



## **Fool-proof interviews: One manager's formula for success**

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by Marla Emery

### **Fool-proof Interviews**

During my tenure as manager, I have interviewed over 50 candidates for technical writing and technical editing positions. Managing a team of eight technical writers with diverse personalities brings challenges for any manager. Finding members of a team that can work well together, work well on their own, and are always up to the task doesn't happen by chance.

In sharing the interview process that we use to hire technical writers and technical editors, I hope that you will be able to glean some strategies that will help you the next time you conduct an interview. While not every interview is handled the same way or with the same amount of structure, we've developed an interview process that is comprehensive, adaptable and suits our needs.

### **Purposes of an Interview**

The purposes of an interview are:

- ◆ To give and receive information
- ◆ To learn about the applicant
- ◆ To find out if there's CHEMISTRY

A well-defined and comprehensive interview process gives a manager the information needed to successfully choose the best candidate for any position. Beyond that, though, I've been told by the folks we hired that they accepted the job offer because our interview process gave them the information they needed to make their decision. The interview process provides the applicant with a job description, a first-hand view of the work environment, and a meeting with the people that he/she will be working with. That's important because I believe both parties need to have a high level of comfort in order to make the relationship work on a day-to-day basis. Skills, background, and experience must all be compatible, and there has to be the right chemistry!

### **Recommended Reading**

There are many books on the market that explain how to review a resume, how to interview effectively, how to assess the applicant's strengths and weaknesses, what questions to ask, and how to ask them. In my opinion, one of the best books on this subject is Knock' Em Dead by Martin Yate. Even though this book is written for job hunters, I also highly recommend it for hiring managers.



### Phases of the Interview Process

The phases of the interview process that I use to hire technical communicators are:

- Phase 1**      Resume review
- Phase 2**      Phone interview
- Phase 3**      Applicant has a personal interview with:
  - Manager
  - Group
  - Summary with manager
- Phase 4**      Take-home writing test
- Phase 5**      Choosing the best candidate for the job

### Phase 1: Resume Review

Today, the Internet is commonly used to post resumes. If you're a recruiter or manager looking for qualified candidates, you can do a keyword search to retrieve literally hundreds of resumes. In addition, if you place an ad for a position that you want to fill, you can easily get a mountain of responses.

I've looked through many stacks of resumes, skimming through and picking out the relatively few that catch my eye. I look for resumes that stand out because they provide the information that I need. Visually appealing is nice, but the information presentation is essential.

At this stage, it's very helpful to identify exactly the information you are looking for. There are many things, such as work history and education that most managers would be interested in. However, as a manager of a documentation group, I look for a few key bits of information that are specific to our industry.

### Key Points to Look for in a Resume

A well-written cover letter and resume are particularly crucial in our field because the resume serves as an initial writing sample. An applicant's resume is held to the same standards as the documentation that comes out of my department, which means that I am only interested in resumes that are well-organized and consider the audience's need for information.

Most people in the technical documentation field are interested in and capable of learning new technology. That's why I feel that knowing how to use tools is less important than what the applicant has done with the tools that he/she has used. Look for job descriptions that include the types of documentation that the applicant has written, the audience, the medium, what types of products the documentation was written for, and the platforms used.



Occasionally managers decide not to accept cover letters with resumes. I believe, however, that a cover letter can help expedite the resume review process. Also, when included, a skills summary can also decrease the amount of time you spend reviewing an applicant's qualifications.

### **Phase 2: Phone Interview**

A phone interview is a fairly new part of the traditional interview process. I find the phone interview to be extremely helpful because it gives me the opportunity to meet the person behind the resume and it gives the applicant the first chance to sell his or her skills to me, the interviewer.

#### **Phone Interview Pointers**

Always make an appointment for phone interviews to give the applicant a chance to prepare. The interviewer should always call the job applicant, so you don't put the candidate in an awkward position of locating you if you step away from your desk. I usually begin the interview by introducing the company and the products, and describing the position, before asking questions about the candidate's background. The candidate should answer questions directly and concisely. An applicant who asks questions is prepared and inquisitive.

### **Phase 3: Personal Interview**

At our company, the personal interview has several important components. Each component is meant to provide the interviewer and the interviewee an opportunity to find out as much as possible about each other in a relatively short time period.

#### **Elements of the Personal Interview**

The elements of the personal interview that I use are:

- ◆ The manager meets and interviews the applicant.
- ◆ If the applicant is applying for a position as a Technical Editor, he/she takes a timed test.
- ◆ The applicant meets and interviews with team members.
- ◆ In closing, the manager conducts a summary meeting with applicant.

#### **Initial Interview with the Applicant**

During the initial meeting with the applicant, I make observations regarding:

- ◆ Overall appearance - How does applicant present him/herself?
- ◆ Communication skills - How does he/she speak and what does he/she say?
- ◆ Knowledge - How does he/she respond to questions?
- ◆ Inquisitiveness - What questions does he/she ask?
- ◆ Chemistry - Do I think we could work together?



Communication skills, knowledge, and chemistry are all related. For instance, when I ask the applicant a question, he/she should answer the question directly based upon his/her knowledge of the topic. This is particularly important considering that I am interviewing for a technical communicator. Answering the question simply and concisely is an indicator of how well he/she will fit into a technical communications job in my office.

### **Group Interview**

My whole team is usually involved in the interview process. A group interview gives the applicant a chance to meet the team and gives the team a chance to meet a prospective member. This is another opportunity to discover whether the applicant is right for the job.

A group interview can be difficult for the interviewee, who has to respond to the questions and expectations of multiple people at the same time. A large group may be broken into two so that interactions provide meaningful feedback. With some consideration and planning, though, group meetings are very effective in helping a manager to identify an applicant's strengths.

After a group interview, consider how the applicant did with these indicators:

- ◆ A cooperative attitude
- ◆ Eye contact with the person who is asking the question
- ◆ Answers given directly to the person who is asking the question
- ◆ Eye contact with other group members
- ◆ Tactfulness
- ◆ Asking pertinent questions in the group setting
- ◆ Willingness to participate in group discussions

### **Summary Interview with Applicant**

After the last team interview, I always meet with the candidate. By that time, the candidate is often worn to a frazzle. This is certainly understandable. At this point, I try to help him/her regroup and make some sense of what he/she has just experienced. I start this meeting with the question "What did you learn today?"

The answer to this question will reveal what the applicant thought was the most important information that he/she received that day, how he/she feels that he/she would fit into the department, and his/her current feelings about the opportunity with your company.

It's a good idea to close this meeting by discussing your interviewing and hiring timelines, the number of applicants that you're interviewing, when you'll get back to the applicant, and company policies on the amount of time a resume will stay in the personnel database if he/she is not hired for your position.



### Phase 4: The Writing Test

If the applicant looks promising, you will need to know if the candidate has the skill set and knowledge to actually do the job. What better way than to give them a realistic work problem to solve?

Give the writer a description of the problem, with directions on the length of the assignment and any other particulars that he/she will need to know. Supply an envelope to mail it back, or provide an e-mail address. Make sure to give a deadline or ask the applicant when he/she thinks it can be completed.

When the test comes back, check it out. Did the applicant:

- ◆ Solve the problem?
- ◆ Follow instructions?
- ◆ Check his/her work, including using a spelling and grammar checker?
- ◆ Return the test promptly?

### Phase 5: Choosing the Best Candidate for the Job

Once I receive the writing test back from the applicant, I hold a team meeting to evaluate the candidate based on the personal interview and the writing test. Generally speaking, there's usually a strong consensus among the group as to whether or not the candidate "has what it takes."

#### Hiring Considerations

When deciding whether to hire a candidate, the team takes the following factors into consideration:

- ◆ Skills: quality of writing sample, proficiency level with software tools, knowledge of the technology, writing test
- ◆ Background: knowledge of industry, what the applicant brings to the table that makes him uniquely qualified for the position
- ◆ References: comments from his/her coworkers
- ◆ Chemistry: will he/she be a good fit with the position?

My most important consideration is chemistry! Although we're talking about chemistry here, you may not feel that this is a very scientific way to judge someone's technical abilities.

In our department, chemistry is the one common ingredient for success. We've had very talented and skilled candidates come through the doors, but only those candidates who are also well received by the group come back through those doors as employees!



### **About the Author**

Marla Emery has been in the technical communications field for over 20 years and currently works at Computer Associates. This article was adapted her presentation at Career Day 1999, sponsored by the [Philadelphia Metro Chapter of the Society for Technical Communications](#).

