

A New Accelerated Approach to Selecting Talent:

A successful Case Study of Online Interviewing

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Imagine you need to hire/promote 400 people for key managerial positions within a two-week period as part of a growth strategy; that this is a new position in the organization and that you want to select candidates from a pool of 1400 existing employees; that the selection process must be carried out without disruption to any function, no harm to employee morale and no lawsuits.

If presented with this assignment, you might think it impossible or at least improbable. After all, the sheer volume of interviews necessary – not to mention interpreting and coordinating the results of those interviews – would be a huge obstacle.

At least it would be an obstacle if you insisted on conducting interviews in-person. We'd like to suggest an alternative: an online selection process that not only speeds up hiring but makes the right hires with uncanny accuracy. We'll share a successful case study example that illustrates the viability of this process, offer suggestions about how you can implement/facilitate the process and provide an analysis of its pros and cons.

Let's start out with the case study, which was 100% successful in hiring the needed personal, efficiently and effectively and just as important, without any drop in company morale.

KEY FACTORS: LITTLE TIME, MANY CANDIDATES, NEW POSITION

Although there are many benefits to an online selection process, it is not always a good substitute for face-to-face interviews. Clearly, you can't get a sense of a person through their expressions, dress and body language when you're conducting the process electronically. However, in today's fast moving, complex world, there are many instances where it is strategic to sacrifice the benefits of the face-to-face interview, for speed, efficiency and the selection precision of an online interview.

AJAX: A CASE STUDY

A large, nationally-known company we'll refer to as Ajax was recently acquired by a private equity firm, and this firm installed a new CEO. This CEO began implementing a high-growth strategy to increase profit, trying to change the culture from loyalty-based, short-term and firefighting to performance-based and client-centric. A number of options were explored to make this change happen, and it was eventually decided that the best approach was to restructure and create a new leadership position just above the customer interface level. The new position—the equivalent of a store manager—needed to be filled immediately.

Typically, when companies try to fill a leadership position, they want to go through a series of one-on-one interviews so the interviewer(s) can obtain a “gut-feel” for whether someone is right for the position. In this situation, however, such an approach wasn't feasible because of the speed and volume issues. Perhaps more significantly, mass delegation of interviewing would have created a disconnect between some of those put in the new jobs and the culture. Many of the interviewers would have been middle managers, steeped in the “old” Ajax culture. Their biases would probably have resulted in store managers who were not well suited to this critical position—who had more in common with the loyalty-based, short-term mentality of the previous regime. In addition, cronyism is always a problem when people are being selected from within, and that too would have sabotaged the process when so many people needed to fill so many positions quickly.

On top of all this, the position itself came with very specific but challenging specs – not just anyone could do the job.

For all these reasons, we recommended and launched an internal interviewing process built around psychologically valid, online application forms.

THE ELECTRONIC NUTS AND BOLTS: HOW THE APPLICATION WORKED

Using a simple Internet platform (SurveyMonkey), we had the 1400 applicants complete an online application form that assessed for five criteria:

- Relevant work experience
- Sustained performance record
- Technical functional skills
- Leadership competencies
- Adaptability

We created a series of questions for Ajax applicants to answer designed to provide us with insight into these five areas. Of the five, adaptability was key. We knew that the individuals who could best handle the new position would be those with superior adaptive skills—that they would not only make a smooth transition to a new job but to a new culture.

Yet of all the five areas, adaptability may seem like the hardest to measure without a face-to-face interview. Yet as you’ll discover, it was measurable.

To assess adaptability, the application asked the following:

Have you been in a situation where you were asked to do something that you believed the timeframe to complete was inadequate, and it did not go well? Yes or no? If you answered Yes, please choose one situation and explain. Be specific, tell your experience: 1) What happened? 2) Why did you choose to do what you did? 3) Explain why you believe you did not overcome the time constraints.

We prepared a handful of individuals assessing the responses to look for the three signs of adaptability: a rich array of experiences; learning based on those experiences; application of what has been learned to future situations. As a result, applicants who described a wide range of challenging work experiences, who could articulate specific knowledge gleaned from the work they did and who demonstrated they applied what they had learned were the ones most likely to be chosen for the positions.

To help evaluators chart the adaptability responses, we provided the following tool:

Personal Change -- Adaptability				
Low	Negative Indicator	Mixed	Positive Indicator	High
	“Hits the wall”; told by others that must change		Picks up on need to change on own, and adjusts behavior accordingly	
	Defensive; makes excuses, blames others		Not defensive; admits own issues; accepts responsibility	
	Waits for problems to surface, then reacts		Seeks feedback and modifies personal actions to fit the circumstances	
	Arrogant, excessive use of the word “I”		Humble and candid	
	Focuses on self, stories center on individual accomplishments rather than team achievements		Focuses on how to be helpful with others	
-		=		+

(-) Needs development and/or experience to meet current business needs	(=) Meets current business needs	(+) Strongly meets current business needs
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We should add that the first week of this process focused on distributing the application and retrieving completed responses. During the second week, Ajax' selection teams reviewed the applications and made their decisions. Not only were these teams required to provide a rationale for their decisions on applicants, but the information became the basis for individual development plans – both for those selected and those who were not.

OUTCOMES

A number of positive outcomes emerged from this process, including:

- **Recognition that online applications are a better option than one-on-one interviews in certain situations.** While the online approach has a downside – inability to obtain a feel for a candidate – it also provides many advantages, such as speed and efficiency. More than that, it can identify certain key traits critical for a position with uncanny accuracy. And we found that employees responded positively to the process, believing that it takes the favoritism and other types of bias out of the equation. In fact, no negative repercussions were seen – morale remained high during and after the selections, no lawsuits were filed and worked processes were not disrupted.
- **Identified “hidden” talent.** Using normal experience and expertise evaluation factors, employees with high adaptability and leadership potential would have been passed over in traditional one-on-one interviews. For instance, two women who lacked sufficient work experience and technical skills, but showed clear signs of being adaptable, were selected for the new store manager positions. After five months, both their operations were performing significantly above expectations.
- **Excellent retention.** Of the 400 people Ajax selected, only five of those left their jobs within five months after starting, and those five left for non-performance reasons. In a company where management turnover at this level is over 20% annually, this is an especially noteworthy statistic.
- **Selection of Solid Performers.** Of the 400 individuals selected, over 98% of them had either met or exceeded expectations within the 6 month evaluation period. This percentage is far greater than most selection interview processes. The success can be attributed to how the selection process also identified areas of development for each candidate. Each successful candidate was given a development and coaching session within their first 30 days in their new role.

As this case study shows, interview processes that require speed and efficiency can be successfully administered with an online interview. Though we recognize the value of one-on-one interviewing and believe it is tremendously useful in certain situations for certain types of jobs, the online interview process can be more successful depending on the parameters. Any company faced with the challenge of hiring or promoting multiple staff in a short period of time, would find the greatest success from using an online interview process. There is no question that the success of the online interviewing process challenges the traditional thinking of face-to-face interviews, but this new generation of conducting interviews is ideal for many companies needing the speed and efficiency it offers.