5 interview tips for winning over job candidates

In a tight talent market, the job interview cuts both ways. Here's how to ensure, as an interviewer, you don't lose a strong could-be colleague.

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Don't talk too much about your personal life. Don't come across as overly aggressive. And never, ever check your phone. This is just some of the advice job experts give applicants interviewing for a position. But when it comes to filling engineering roles, employers might need a little wisdom of their own.

After all, tech is a candidate's market where the right hire may actually turn you down — and engineering managers typically aren't human resources professionals. They oversee the team where applicants will be working, so when it comes to interviewing, sometimes all they know to look for is whether someone seems like a technical fit. They don't always know what they can and can't talk about, what questions to — or not to — ask. They may be a great boss, but because they don't get HR, they can accidentally say or do something that keeps candidates from accepting the job.

With that in mind, here are five tips for interviewers in a tight market for tech talent.

1. Think before you speak

In the United States, there are laws around what companies can and cannot ask a job applicant. Most are pretty well known: Employers can't ask how old or what race someone is, for example, or whether they're pregnant. The Society for Human Resource Management also advises interviewers stay away from questions that are basic workarounds, like 'What's your birthdate?' or 'When are you due?'

What's tough, though, is when these questions overlap with genuine efforts to get to know someone. "There's a stereotype that IT folks aren't great with people," says Andrew Jones, a recruiter with IT sourcing company Source One. It's understandable that a future boss would want to come across as friendly. But friendly can sometimes cross the line, as more private applicants might not want to discuss their due date or how many kids they already have.

Another seemingly innocuous question, says Kieran Snyder, CEO of augmented writing software company Textio, is 'What do you like to do for fun?'

"The intentions here are usually good," she explains, "The hiring manager wants to connect [at] a personal level; however, it creates a kind of selection bias. If what I do for fun isn't something I believe the hiring manager will appreciate, I am far less likely to share it." No one likes to think their Brony habit or D&D roleplay might keep them from getting the job.

2. Think about what you share
Honesty is a virtue, but too much of it could cost your company a fantastic candidate, as Jones describes one client who offered an applicant the job, then "proceeded to paint a bleak picture of his company's future. He told my candidate point blank that he couldn't guarantee anything in the way of job security. The entire IT department, he suggested, might soon get shipped over to Poland. Needless to say, my candidate didn't accept the offer — and the company's IT department stayed put."

In other words, focus on sharing information that you know for a fact and stay away from fearful conjecture.

3. Think about how you say it
Snyder says, "Hiring managers are often not intentional with their language." Even subtle vocabulary decisions — like calling everyone on your team 'guys' — can negatively affect how applicants see the workplace. "[If] the candidate doesn't identify as male, they may feel like they will be left out of the team," she explains.

Note language faux pas aren't restricted to gender. Take "work hard, play hard" for example, a phrase the tech community uses often. Snyder asks, "What message is really being sent?" Some candidates might take this to mean overtime is required. Or, looking at it the other way, will new hires be singled out if they don't play in the company ping-pong tournament? What if they don't want to go out after work for beers? "Maybe if you aren't willing to 'play hard,' you aren't a fit," she says, "If your life includes family or personal obligations outside of work, you might not fit in."

Every manager has their own conversational style and you don't have to change the way you talk. But Snyder does point out companies put effort into making sure job postings and descriptions are phrased in a way that attracts diverse applicants. For them to actually take the job, she says, "It is critical that hiring managers get really intentional about their language before they walk into a meeting with a candidate. The words they use are reflective of their culture and they want to make sure they are using words that will appeal to the candidate."

4. Let the candidate do the talking
In addition to that 'not good with people' stereotype, Javier Castiarena, director of engineering for recruitment platform Fetcher, suggests interviewers allow more time to let job seekers speak: "Some engineers are shy by nature and hesitant to speak out. Without encouragement they may reject the role silently if they have doubts." So keep the focus on the applicant, not yourself, and "give candidates enough room to ask all their questions," he says.

5. Slow it down

By the time prospective hires get to your office, they've already made it past HR, so it's easy to assume they have all the qualifications you need. But recruiters aren't engineers — even the good ones don't check for everything. No matter how badly you need to fill that opening, slow down. "Most of my hiring mistakes have been to misjudge the culture fit — or be too optimistic about the ability of someone to adapt to our culture," says Johan Bilien, senior vice president of product and engineering at recruitment platform Scout Exchange.

No one you hire will be perfect. Bilien says, "We often have to compromise a bit." Recruiters may not be able to find an expert in the exact language you need or as Castiarena points out, the ideal candidate on paper may not be best for the job in real life. So take your time and get to know applicants as people. Just don't ask any inappropriate questions while you do it.

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