cent of respondents choosing these as their favourite type of questions.

“You want to ask someone what they know about your company to see if they’ve done any homework on it,” said Gooley. “Typically, if they know quite a bit, then it shows more interest as well.”

And 23 per cent of survey respondents cited qualifications-based questions as their favourite. This is likely because qualification information can be found on a resumé and it only shows an individual has met a minimum standard, not how well she did in her job or what else she has to offer, said Duggan.

“For instance, there are lots of chartered accountants but there may only be one per cent who have the key abilities to provide executive leadership,” he said. “So, if you’re looking for a chartered accountant for leadership, then you have to go way beyond the qualification.”

Some CFOs also like to throw in the occasional curveball question, found the survey, such as “If you were a tree, what kind of a tree would you be?”

“It’s something they haven’t thought about and can’t prepare for,” said Gordon. “The questions are sometimes dumb but it’s not the question, it’s how good you are on your feet.”

As evidenced with the type of questions preferred by CFOs, behavioural-style interviews are still the predominant choice, said Gooley.

There is also a standardizing among interviews emerging, said Duggan. Some organizations are providing candidates with a series of questions and giving them

time to prepare the answers or asking candidates to make presentations, so everyone can start on the same level, he said.

“Many people go into (interviews) unprepared but now the expectation from employers is people go in prepared and they expect a higher level of engagement in the process,” said Duggan.

With the economy picking up and competition for talent increasing, HR needs to make sure it is asking questions to evaluate if a candidate can help support the organization’s growth initiatives, said Gooley.

“You want to look for maturity — people that are willing to invest in gaining experience and want to grow their careers with you,” said Gordon. “We want to make sure we can take them to the next level and the level after that with us.”

Employers also want to make sure they are selling the company to candidates during interviews. To do that, they should determine the pros of working for their organization, how they want to differentiate from the competition and what really makes them appealing, and then sell that in the interview, said Gooley.

“You could probe to find out what the motivators are of that candidate and if they are things your company offers — for example, the flexibility to work from home one day per week — then that is something you can verbalize so they see it is, potentially, a good fit,” he said.

The main thing to keep in mind is the overall tone of the interview should reflect the new positive direction and outlook of the organization and the economy, said Gooley.

“The focus in a recession is things like, ‘It’s tough right now,’ ‘We’re cutting costs,’” he said. “The mood is different now so things like growth and improvement are what we should be focusing on.”