



# Reading Between the Lines

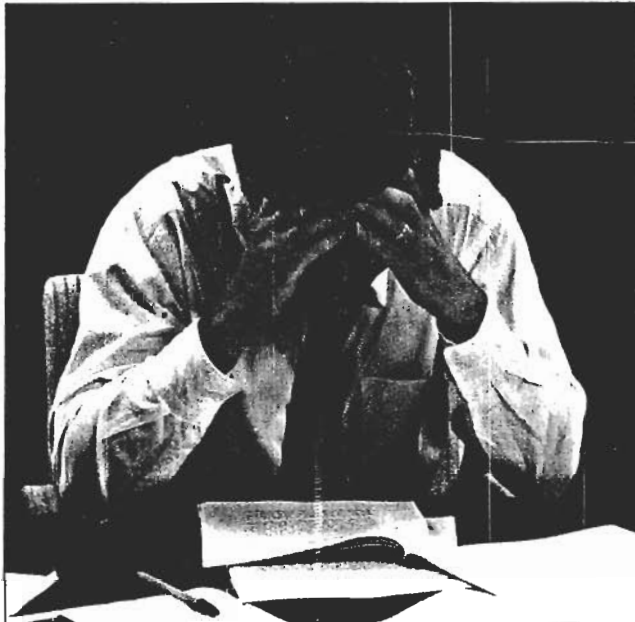
*How Entrepreneurs  
Can Win the  
Hiring Game*

*By J.A. Dunnigan*

**F**or the average small-business owner, interviewing job applicants can be a frustrating, sometimes even fruitless, experience, particularly if the entrepreneur lacks the necessary resumé-game skills to see through the smoke-screens, exaggerations, artfully written deceptions, and outright lies that pass for acceptable resumé. If the job you're offering is a good one, you'll probably be inundated with resumé of virtually every type and description. And according to the rules of the game, it's up to you, the prospective

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The Stock Market/Cabe Palmer

**ENTREPRENEURS CAN AVOID HIRING HEADACHES BY LEARNING WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN REVIEWING RESUMÉS. SKILLFUL RESUMÉ WRITERS CAN MAKE THEMSELVES SEEM MORE QUALIFIED THAN MORE APPROPRIATE BUT LESS CREATIVE APPLICANTS.**

employer, to ferret out the "right" applicant from the morass of unacceptables that your ad will certainly attract. Trying to play the resumé game "uninitiated" is tantamount to betting the mortgage on filling an inside straight—the odds against you are just too great.

So how does the small-business owner—immersed as he or she is in the day-to-day operation of the business—usually go about finding the right employee to bring aboard? Most of the time, according to the employment experts we spoke to, entrepreneurs expend a great deal of time and energy wading through stacks of resumé, platoons of applicants, and days of interviewing—with no guarantee that they'll be any closer to hiring a good employee than they were at the start. And if the business owner decides not to use a private employment agency or service, the hiring burden falls solely on him or her.

The hiring process usually begins with drafting an advertisement. The best method of writing a good ad is twofold. First, analyze the position to be filled with an eye toward cataloging both the duties to be performed and the skills necessary to complete those duties; and second, prioritize those duties and skills based on the salary to be paid.

Robert Half, noted author and president of the recruiting firm of Robert Half International, Inc., suggests that the type and number of resumé the employer receives will directly reflect the type of ad placed. "Don't 'overspec' the job," he says. "You don't want to have too many specifications for any one job. If you find that your list of specs is reasonable and fair, then analyze them to determine which are the most important. You might be looking for a CPA-MBA with a background in publishing to be your controller.

## Interviewing Guide

### Ask The Right Question;

#### ASK YOURSELF

- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Attitude</i>      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can compete without irritation?</li> <li>2. Can bounce back easily?</li> <li>3. Can balance company/self interest?</li> <li>4. What are life priorities?</li> <li>5. Is there a loyalty level?</li> <li>6. Takes pride in doing a good job?</li> <li>7. Indications of cooperativeness?</li> </ol>   |
| <i>Motivation</i>    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is settled in choice of work?</li> <li>2. Works from choice or necessity?</li> <li>3. Makes day-to-day and long-range plans?</li> <li>4. Uses some leisure for self-improvement?</li> <li>5. Is willing to work for what he/she wants in face of opposition?</li> </ol>  |
| <i>Initiative</i>    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is he/she a self-starter?</li> <li>2. Completes own tasks?</li> <li>3. Follows through on assigned tasks?</li> <li>4. Works in assigned manner without leaving own "trademark"?</li> <li>5. Can work independently?</li> </ol>   |
| <i>Stability</i>     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is this person excitable or even-tempered?</li> <li>2. Impatient or understanding?</li> <li>3. Does he/she show likes and dislikes freely?</li> <li>4. Does he/she use words showing strong feelings?</li> <li>5. Is candidate poised/impulsive; controlled/erratic?</li> <li>6. Will broaden or flatten under pressure?</li> <li>7. Is candidate enthusiastic about job?</li> </ol> |
| <i>Planning</i>      | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ability to plan/follow through without a supervisor?</li> <li>2. Ability to coordinate work of others?</li> <li>3. Ability to fit into company methods?</li> <li>4. Ability to improve methods?</li> <li>5. Will he/she see the whole job or get caught up in details?</li> </ol>  |
| <i>Insight</i>       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Realistic in appraising self?</li> <li>2. Desire for self-improvement?</li> <li>3. Interested in problems of others?</li> <li>4. Takes constructive action on weaknesses?</li> <li>5. How does he/she take criticism?</li> </ol>   |
| <i>Social Skills</i> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is this person a leader or follower?</li> <li>2. Interested in new ways of dealing with people?</li> <li>3. Can get along best with what types of people?</li> <li>4. Will wear well over the long term?</li> <li>5. Can make friends easily?</li> </ol>   |

# Get The Right Answers

## ASK THE CANDIDATE

1. Ever lose in competition? Feelings?
2. Ever uncertain about providing for your family?
3. How can the American way of business be improved?
4. Do you feel you've made a success of life to date? How?
5. Who was your best boss? Describe the person.
6. What duties did you like most in your last job? Least?
7. How do you feel about working with other employees?

1. What ambitions does your family have for you?
2. What have you done on your own to prepare for a better job?
3. What mortgages, debts, etc. press you now?
4. How will this job help you get what you want?
5. What obstacles are most likely to trip you up?

1. How did you get into this line of work?
2. Do you prefer to work alone or with others?
3. What do you like and dislike about your kind of work?
4. Which supervisors let you work alone? How did you feel about this?
5. When have you felt like giving up on a task?

1. What things disturb you most?
2. How do you get along with people you dislike?
3. What children's actions irritate you?
4. What were your most unpleasant work experiences?
5. Most pleasant work experiences?
6. What do you most admire in others?
7. What things do some people do that are irritating to other people?

1. What part of your work do you like best?
2. What part is the most difficult for you?
3. Give me an idea of how you spend a typical day.
4. Where do you want to be five years from now?
5. If you were the manager, how would you run your present job? What are the differences between planned and unplanned work?

1. Tell me about your strengths/weaknesses.
2. Are your weaknesses important enough to do something about them? Why or why not?
3. How do you feel about these weaknesses?
4. Most useful/useless criticism received?
5. How do you handle fault finders?

1. What do you like to do in your spare time?
2. Have you ever organized a group? Tell me about it.
3. What methods are effective in dealing with people?
4. What kind of people do you get along with best?
5. Do you prefer making new friends or keeping old ones?

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How [necessary is] the publishing experience? Where would you compromise if you had to give up something?" Answering that last question enables the individual entrepreneur to *prioritize* his specifications so that he knows which of the traits/skills he is asking for are most important.

"Your real goal," Half says, "is to get someone who has the *ability and willingness* to do the job. Sometimes your qualifications are very difficult to meet because the person who had the job previously developed certain skills while on the job. For example, let's take that controller we spoke of. A controller is basically an accountant. However, in many firms—particularly in small firms—the controller performs many functions. The previous controller may have *acquired* advertising and marketing skills. This person is leaving and now you're looking for a CPA-MBA controller who has marketing and advertising skills. Just try to find one. What's happened is that you've created a specification that didn't exist before. The only reason the old controller had those skills is because he worked himself into them. He educated himself while on the job." So, in the case of the ad for the new controller, the ability to learn marketing is important—marketing experience is not.

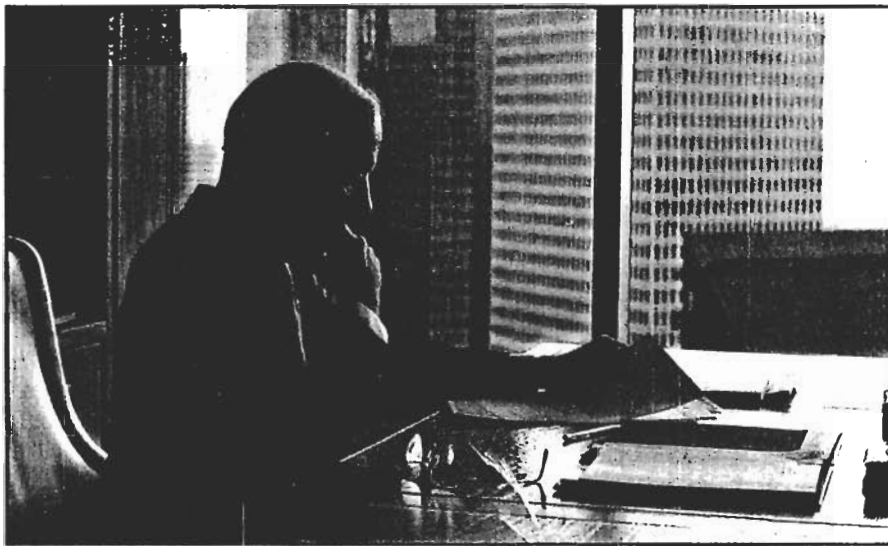
Half also believes that it's a big mistake to allow the departing employee to write the job specifications for his own replacement. "Everyone wants to make himself look good—real good," he says. "And people just naturally want to be missed when they leave a job. So they make the job [and their shoes] tough to fill. As a result, the job requirements can be totally unrealistic. It's a sad mistake, but I've seen employers allow that departing employee to not only set the specs but also interview the applicants for his job." So the person with hiring authority should write the ad, review the resumés, and interview the applicants. It's also impor-

tant to remember that if a personnel service finds the right applicant for the position, particularly if you've been unable to do so, it's well worth the fee charged.

"The most important factor the applicant should communicate to the prospective employer via the resumé is *achievement*," Half continues. "You'd be shocked at how often this is overlooked or omitted from a resumé. After all, the most important characteristic of *any* resumé is what the person has accomplished. These are the applicant's successes, and that's what the informed employer should look for."

To screen resumés properly, Half also suggests batching and spot-checking. If a secretary or assistant is prescreening resumés as they arrive, they should be separated into three categories: 1) strong candidates; 2) middle-of-the-roads; and 3) obviously unsuitable applicants. Once this is accomplished, the owner or interviewer with hiring authority can spot-check each category to ensure that applicants are properly batched. This also gives each resumé two chances to capture interest.

If there are a great many resumés to be processed, another technique Half suggests is pre-interview screening via telephone calls to the applicants. Giving the applicant a chance to sell himself or herself over the phone is an excellent method of providing the interviewer with key insights about that person. A quick phone call allows the interviewer to gauge the applicant's ability to conduct himself over the phone, to summarize past accomplishments succinctly, and to extemporaneously cope with an unscheduled request for information. When too many resumés arrive, this is a good method of weeding out candidates while giving everyone called the same opportunity to shine. For the busy entrepreneur, this technique can *significantly* reduce the time spent interviewing applicants.



THE VALUE OF RESUMÉS IN THE HIRING PROCESS IS OPEN TO DEBATE, ACCORDING TO THE EXPERTS, BUT EVEN THEIR ADVOCATES WOULD AGREE THAT A RESUMÉ ALONE CAN NEVER CONVEY THE INFORMATION TO BE LEARNED IN A FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW.

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## IMPROVING INTERVIEW SKILLS TO ATTRACT BETTER EMPLOYEES

Most tips on interviewing are directed at helping prospective employees improve their interview skills. But Ed Kiradjieff, a former Price Waterhouse personnel director and head of the Boston-based employment-consulting firm of Kiradjieff & Company, believes, "When it comes to interviewing, business owners who may interview infrequently also need advice to help them fill jobs with the best-qualified people." Kiradjieff has identified 10 ways entrepreneurs can improve their interviewing ability:

**Prepare a written job description.** Give some thought to just what the nature of the job is and write it down. This can be broken down into three elements: job duties and responsibilities, a description of the professional qualifications, and the kinds of work experience needed.

**Break the ice.** Establish a friendly atmosphere. You can do this by making small talk. Asking the candidate about personal interests not only puts him or her at ease but helps you gather information and details.

**Develop an interview time plan.** Plan the interview and [know] how much time you have for it. Try to avoid interruptions, such as phone calls. Be on time and stay on time. How you allocate the time for the interview is essential. Communicate the time plan to the candidate.

**Keep an open mind.** Guard against forming hiring decisions too early in the interview; you may weed out the right person. Look for positive attributes and strengths.

**Give the candidate time to tell his or her story.** One of the biggest errors is not giving the candidate enough time to talk.

**Present a truthful picture of the company and the job.** Candidates will respect an honest presentation of the pluses and minuses. Surprisingly, some managers overemphasize the negatives and turn off interest.

**Listen carefully.** Listen with full concentration and take notes. Listen for repetitions, consistency, and conviction. Look for the passion with which an applicant pursues his or her outside interests.

**Avoid salary hide 'n' seek.** Don't ask candidates, "How much do you need?" or "What will it take to get you on board?" This is threatening. He or she may ask too little for fear of being eliminated, or too much, expecting to be bargained down. It's best to ask about salary history. Most people are truthful about what they earn. The interviewer should also be truthful about the salary range. If the candidate has been earning \$30,000-60,000 and the job pays \$35,000-70,000, you have a match. You can then proceed to narrow down a starting salary and benefits package.

**Tell the candidate about the next step.** A candidate wants to know what will happen next and when. Don't leave him or her hanging on. Stick to the plan and communicate as promised up to the very end.

**Mind your manners.** Extend the kind of courtesy you would give your best customer. Who knows, the job hunter may want to buy your product some day. And above all, don't *act* interested—*be interested*. ■



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Alan Schonberg, cofounder and president of Management Recruiters International (MRI), an executive search and recruitment organization, strongly believes that resumés generate miscommunication. So adamant is Schonberg on this point that it is his company's policy *not to submit* a resumé to a prospective employer on behalf of an MRI client.

"Resumés per se are probably one of the most grossly misleading instruments in the United States," Schonberg insists. "Every time someone picks up a resumé, he comes to a preconceived notion of good, bad, or indifferent. Most interviewers see many, many candidates—as a result of reading their resumés—that should never even get an interview. Anyone who has the least bit of skill can make his or her resumé an inducement. Employers in this country spend enormous, countless hours per year plodding through interviews that should never have occurred. All those wasted interviews testify to the skill of the resumé writer who is not really the qualified person his resumé depicts.

"The prospective employer has a hunger, a need, a thirst to find a good candidate and make a good hire," adds Schonberg. He may be inundated with 30, 50, 70, or 150 resumés to read. The employer knows

he's only going to hire one of those people, and he's got to get through all those resumés. As a result, he *skims* through the resumés quickly, and an artful resumé writer can make ambiguity so attractive to the reader that his eye just picks up key, well-turned phrases that the writer knows are going to appeal. Yet those statements only convey ambiguity. The resumé doesn't really state what the person has done and what his or her track record actually is.

"There is more ambiguity in resumés than *anything* else," Schonberg continues. "In the resumé game today, the old 'Just the facts, Ma'am' approach won't wash. The employer who is reading just facts that are not presented in a stimulating package will pass on that resumé because it just hasn't grabbed him."

If Schonberg had his druthers, he would "totally eliminate the resumé from the interviewing process." But realistically that won't happen anytime soon. Flawed as resumés are, they are still the foundation on which professional-employment opportunities rest. No matter how poorly employers screen resumés, no matter how many faulty preconceptions result, neither employers nor job seekers seem willing to give them up.

It stands to reason, then, that business owners still must rely on the resumé in the hiring process. Knowing that, the smart entrepreneur will view those *vitae* with a keen eye.

Is the resumé cleanly prepared and presented? Does it provide the reader with a "professional look" at its owner? Are there clearly stated successes, or is the resumé rife with ambiguities?

Remember what you're really looking for in an employee when you write an ad. First analyze and then prioritize job duties versus salary. How much does your new person need to know the first day? How much can a quick learner pick up on the job? How important is attitude versus experience? Isn't what you're really looking for a motivated individual who will make a contribution to your team?

As an employer with hiring authority, you must keep in mind the two goals of the resumé: First, it must capture your attention by standing out from all those others in the pile. Second, once it has captured your attention, the resumé must then sell itself (and its owner) sufficiently to warrant an interview. The resumé has become a promotion. There's nothing wrong with a successful promo, but it is *not* an end in itself. The payoff, for both the employer and

candidate, should occur in the interview.

Although we have focused this discussion on analyzing resumés, it's also a good idea to have a clear idea about what you want from an interview, and from the interviewee,

*before* the fact. What are the most important pieces of information you wish to obtain? Are you primarily concerned with your face-to-face reaction to the applicant, or will the answers to specific questions be the primary factor influencing your hiring decision?

If you come in to the interview with key questions to be answered, is that because the information was not contained in the resumé? If important points about the applicant's background or work history are omitted, you should have a very sound alternative motive for granting the interview in the first place. A certain amount of flexibility will pay off in the long run, particularly if the person you wish to hire will be employed for reasons other than writing skills. If you're filling a people-to-people position, for example, the only way you'll find the right person for the job is through an interview, not from a resumé.

Unfortunately, there aren't any clean and neat shortcuts to the hiring process. If you want to get the best employee, you'll just have to work harder than the other guy at finding them. Read resumés with a grain of salt. Preinterview telephone conversations with prospective candidates could save you quite a bit of unnecessary interviewing.

And above all, when you're considering candidates you might want to keep in mind Robert Half's definition of a resumé: "It's a balance sheet without any liabilities." ■

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