

Picking the right employees

Gerry King looks at what's important when selecting new staff and provides some tips for when you apply for jobs

In July 2006, banking group HBOS appointed Andy Hornby as its chief executive, even though he had no banking qualifications. After the group made losses exceeding £10 billion in 2008, Hornby was forced out of his job. Who selected him? And how are selection decisions made?

Selecting the right employees is an important function for the owner of a small business or for the human resources department of a larger business. The right candidate should be self-motivated, perform well and add value to the organisation. By contrast, the wrong candidate might lack motivation, be unable or unwilling to perform well and may leave, costing the business dearly in terms of wasted recruitment, selection and training costs and reduced productivity.

While most businesses use the term **recruitment** to cover the whole process of employing a new member of staff, some exam boards classify recruitment as the

stages from identifying a vacancy up to the receipt of applications (Figure 1). They then separate the selection process to include shortlisting candidates, choosing them and offering them the job (Figure 2). This article explores the selection part of the process. The method of selection used will depend upon a range of factors, including the budget available and the complexity of the position the business wishes to fill.

Methods of selection

The traditional approach to selection is the interview. Generally, the employer will review all applications and shortlist maybe four to six candidates. The shortlist may be drawn up by comparing the applications to the list of essential and desirable attributes identified in the **person specification**.

In larger businesses, where the volume of applications may run into the hundreds, the first stage of shortlisting may be outsourced to a recruitment agency, which will conduct simple telephone interviews against agreed criteria in order to pick out the most suitable candidates. There may also be an online assessment that the candidate must pass. These methods provide consistency and save the company time and expense later on.

Interview tips

It is a fact of life that the best candidate doesn't always get the job. Some candidates are better at presenting themselves, while some interviewers might have preferences that are entirely subjective. To help overcome this, remember the importance of good preparation by thoroughly



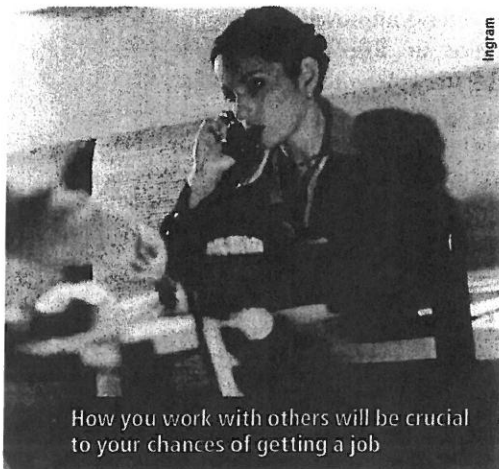
researching the organisation that you are being interviewed for. Make sure that you give a good first impression, including paying attention to your appearance and handshake. Listen carefully to the interviewer for clues about his or her personality and interests, which you can then reflect back.

A good interview should follow a relaxed but formal structure in an attempt to find the candidate best matched to the person specification. Many interviews are evidence based, with questions asking for examples of when you have demonstrated the attributes or competencies that the job requires. A typical question might be, 'please describe to me a time when you have been responsible for others.' Once you have described the situation, the interviewer will ask follow-up questions to further assess your strengths in areas such as leadership and teamwork.

Many employers now use search engines such as Google to research prospective candidates, so you should check that your online profile presents a positive image. If you have a public Facebook profile, be sure to delete those embarrassing photographs and any evidence of a poor attitude, such as complaining about current or former employers.

Assessment centres

An assessment centre aims to gain a more rounded view of each candidate by using a



How you work with others will be crucial to your chances of getting a job

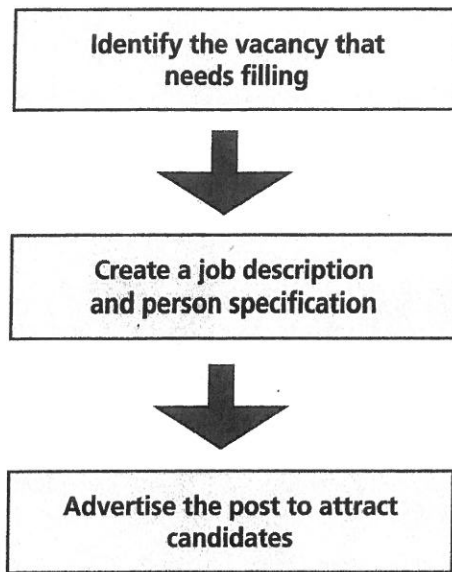


Figure 1 The recruitment process

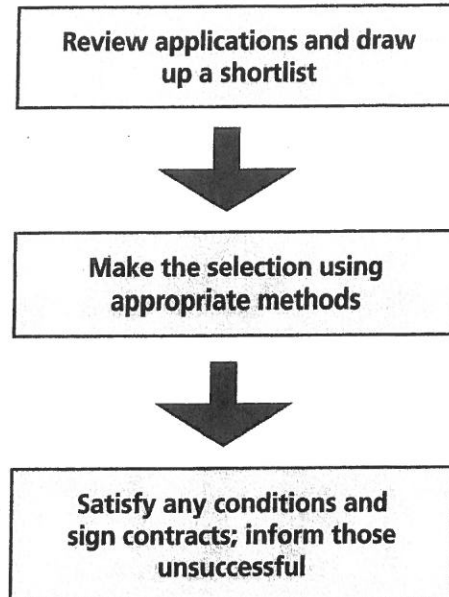


Figure 2 The selection process

range of exercises, all designed to find the best person for the job. Assessment centres may last 1 or 2 days and may include presentations, tests, exercises and group activities. They can be intense experiences and each assessor will be assigned to only one or two candidates during the process. The current level of competition means that some larger companies use assessment centres for hiring undergraduates who are applying for temporary placements as part of their degree course.

Presentations

The assessment centre requirements may include the design and delivery of a presentation. Assessors will be looking for an engaging presentation that is well structured and has a logical flow. If you are given the topic in advance then make sure that you practise your delivery, paying particular attention to timings.

Tests

Employers may use structured tests to help them assess your suitability for a job. These may be specific to the type of work that you will be undertaking, for example IT skills, or they may be **psychometric tests** that gauge general skills such as verbal reasoning, numeric analysis and diagrammatic and spatial reasoning. There are many exercises that you can access on the internet to help you prepare for these. Employers may also use **personality tests**,

which have no right or wrong answers but are designed to give the employer a profile of your character and preferences.

Exercises

Exercises will be used to test skills such as organisation, planning, prioritising, data analysis and time management. You may be given a case study and be asked to analyse it and report on your findings, or you may be given a range of e-mails and phone messages and be asked to take decisions on which tasks to prioritise or delegate, explaining how you would respond.

Group activities

Group activities are designed to assess your interpersonal and communication skills to see how well you mix with other people. They are used to evaluate higher-level skills such as leadership, negotiation and the ability to influence others. They may include practical tasks (such as designing a piece of equipment) to test teamwork, timing, planning and problem-solving skills, or they may comprise group discussions and role plays. The assessor will be looking for candidates who find the right balance between advancing their own ideas and involving the rest of the group.

Making the appointment

Once the successful candidate has been chosen, terms and conditions will need to be agreed and contracts will be drawn

up. References will probably have been checked at the shortlisting stage, but if not then they should now be checked before the formal offer is confirmed and contracts are signed. Finally, those who have been unsuccessful will need to be informed, often with the offer to provide feedback.

You should actively seek feedback if you are unsuccessful in an application, even if it is not openly offered. It will help you learn from the process and better prepare for your next opportunity.

Evaluation

Remember that the selection procedure is a two-way process. As well as being designed for the employer to find the right candidate, it is an opportunity for you to decide whether the organisation is right for you. In addition to preparing thoroughly and asking questions to your interviewers during the selection process, you should take the time to look around the organisation and chat to existing employees to get a proper feel of what it would be like to work there. Businesses will also evaluate their own selection process, e.g. by measuring the retention rates of staff employed and the percentage of candidates who accept job offers.

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