



Paul Pompeo

THIS MONTH WE RETURN to a traditional Q&A format. What follows are actual questions from both employers and candidates. If you have a question about the job market, hiring trends, the interviewing process, or if you have a topic in mind for a future “Careers & Hiring” column, drop a line to Question@pompeo.com. No names or companies will be used.

“Hiring managers often get [so] fixated on finding the ‘ideal candidate’ that they often don’t fill a position quickly. What is your advice on the balance between keeping headcount and getting the best candidate available?”—Director of Applications Engineering, Lamp Manufacturer

A Pompeo: Great question...and something we often come up against during a search. It’s kind of like the person who never gets married—instead waiting on the “ideal mate” who fits their mental checklist of items—and sometimes ends up missing someone who might be nearly perfect because

that person only fulfilled 80 percent of the “wish list.”

On the one hand, a company wants the best possible candidate that has “x” number of requirements (five-10 years of experience with architectural downlighting, for example, or a BS in Electrical Engineering), so it evaluates candidates using a checklist, for lack of a better term. On the other hand, there is a danger that a company could miss a great candidate, who might not fulfill all 10 items on the checklist, but would be a great fit chemistry-wise and have more advancement potential. With this approach, the tendency is to look for someone from a direct competitor, which on the surface might seem more likely to produce a “perfect match,” but also significantly reduces the talent pool a hiring manager can draw from.

“I am in the process of hiring a local office manager and have interviewed three people. They all seem great and their references are quite good. My present office manager will stay as

long as needed to train the person, but once that person is trained, my office manager is going back to her old field. So, if I pick the wrong person, and it doesn’t work out, I have no one left to do the training. Therefore, I must pick the best person.

Is it okay to ask the following questions: 1) It’s Friday afternoon and there is a lot of work to do, but I’m going to the lake and you have to stay and work. How do you feel about that? (I’ve already worked about 60 hours this week and may be returning from a trip, but I want to know if he/she is going to be frustrated.)

2) I may be out of town and arrive at an appointment early. I’ll call in to check messages but I only have five minutes to get the messages and return calls and I’ll be quite short (hopefully not rude, just very short). How do you feel about that?” — Sales Manager, Ballast Manufacturer

A Pompeo: Your first question isn’t a bad one, but I might word it differently. Rather than essentially stating, “I’m

going to the lake, but you have to stay and work” (which comes across as a bit antagonistic), just explain that you often work a lot of hours and you have to take pockets of vacation or “down” time whenever possible. This would require the candidate to “man the fort” (which may be a politically incorrect term these days) in your absence. You can then ask if that is something he or she is comfortable with. It sounds like a very slight difference in wording, but if this is the person whom you end up hiring, the feelings of mutual respect can be established early on, during the first interview.

To your second question, I would explain to your assistant (just as you did in your question) that when you call in for messages you may only have a few minutes to spare. Try giving the candidate a couple of “test” messages with information and see how she/he relays them back to you. Beyond this, ask applicants some fairly rapid fire questions and see if they’re able to

give you a quick, concise answer. If the responses tend to be overly lengthy, verbose, or go off on a tangent, this may be a helpful clue. Beyond the interview process, here are two other suggestions for retrieving messages from the road: a) Set up a voicemail system that lets you go into a recorded message, bypassing your office manager. b) Have your office manager immediately transfer all your voicemail into concise, two-three line e-mail messages. You could then check them from your PDA or laptop, and get the same information without *any* risk of unnecessary small talk. You could even make this part of the interview process, by giving applicants several verbal messages, and then seeing how well they summarize them into an e-mail format for you.

“How much influence does Human Resources (HR) have on the hiring process? What information are they typically looking for?” — Human

Resources Manager, Ballast Manufacturer

A Pompeo: Human Resources can have a great influence, but it varies largely by how HR is perceived (and what authority is allocated to it) by general management. It also depends on the quality of personnel in that department. The prominence of Human Resources also seems to vary by the size of the organization—the HR departments for conglomerates and large manufacturers generally are much more actively involved in the hiring and interviewing process.

In the past, Human Resources would explain benefits and ask a candidate’s salary. Over the past few years, HR’s role has evolved and become more sophisticated. I personally find the best and most effective HR professionals play a very important role in hiring—not necessarily by *dominating* the process, but by effectively *guiding* the process—acting as a very important facilitator.

As for job candidates, don’t sell short the interview with HR. Just because you may not report to the Human Resources professional (or other individuals from the company whom you might speak with during the interview process), obviously does not mean you should discount their importance. You should really treat every meeting with a representative of the company you are interviewing with as seriously as you take the interview with the actual hiring manager.

Paul Pompeo is principal with The Pompeo Group, Albuquerque, NM, a leading executive recruiting firm in the lighting and electrical industry. Pompeo spent 16 years with Search West before starting his own firm in March 2003. In September of last year he became president of the IESNA Rio Grande section. He can be reached at paul@pompeo.com or www.pompeo.com.