



Conducting an Effective Panel Interview

Hiring authorities are accustomed to interviewing jobseekers on a one-on-one basis, but panel interviews can offer a valuable alternative. These interviews can be a powerful tool giving you a deeper insight into a candidate's suitability for a role, but you need to make sure you get the format right otherwise, it could be a disaster waiting to happen.

Traditional one-on-one interviews may allow for a more intimate discussion to take place between the interviewer and the candidate, but with a process that requires input from multiple people, it can be quite a time-consuming exercise.

The problem is, the longer the hiring process, the higher the probability an applicant may lose interest or find another position. If candidates must interview multiple times it may test the patience of even the most dedicated person. Multiple interviews require taking time off, traveling, etc. This is why panel interviews can be an invaluable screening method.

However, panel interviews offer much more than just saving time. They can provide objectivity since there is less personal interaction, so the temptation to chat is reduced. Furthermore, panel members can question a candidate in rapid succession, meaning the candidate has to show an in-depth knowledge of the job's requirements. Panel interviews can also be quite daunting for the candidate, so the interviewer can see how they handle tense situations.

Having said that, this format does have its downsides, for example, there is less time to analyze a candidate. But it also eliminates the one-on-one comfort zone where talented interviewers may be able to bring the best out of a more reserved candidate. And, of course, there is a danger that outspoken or opinionated interviewers can skew the views of the panel.

So what does one need to know to ensure they manage a panel discussion effectively?

The setting

How you arrange the room for a panel interview can be vitally important. Try to make sure the set-up is as informal as possible. You can get more in depth information out of a candidate who is relaxed. Also ensure that panel members are seated at comfortable angles visible to the applicant. Certainly avoid seating panel members behind a big table or facing the applicant as if it were an interrogation.

The members

You need to make sure that your interviewers are from varying departments and that they also have differing backgrounds and personalities. This will enable you to get a broader perspective of the candidate's performance. Different points of view will help you better assess an applicant. It's also important that the people you choose are trusted individuals who know your company or business inside out.

When you have chosen your members, make sure that you designate a leader, someone to act as the host and act as the facilitator for the whole process. During the interview, the lead interviewer will ask the basic questions and follow up with some fact-finding. Only the primary interviewer can change the topic or the focus of the question.

Every other member of the panel should see themselves in a support role, helping the primary interviewer clarify as much as possible by digging deeper into questions as they feel necessary. This hierarchy doesn't have to be set in stone throughout the interview, and sometimes other members can take on a lead role for specific questions particularly if it's more related to their specific skills base. Ultimately, there should be one person controlling the start and finish of the interview.

Whatever happens, everyone needs to be clear on their role throughout the process, so as not to cause confusion and break the focus of the interview. Also, any panel should consist of between three and five people.

Get organized

There are a number of factors at play here. Everyone taking part in the interview needs to have a good knowledge of the candidate's resume, as well as the job description and the skills base necessary to fulfill the role. In addition, everyone should have agreed upon a set of questions and understand their role in the process; so that people are not talking over each other or contradicting each other during the interview.

You should also make the focus of the interview a discussion of the candidate's major accomplishments; and it's perfectly acceptable to ask the candidate to come prepared to discuss a few of his/her most relevant major accomplishments. This will improve the information exchange.

Listen!

...and listen carefully. Being in a group interview situation gives you the benefit of "extra ears" to pick up on key details and nuances from the candidate; so use this. Panel members should be taking notes throughout, but they need to stay engaged in the discussions.

Don't forget the basics

This may sound obvious, but it's often the small details that matter. So, remember to introduce everyone at the onset. You also need to allow the candidate enough time to ask questions at the end and possibly provide additional qualification information.

Make sure you have a prepared closing statement as a professional way to end the interview, including a realistic expectation for the follow-up schedule. This will leave the candidate feeling as though they have been treated professionally. Don't forget to thank them for their interest and time.

Conducting a panel interview can be of great benefit to your organization. Not only will it help you make a decision, but you will also be able to get to know a potential staff member better. So if you are going to go down this route, it really is worth making sure you do it properly.

Sample Panel Interview Questions

- Summarize your education and experience and explain how they qualify you for this position.
- Describe one of your work accomplishments and explain how you achieved it.
- Identify one of your job weaknesses and describe the steps you are taking to improve or strengthen it.
- Explain how you prioritize your tasks to ensure your work is completed on time.
- Describe a difficult work problem you resolved without help from others.
- Describe a stressful situation you faced at work and explain how you handled it.
- Give an example when you helped your management team solve a complex problem.

- Describe your experience managing programs or projects.
- Describe your experience supervising others.
- Explain how you train and develop others to achieve their potential.
- Describe your leadership philosophy and a situation when you applied it at work.
- Give an example that best illustrates your analytical and problem-solving ability.
- Give an example of a difficult task you had to learn quickly and explain the steps you took to learn it.
- Describe a creative idea you implemented at work that benefited your organization.
- Explain why colleagues and customers like working with you.
- Describe your experience working in groups and your contributions to them.
- Give an example when there was no rule or guideline to help you solve a problem.
- Describe a work situation when you tackled a difficult or unpopular assignment.