

Interviewing Senior Executives

By Merna Skinner, partner, Exec/Comm, New York

Chief executive officers have consistently noted that they are most likely to lose sleep over talent gaps in the executive ranks. Whether a company is a new dot-com or a traditional corporation, the crucial goals of innovation and growth depend on planning and implementing recruiting strategies.

These brief case histories demonstrate different approaches to recruitment and philosophies over how to best interview and assess top managers. Central is the integral role of human resources as the "hub" of the process and the part played by other key managers as interviewers.

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Much has been written about how to determine if a candidate will fit into a company's culture. An important part of this equation is a succinct agreement on how the interviewers portray the firm and its culture. Deutsche Bank recently set in motion a global initiative to clearly define the bank's visions and values. "We are looking for senior people who are results-oriented, technically proficient, and innovative," says Maureen Solero, director of global staffing and recruiting for the Global Institutional Services Group. Solero makes sure that her teams of line interviewers know exactly how to communicate the bank's emphasis on customer service, teamwork, innovation, performance and trust.

Formal search teams are formed at Deutsche Bank for senior position evaluations. "The ideal mix," comments Solero, "is a number of line people at comparable levels, as well as a designated human resource manager who has a good knowledge of the specific business." These committees convene at periodic assessment meetings to compare their evaluations of candidates.

So committed is the bank to good senior candidate assessment that top management is considering an executive

training session to reinforce this skill.

Not all organizations use a formalized interview process. At Jackson Lewis, a national labor law firm, prospective partners are interviewed by a number of senior people and associates. Human resources still acts as dealmaker, but the process is less structured.

Kathleen Brady, national director of staff recruitment and development, says, "We have a relatively informal culture, and it is important that we communicate this in the way we interview senior people."

Because the firm practices only employment litigation and labor law, there are fewer functional evaluators who must get involved in the process. The partners also rely on industry references as an additional gauge of the candidate's reputation.

"In our firm, the most crucial thing we try to agree upon is whether we think the person fits our culture and thus will flourish," says Brady.

In the past, the main purpose of interviewing was to make sure that you selected the right person. With less competition, interviewers didn't have to spend much time marketing their firms to the candidates. Now, with increased options, senior candidates want to hear why they should join your company.

Every evaluator of a potential candidate should be able to sum up in 10 words or less the benefits of joining your firm. It is important that this message be consistent across interviewers. In addition, every member of your selection committee should be prepared with facts, examples or analogies that support your statement.

"What most of us call 'marketing' is really a series of information exchanges," contends Solero of Deutsche Bank. At her firm, marketing the company does not occur just in the last round of interviews. She sees it as a continual process, starting as early as when pre-interview informational materials are sent to the prospective candidate. During subsequent rounds of interviews, information is clarified.

"We are seeking to give this senior candidate as much information as possible, so that he or she will be as well equipped to make an informed decision as we are," she says.