Effective Techniques

Cross-Cultural Interviewing in the Hiring Process: Challenges and Strategies

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Although interviews are used widely in the selection of suitable job applicants, recruiters may unconsciously be operating from culturally biased frameworks. In this article, the use of interviews across different cultural backgrounds and the potential for cultural bias are presented. Two case studies are used to illustrate the importance of cultural sensitivity in successful interviewing. Effective techniques, which include establishing rapport with the candidate, building a relationship, and choosing appropriate interview styles, are provided for practitioners.

Despite the widespread use of interviews as a selection tool (Graves & Karren, 1996), increasing workplace diversity has created challenges for interviewers and interviewees. The changing nature of workforce demography may result in a shift in people's work values, attitudes, and beliefs, which have important ramifications for the importance placed on certain work aspects. Different personal attributes are believed to exert influence on individuals' work expectations (Harpaz & Fu, 1997; Wiersema & Bird, 1993). Hence, recruiters and managers can expect different job expectations, and creative job designs may be required to accommodate diversity (Chan, 2002). Consequently, matching individuals to jobs while considering diversity issues can be challenging for those involved in the process.

Although diversity includes a multitude of differences, this article focuses on effective cross-cultural interviewing strategies for recruitment, selection, and career development. As many societies and workplaces become increasingly multicultural (Osman-Gani & Tan, 2002), interviewers and interviewees need to be prepared for job interviews. This is especially important when the mounting evidence that multiculturalism offers tremendous competitive benefits to an organization is considered

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(Raatikainen, 2002; Richard, 2000). Thus, having a better understanding of cultural values and behaviors may help recruiters make informed hiring decisions.

We present two case studies to illustrate the importance of cultural sensitivity in interviewing. The first author was involved in the capacity of an external recruitment consultant in the following case studies. Pseudonyms and altered contexts have been used to protect the privacy of the clients and candidates.

Case Studies

The Case of Zaidi

Zaidi was an Algerian man with more than 10 years of relevant industry experience. He had been in Australia for 6 months. The hiring manager (Bob) who interviewed Zaidi was a Caucasian Australian. Zaidi's résumé and cover letter revealed a strong transferable skill set. The candidate demonstrated a reasonable knowledge of the relevant products and services offered by the hiring company.

The hiring process had several steps. Zaidi had several phone discussions with the consultant. These contacts revealed Zaidi's lack of cultural awareness. At the interview, the consultant decided to take a culturally sensitive approach. The interview icebreaker focused on Zaidi's personal background, followed by his experience of living and working in Australia. This approach allowed the consultant to establish a closer rapport with Zaidi. More important, the consultant highlighted cultural similarities and differences with Zaidi, thereby allowing him to acknowledge and affirm his experiences. An acceptance of similarities and differences in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of the two different cultures was encouraged. When Zaidi seemed sufficiently relaxed, the rest of the interview focused on the selection competencies. The interview concluded with how Zaidi might modify his behavior to make himself better understood by an Australian manager. Although some of the feedback was personality based, other feedback was culturally based, with the recognition that both factors influence behavior.

It was considered equally important for the hiring manager to be coached. Bob showed great propensity, tolerance, and knowledge of cultural differences. He was advised to build a relationship with Zaidi in the first 10 minutes and not form any opinion of the candidate during this time. Suggested topics for discussion included family life, experiences, and circumstances. When good rapport was developed between interviewer and interviewee, the assessment for competencies could begin. Eventually, Zaidi was recruited by Bob with a starting salary that was more than 40% higher than the initial offer.

The Case of Siva

Siva was an Indian candidate who applied for an information technology support role in the financial services industry. He was to be interviewed by an Australian manager, Tom. Initially, Siva's résumé was not appropriate because his reverse chronological résumé indicated he was, at that time, a trainer in a call center. When Siva's last role was ignored, his work experiences in three separate roles prior to the last had some relevance.

The consultant decided to interview Siva. During the interview, Siva was very grateful, articulate, and engaging.

It was mutually agreed that Siva's résumé revealed some culturally driven values. Too much information was presented in the résumé, which reflects the findings that people from a high-context culture tend to place more emphasis on nonverbal cues (Hall, 1989; Vida, 1999). Hence, when an individual from a high-context culture writes, there is a tendency to write more than necessary to compensate for the lack of verbal or written cues. Some of the information in Siva's résumé was not job relevant. Relevant information about Siva's experience was crystallized; Siva then sent a revised résumé to the consultant, who then forwarded it to Tom.

Tom had many years of experience working in many different Asian cultures. During the consultant's discussion with Tom, Siva's technical capability was deemed sufficient for Tom to interview him. The conversation now turned to interpreting and managing cultural expectations in the interview between Tom and Siva. Before the interview, Tom provided a clear job description to Siva. Siva was offered the job with a salary of almost 30% above his initial expectations.

Implications for Interviewers and Career Development Professionals

Interviews are usually used in recruitment and selection, promotion, identifying training needs, and performance review. Thus, career development professionals (e.g., managers, career counselors, career development facilitators, employment counselors, workforce development professionals, and human resource practitioners) need to be aware of the potential impact of discrimination caused by cultural misunderstanding. Although the extent of discrimination is difficult to determine, many practitioners are concerned about the negative impact discrimination has on employees' attitudes, which could, in turn, compromise individual and organizational performance (Snape & Redman, 2003). Despite the presence of laws prohibiting racial vilification and organizational policies against discrimination, such awareness needs to be translated into practice where cross-cultural interviewing is concerned.

Because the success of an organization is believed to be heavily dependent on its human or intellectual capital, practitioners need to be aware of the cultural forces at play during an interview. Poor interview practices that result from interviewers' bias, halo effect (i.e., drawing a general impression about an individual based on a single characteristic, such as intelligence or sociability), and excessive use of unstructured interviews undermine an organization's competitive advantage (Graves & Karren, 1996; Spence & Petrick, 2000). An important lesson for interviewers and interviewees to bear in mind is that speaking the same language does not mean sharing the same culture. This was highlighted in Siva's case, in which fluency in English did not mean he was culturally similar. The icebreaker example cited in the case of Zaidi illustrates the importance of developing rapport with the interviewee before assessing competencies for a given position. Thus, an interviewer needs to develop rapport with the interviewee by building a relationship that is based on trust, understanding, and acceptance. Organizations might

wish to diversify the interview panel. Another alternative is to use a composite assessment methodology, in which the interview is only a part of a range of selection tools.

There are policy and practical implications for organizations to ensure that interviewers are aware of cultural similarities and diversities. For example, a mandatory cultural training policy that is supported by the executive team can be considered. The program needs to focus on raising cultural awareness and improving cross-cultural communication. In addition, interviewers need to be able to differentiate between skills, personality, and culturally based behaviors. Thus, career counselors, supervisors, managers, and trainers need to be prepared to deal with diversity (Evans & Larrabee, 2002), provide minorities with tools to deal with workplace issues (Flores & Heppner, 2002), and understand the cultural needs of others so that effective intervention strategies can be applied (Pope, 1999). Future researchers are encouraged to investigate the effects of career support for minorities on a variety of work attitudes and outcomes.

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