Uncovering Soft Skills

Interviewing techniques for drawing out an employee's soft skills

As IT continues to evolve, integrating more closely with other business units, there has been a growing need for IT professionals to have what are called 'soft skills'. But, what are they?

Essentially soft skills are anything beyond the technical skills needed to perform a job. They fall primarily under the categories of communication and relational skills. Communication skills include active listening, writing, and speaking, while relational skills are adaptability, a respectful attitude, problem-solving, common sense, and the ability to make decisions.

Considering an employee's soft skills during the interview process is important, as they are just as essential as the technical skills a candidate brings to the table. How do you uncover these communication and relational skills prior to bringing an individual on board?

It is probably impossible to perfectly assess an individual's soft skills during the interview, but there are several strategies you can use to help you find the best employee for your team.

1. Assess your needs:

Just as the same technical skills are not required for every position, not every position requires the same combination of communication and relational skills. It's a good idea to take time before the interview to assess which soft skills are necessary for the role you are hiring, or are essential for an employee to thrive on your team.

In addition, talk with your team about the role you're looking to fill. Find out what insight they have to offer concerning the position and the type of person who should fill it. In doing so, you are likely to get a clearer idea of which skills are indispensable.

You will not find, and you do not need an individual who has every soft skill, so defining which key skills you are looking for prior to the interview will ensure a more productive interview process.

2. Ask open-ended questions:

Open-ended questions directly test some soft skills—like adaptability, and the ability to communicate effectively—but more importantly they give candidates the opportunity to reveal the skills they have or would use in particular circumstances. There are several kinds of questions that draw out soft skills.

Ask general questions about the candidate's interests and hobbies. Smiling and asking your interviewee, 'tell me about yourself,' is a good place to start. Asking candidates about themselves puts them at ease and can give you a sense of personality and how they relate to others. (We know it's obvious, but we don't think you should ever underestimate smiling during the interview. As interviewer, you're likely to get better responses

from your candidates—and give them a better impression of your company—if you smile during the interview.)

You may also want to ask a more pointed, challenging question, like 'what would you improve about yourself, both professionally and personally?

Tell me about a time when…this type of questioning has grown in popularity as it is a good tool for drawing out an individual's communication and relational skills—it asks candidates to tell you about past experiences and share examples of their soft skills in action.

This is an effective questioning method in many instances, but it can also be leading. For example, if you are looking for someone who handles conflict well and ask a candidate to tell you about a time when he had a conflict with a coworker, the candidate knows you are looking for a story that shows how he successfully resolved a conflict.

Use 'what if' scenarios. Rather than drawing from past experiences, asking candidates 'what if' questions asks them to envision working at your company and predict how they would respond to or handle a situation. Create a scenario you think would provoke someone's emotions and then let her describe how she would react. You are asking the candidate to process your question in the moment and respond without the security of a practiced story.

The candidate may still guess what kind of answer you're looking for, but this method of question has the advantage of uncovering talent potential. You may be interviewing someone who lacks experience in one area. But if you ask what he would do in a particular situation, he could surprise you (and a good candidate will) with the knowledgeable way he approaches a scenario with which he is less familiar.

Ask directly about soft skills. 'What is the importance of soft skills for you in doing your job well as an IT professional?' 'What soft skills do you have, and how do they help you do your job well?' or 'What would your last manager describe as your top three soft skills?" The way a candidate answers these questions can be very telling. Does she know what soft skills are? Does he think they are important?

Is the answer an 'easy out' or does the candidate have knowledge of the soft skills she possesses and how to use them?

3. Read the candidate:
As an interviewer, you are probably used to the gut feelings you get about a candidate during an interview. Communication and rapport are very important qualifiers in finding someone who will be a good fit for your team. But some skills aren't determined by intuition or gut instinct. If you know how to read a candidate in an interview, you should be able to gauge which soft skills he or she has, and which are missing.

Here are a few things we look for when interviewing a candidate for soft skills:

Active listening—does the candidate repeat your questions back to you? Dos he answer in a way that clearly shows he heard and understands what you were asking?

Adaptability—how does she answer questions that are direct, but open-ended? Is she able to answer questions that catch her off guard or asks her to talk about a specific time or unusual scenario?

Respect—does the candidate interrupt you or wait until you are done speaking before jumping in? Did he make eye contact? Does he say thank you before leaving the interview? Is he prepared for
the interview? Was he on time?

Confidence—does the candidate want the job? Does she give a firm handshake? Is she able to speak knowledgeably about a technology she hasn't used recently, or at all?

If someone is a poor listener, or is unable to explain or speak knowledgeably about her work, it could hinder work performance. Your work environment may be one that requires someone to be a self-starter or one that functions on a hierarchy of direction and assignments. Taking the time to identify the core soft skills you want in a prospective employee and developing a systematic approach for uncovering them in the interview leads to greater success in hiring the right IT professional for your team.

IT professionals collaborate on a daily basis with other business units. As such, soft skills will continue to be increasingly important in the coming years. Interviewing for and valuing soft skills now will ensure you have a strong IT department in the future.