What are Job Candidates Really Saying?

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Key Points:

- Interviewing can be a useful tool when selecting the best-suited candidates from a flooded applicant pool

- The interviewer can underutilize the process by not delving into the real meaning behind the words

- Commonly used terminology has different meanings for different people

- Lacking specificity is not always an attempt to deceive the interviewer, but it needs to be probed further

- The onus is on the interviewer to glean the correct meaning of the candidate's words and terminology

By Dr. Stephen A. Laser

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Organizations today find themselves in the enviable position of having a multitude of candidates from which to choose in the event of a job opening. This situation is largely the result of the current economic downturn that has left the country mired in a deep and potentially long-lasting recession. With so many available applicants, it behooves an organization to be careful when making a final choice. Toward that end, most companies will turn to interviews, either face-to-face or over the telephone, to help screen from amongst the pool of potential candidates. Unfortunately, the interview is disparaged by most industrial psychologists, especially in academia, as an unreliable and often invalid way of picking people to fill a job opening. To quote an old phrase rather than curse the darkness, we would prefer to light a few candles to assist with making the interviewing process more illuminating.

The key to good interviewing is knowing exactly what the applicant is telling you. This begins by making sure you understand the precise meaning of the words and phrases used by the candidate during his or her interview with your organization. Before delving deeper into this topic, it might be instructive to relate a story that took place many years ago during a workshop of employee selection. At that time one of the workshop leaders, an industrial psychologist, was explaining his involvement in a study to find a fair method for selecting state troopers for a large state located on the East Coast. To accomplish the task, the psychologist did a thorough job analysis to identify the key success factors for the state trooper's position. The job analysis involved interviewing over 100 commanders at state police outposts throughout the state. When he was finished, the psychologist was elated with the uniformity of his findings.

Almost to a person, the commanders identified one major factor that distinguished effective from ineffective troopers – "common sense." Upon further review, however, the consulting psychologist was appalled when he discovered that each of the commanders, while naming common sense as critical to the job, had a different definition of common sense. For one commander, it meant having a sense of humor under duress. For another, it

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meant keeping one's weapon holstered unless absolutely necessary to make a show of force. Another commander stated that common sense meant knowing when to call for back-up assistance. While yet another post commander defined common sense as knowing when to write a warning ticket versus when to make a formal arrest. And so it went, with explanation after explanation of this all important dimension of job success being conceived differently by each person.

Thus, the lesson is a simple one. Make sure you clearly define what people are saying. How many times have you as an interviewer heard an applicant say that she likes a "challenge" or wants to experience "meaning" and "variety" in her job? What about the candidate who cites "organizational politics" as his reason for disliking a job? Have you heard people say in interviews that the "lack of room for advancement" was the reason they wanted to find another job? Even though there is certainly nothing wrong with any of these answers, without probing for precision and deeper meaning, however, employers might be missing important cues that could either make the applicant a desirable choice for a job opening or disqualify the individual as a poor fit for the company's culture and values.

While offering a lexicon for these types of responses is beyond the scope of this newsletter, we would like to provide a little context for these commonly used words and phrases. First, we want to state that almost all applicants will use these terms, and their lack of providing specificity is not necessarily an attempt to deceive the interviewer. Instead, it is really the responsibility of the company in general and the interviewer in particular to dig for more details. Now, let's look at some of these terms.

Challenge and variety along with meaningful work are typically elements that many people desire in their jobs. Yet, they can mean very different things. For some, challenge and variety mean not sitting behind a desk, and instead, operating outside or in the field. Other applicants might identify challenge and variety as the opportunity to learn new things on the job and stretch their minds with taxing information. Other job candidates will talk about "wanting to be with people." Once again, a call for specificity is suggested. Exactly which people are they referring to? Are they making specific reference to their coworkers or their customers or a combination of both groups of people?

How about a person who prefers a supervisor who is "honest" with them? Very often this term is misinterpreted to mean that the applicant wants to be managed by an honest or ethical person.

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We have found, for instance, that the term, honest, can mean that the candidate is looking for direct and straightforward feedback. In other words, he or she needs to know where they stand with their boss and that individual will not be comfortable with a boss who beats around the bush.

With respect to the negatives cited by candidates, it is perhaps, even more critical to pin down the person. For example, we hear people talk about "politics" as one of the reasons they dislike their place of work. But, what exactly do they mean? Are they referring to nepotism or favoritism? Might they mean the practice of turf-building or the habit of operating in an environment that promotes departmental silos? In other cases, politics can mean that the applicant was not a member of the "in-crowd" or that he or she was excluded from important meetings. The onus is on the prospective employer to determine why the person was excluded. Often there is a reason, and it might not always reflect favorably on the person being interviewed for the job opening at your company.

Finally, we hear applicants saying they want to leave their jobs because there is "no room for advancement." This is frequently a code term for no longer being considered for promotion. On more than a few occasions, we have interviewed potential job candidates who speak about limited potential for growth, and what they are really talking about is a frank discussion that their supervisors or managers have had with them telling the person that he or she is unlikely to be promoted or advanced into a position with greater responsibility. In short, they have reached their limit at the company. Hence, the hiring manager in an organization needs to probe further to find out why the person reached his or her plateau. Is this a concern that will surface at your company as well?

In closing, these are but a few of the terms mentioned every day by job applicants as they discuss their past experiences. Can you think of other commonly used terms? Please let us know on our website at www.laserassociates.net .