

How to Hire the Right Person

The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/guides/business/how-to-hire-the-right-person?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>) · by @nytcorneroffice

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Avoid the Standard Job Interview

Use these basic principles to avoid the common pitfalls of the interview.

A typical job interview is little more than a social call with some predictable choreography. A conference-room meeting, a pristine résumé and the standard questions: Where do you want to be in five years? What do you consider your biggest failure? What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Add in some small talk — maybe the candidate and the interviewer have something in common, like an alma mater or an acquaintance from an earlier job — and that's largely it. The candidate *seems* good, and the references check out. So an offer is made, and fingers are crossed that everything works out.

Then, a month later, the new hire misses an important deadline or starts complaining about the work. Cue that sinking feeling: You start wondering if hiring this person was a mistake.

Of course there's a better way. Here are three principles that can help you hire the right person:

1. **Be creative.** Every candidate will be prepared for commonplace interview questions. Find new ways to truly understand how a person thinks.
2. **Be challenging.** Put the candidate in situations where they are more likely

to show their true selves.

3. Allow your employees to help. You are not the only person who is going to have to work with this candidate. There is likely already a team of employees you trust that will have to interact with him or her every day. Their opinion should matter.

Get Away From Your Desk

You'll have a much better sense of your candidate if you get them out from behind a desk and watch how they behave.



“I can get a really good sense of whether I want to be working with somebody when I walk them through the place.”

The Goal

As you're sizing up job candidates, there are two key qualities to check for:

- Is the person genuinely interested in the work of the organization?

- Do they treat people as equals, regardless of their title?

If you take them out of the office or conference room to see how they interact with others, you'll get a better sense of their personality.

Take Them on a Tour

Stay in the building and show the candidates around your company, and maybe introduce them to some colleagues.

Things to pay attention to:

- Are they asking questions about what everybody does and how things work?
- Are they curious?
- Do they treat everyone they meet with respect, and show interest in what they do?

For Patty Stonesifer, who now runs Martha's Table, a Washington nonprofit, the tour is a key test for any job candidate.

"I can get a really good sense of whether I want to be working with somebody when I walk them through the place," said Ms. Stonesifer, a former top Microsoft executive who also ran the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for years. "I'll stop and introduce them to a half-dozen people, and see if it's just a handshake or whether there's some curiosity and interest."

Share a Meal

Take a candidate out for lunch or dinner. Going to a restaurant will reveal all sorts of clues about someone. For many leaders, this is the most important part of the interview process.

The key is to watch whether the candidate is considerate of others — an essential quality of effective team players.

Things to pay attention to:

- Are they polite to everyone who is serving them?
- Do they look people in the eye (a sign of respect)?
- Are they irritated or flustered by problems?
- Can they keep a conversation going, with smart questions?
- Do they barrel through the restaurant, or let others go first?

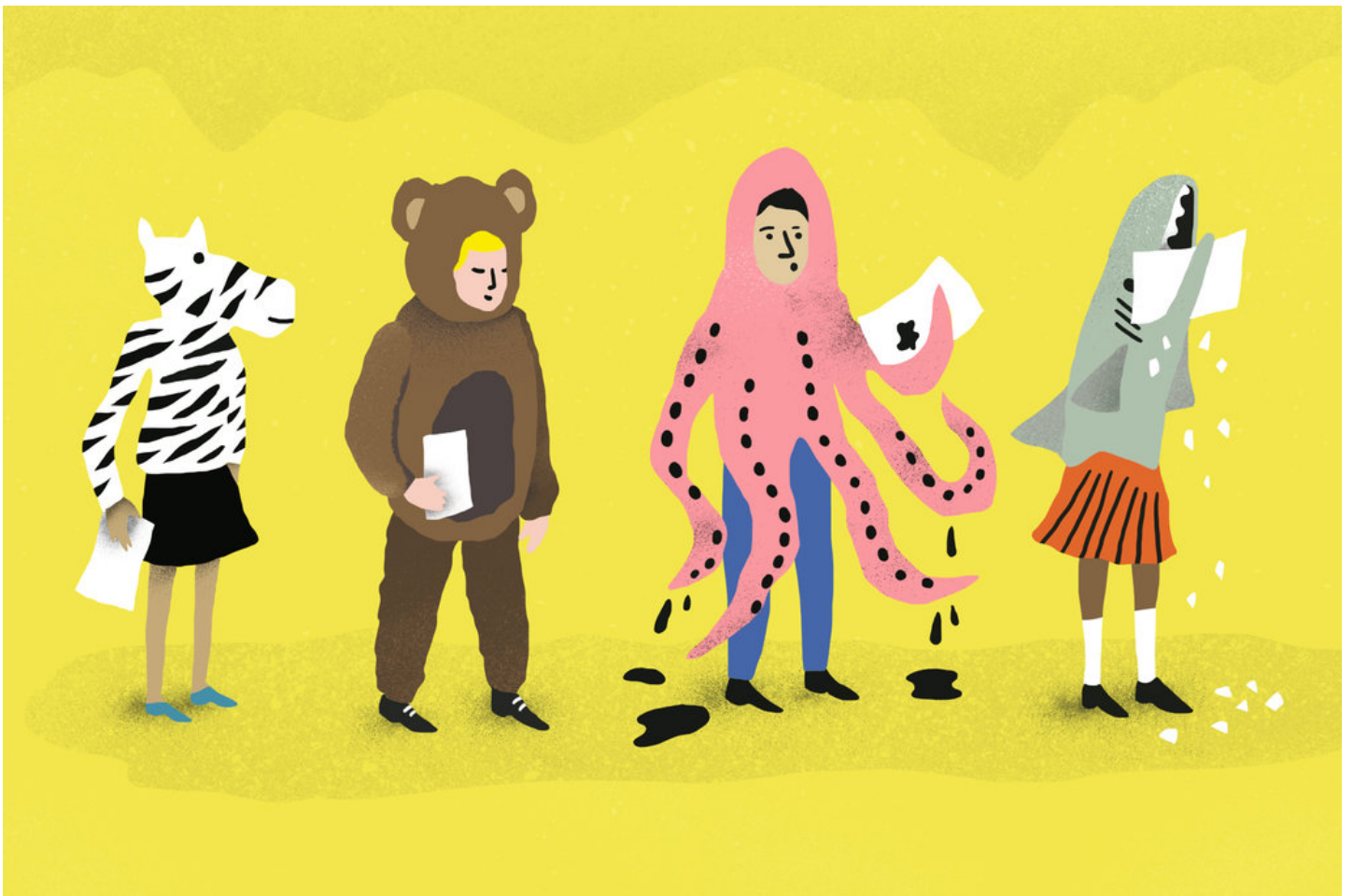
“You learn so much in a meal,” said Carol Smith, the publisher of Harper’s Bazaar. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/business/26corner.html>) “It’s like a little microcosm of life.”

The candidate’s personality comes out during a meal, providing answers to key tests for Ms. Smith: “Are you going to connect with us? Are you going to be part of the team, or are you going to be one of these independent players who wants to take all the credit? Are you good with assistants?”

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Throw Some Curveballs

Unusual questions will get candidates to open up and provide insights into what makes them tick.



“I think if someone is self-aware, then they can always continue to grow. If they’re not self-aware, I think it’s harder for them to evolve or adapt beyond who they already are.”

The Goal

Smart candidates will be prepared for all the usual interview questions, and will try to find clever ways to turn any negatives into positives, worried that any admission of weakness or vulnerability will count as a point against them. This strategy usually backfires with chief executives, since it makes a candidate seem less honest and trustworthy.

To get beyond the rehearsed answers, many executives have developed their own interview questions to better understand what a candidate is really like.

And we don't mean brain-teaser questions like, "How many golf balls can you fit into an airplane?" Laszlo Bock, the former senior vice president of people operations at Google (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/20/business/in-head-hunting-big-data-may-not-be-such-a-big-deal.html>), said that while the company once used those types of questions, it ultimately decided that they were a complete waste of time. "They don't predict anything," Mr. Bock said. "They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart."

Here are some unusual questions that will reveal a lot about a candidate:

Interview Questions to Ask

What is Your Natural Strength?

A person's natural strength is not about their current title or what they studied in college. It is a particular skill or ability that, for them, comes as naturally as breathing but that others may find difficult. Other ways to ask this question: If everybody is in the top 5 percent of the world at some skill, what is yours? Or what is your ninja skill?

What Kind of Animal Would You Be? And Why?

This may strike you as silly, but the answer can tell you a lot, particularly when candidates explain why they chose a certain animal. If you want to test it before you use it in a job interview, try it out at your next dinner party.

Ask enough people this question, and you're likely to hear some surprising answers, and gain valuable insights that will tell you whether they're right for the job. The chief executive who often asks this question, for example, says that if she's hiring somebody for sales, she likes to hear a predator as the answer, like a lion. If

somebody is going to be working in teams all the time, a social animal may be the right answer. The “why?” part of the answer will also tell you a lot about their level of self-awareness.

What Qualities of Your Parents Do You Like the Most?

We’re all influenced by our parents, often more than we’d like to admit. So it’s a good bet that the answers to this question will reveal a lot about the candidate. You can also ask how these qualities come out in their daily lives.

One chief executive takes this question a step further and asks people about the qualities of their parents they like the *least*. (That may be a bit too heavy for some people, though.)

What is the Biggest Misperception People Have About You?

The answers to this question will reveal candidates’ level of self-awareness. Do they know how they come across to others, even in ways that may not be a true reflection of who they are?

This can also be a bit of a trick question, too, because what really matters is how people perceive you – in a sense, there is no such thing as misperception; in this context, perception is reality.

Tony Hsieh, the chief executive of Zappos.com, uses this question often. Here’s what he’s listening for with this approach: “I think it’s a combination of how self-aware people are and how honest they are. I think if someone is self-aware, then they can always continue to grow. If they’re not self-aware, I think it’s harder for them to evolve or adapt beyond who they already are.”

More About Hiring

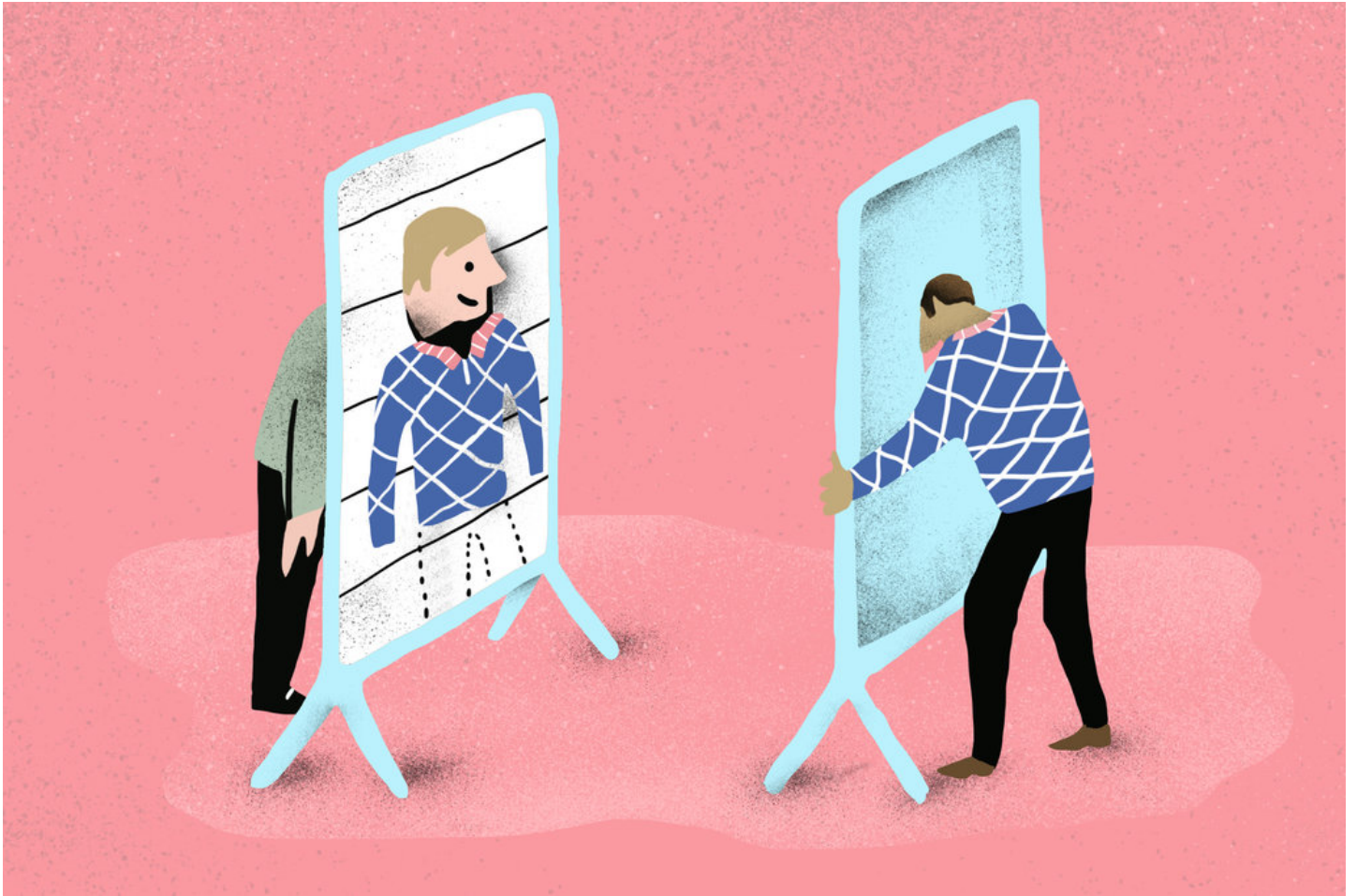
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Turn the Tables

The most important questions may not be the questions you plan to ask, but the questions a candidate has for you.



“I want to see whether you’re curious, and whether you’re going to put a bit of effort into understanding the company. If you put the effort in, I think that you can really wow a hiring manager.”

The Goal

Use it as a way to start your interview, or end it — but be sure you ask a candidate what questions he or she has for you. If you don't have a long time for your interview, this approach can help you discover what matters most to a candidate. Try to leave at least a third of your interview time to allow your candidates to ask their questions.

Things to consider:

- Do they ask insightful questions about high-level strategy?
- Are they curious about the culture of the company?
- About opportunities for leadership development?
- Do they want answers to more granular questions about the company match for the 401(k) plan and how many weeks of vacation they get?

If candidates only ask about their salary or vacation days, it suggests that their interest lies in more what the company will do for them, rather than what they will do for the company.

Have They Done Their Research?

The questions candidates ask will quickly tell you whether they've done their homework.

“I want to know that people have done their due diligence on the company, and that they have a passion for wanting to work at our company,” said Lori Dickerson Fouché, president of annuities at Prudential Financial. “I want them to care enough to have done their research to make sure that there's also a good cultural fit.”

You may think that everyone, particularly when they are applying for senior positions, would do that homework. Not so.

“I continue to be surprised at how little the average candidate does in terms of prep,” said Barney Harford, a veteran travel-industry executive. “I want to see whether you’re curious, and whether you’re going to put a bit of effort into understanding the company. If you put the effort in, I think that you can really wow a hiring manager.”

What If They Don’t Have Any Questions?

Here’s another surprise. Many C.E.O.’s say that sometimes people don’t come in with *any* questions — never a good sign, said Janet Elkin, the chief of RecruitIQ Staffing. (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/business/corner-office-janet-elkin-on-not-letting-the-process-defeat-the-purpose.html?_r=0)

“The first thing I always ask,” Ms. Elkin said, “is: ‘Let’s start out with the questions you have for me. You’ve talked to a lot of people, but is there anything about the mission of the company, our board, my background, that you want to ask me about?’”

“Believe it or not, seven out of 10 people say, ‘I’ve already gotten what I need.’ Maybe they’re nervous, but I’m thinking: ‘You’re talking to the C.E.O. You don’t want to know what makes me tick?’”

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Get a Second — and Third — Opinion

Talking to other people about a candidate can help you confirm your perceptions or prove you wrong.



“Well done is better than well said, and there’s no substitute for good referencing.”

The Goal

Even if you think you are the best judge of character, always take the time to get more opinions because we all have blind spots.

Tom Brady, who has been quarterback for the New England Patriots through seven Super Bowl visits and five championships, was only chosen in the sixth round of the N.F.L. draft, noted Brian Halligan, the chief executive of HubSpot. “I think people overestimate their ability to pick,” he said.

Make Them Run the Gantlet

To get different perspectives on candidates, ask a number of your colleagues to meet with them. They’ll spot things that nobody else sees.

“When we’re finished assessing whether someone has the skills we’re looking for and has the experience we’re looking for, we do something we call running the gantlet,” said Peter Miller, chief of OptiNose, (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/business/peter-miller-of-optinose-to-work-here-win-the-nice-vote.html>) a biopharmaceutical company.

Mr. Miller has job candidates interact with 15 or 20 people within the company, and each has what he calls a “blackball vote” to veto hiring any candidate. Ultimately the person you hire is going to interact with many people in your company, so they all have an interest in ensuring the person is a good hire.

Go Beyond References

It may take some effort, but with a little bit of internet sleuthing, you can probably find a couple of people you know, or whom your colleagues know, who have worked with the candidate. LinkedIn can also be a helpful resource in finding references for a candidate within your social network. Always do extra reference checks — not just the ones a candidate provides. Press those people for an unvarnished opinion about the person’s strengths and weaknesses, how the candidate performs under stress, how he or she treats their colleagues, and anything else that matters to your company.

Amy Gutmann, president of the University of Pennsylvania, often reminds colleagues not to place too much emphasis on interviews. “References, and what somebody has done, are more important than what somebody tells you in an interview. Well done is better than well said, and there’s no substitute for good referencing,” she says.

More on Getting Outside Opinions

How are we doing?

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Push for Diversity

Hiring an innovative team starts with finding people who think differently.



“I’m always looking for the opposite of what I am, for the most part.”

The Goal

Diversity matters for a lot of reasons. A crucial one is that it provides different perspectives for innovation, problem-solving and creativity.

For Douglas Merrill, chief executive of ZestFinance

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/21/business/douglas-merrill-of-zestfinance-steer-clear-of-what-you-cant-measure.html>), diversity matters not because it makes his company look good, but because it truly helps his company. With so many

industries facing disruption — and companies creating new playbooks for strategy rather than following old ones — you need as many different perspectives as possible to find the best solutions. “The more perspectives you have, the more likely you’re going to win,” he said.

Getting Past Implicit Bias

Hiring a diverse team requires pushing through the implicit biases we all have — the ones that can lead people to hire “mini-me” versions of themselves. Removing implicit bias from your hiring process starts early on and should be addressed at every step.

Things to consider:

- Is your job description limiting you? A simple web-tool, [textio](https://textio.com/), (<https://textio.com/>) can help analyze the language you use in job descriptions to help attract the best candidates. Words like “ambitious” or “driven,” can be seen by female candidates as too masculine in a job description.
- Are you casting the net wide enough? Experience doing certain kinds of work is important, but sometimes people with unusual backgrounds will bring fresh eyes to the task at hand.
- Conduct an initial phone interview before you meet candidates in person. That way, initial impressions are more likely to be based on the content of their answer than their appearance.

Christopher Cabrera, the chief executive of Xactly

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/business/christopher-cabrera-of-xactly-learning-to-stay-above-the-drama.html>),

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/business/christopher-cabrera-of-xactly-learning-to-stay-above-the-drama.html>) understands the challenge of inherent bias.

Earlier in his career, he had to hire eight team members. When he was halfway through the process, his boss, who was African-American, pointed out that the first four hires were all white, 23-year-old men.

“I was so embarrassed because I certainly hadn’t done that on purpose,” Mr. Cabrera said. The lesson he learned was that we often just do what makes us comfortable.

“I distinctly remember [my boss] saying to me: ‘How interesting do you think your team meetings will be when you have 12 guys that are 23 years old, white, with the same background? Do you think that that’s really going to be a challenging and rich environment where you’re learning?’ And I just remember thinking: ‘Yeah, that’s crazy. Why would I want that?’ It really stuck with me.”

Lisa Borders, president of the Women’s National Basketball Association, said she focuses on diversity of skills in candidates.

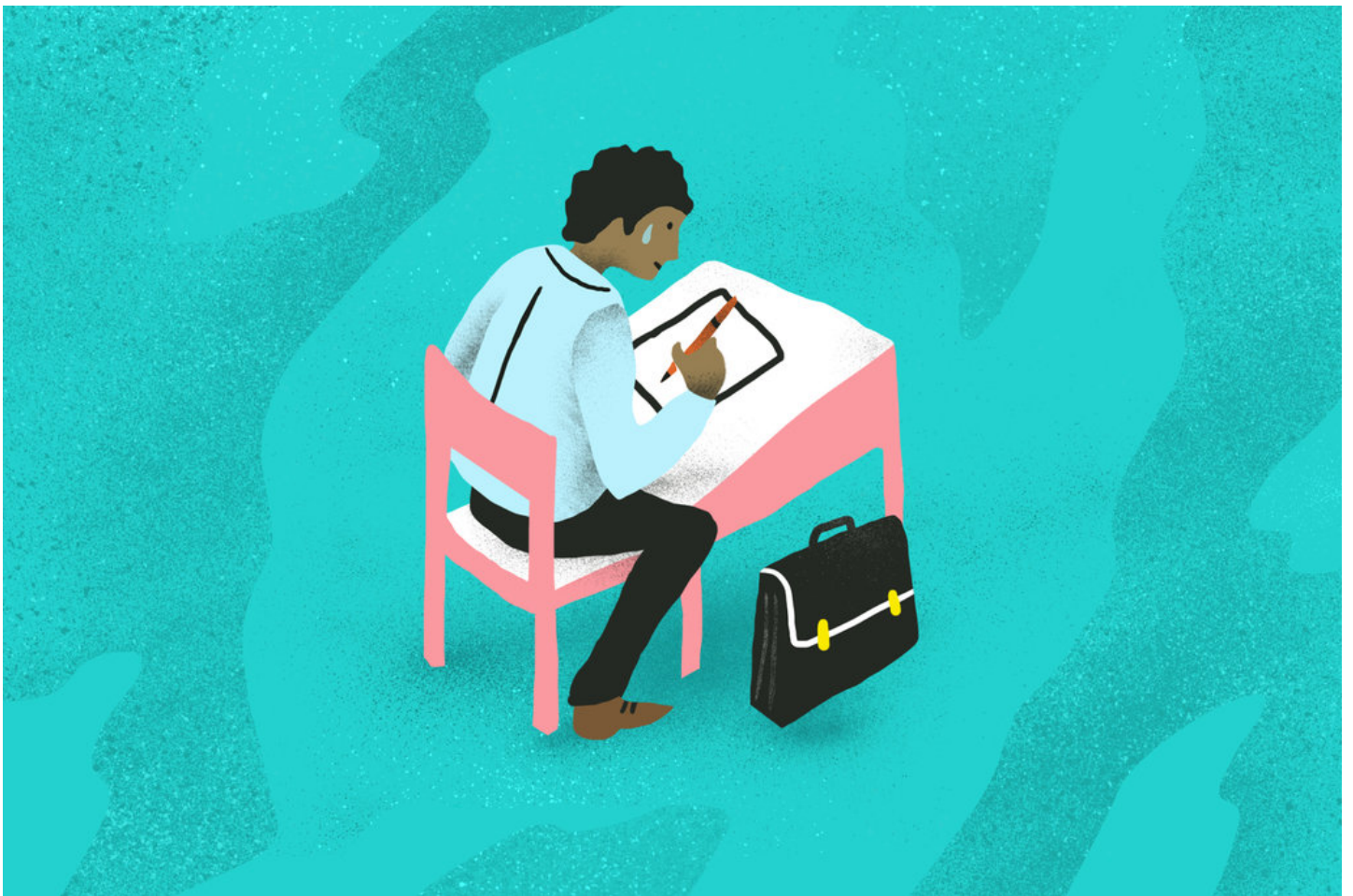
“I’m always looking for the opposite of what I am, for the most part,” she said. “I think so many of us, because of unconscious bias, hire people who look just like us, who have the same skills that we do, to complement us. That’s not a complement at all. That’s a duplicate. So I am often looking for the person who can complement the skills I already have.”

More on Hiring for Diversity

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Assign Some Homework

See your candidates in action by giving them a small task to complete at home.



“I often give the person a real problem, whatever I’m wrestling with right now, because you can learn a lot about a person that way,”

The Goal

When you’re interviewing someone, you’re trying to get a sense of the answer to the question, “I wonder what it would be like to work with this person?”

So why not find out, instead of guessing?

In the ideal world, you’d be able to bring them on as a freelancer or a consultant, but that’s not realistic in a lot of cases. You can, however, give them some homework to see them in action. Not only will you get a sense of their work, but you’ll also find out how committed they are to working at your company, rather than just applying for jobs. In addition, writing samples will also give you a clear sense of how that person thinks and communicates.

“I often give the person a real problem, whatever I’m wrestling with right now, because you can learn a lot about a person that way,” said Jane Park, chief executive of Julep (https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/business/corner-office-jane-park-of-julep-to-succeed-fly-like-a-bumblebee.html?_r=0). “Are they going to be my partner and be able to see the strategic issue as well as how to execute on it? Are they interested and engaged and curious about it?”

Put Pen to Paper

Some suggested questions to ask a candidate to answer in writing:

- How do you plan to be successful in your first 100 days on the job?
- How would you describe yourself in 500 words?
- Write a proposal for a specific strategy to implement in the new role.

“I’ve found that there are so many biases that we create or imagine when we’re going through the hiring process — this person came from that school or they seem very polished, whatever the biases might be. But when you have them put pen to paper, and compare that against a field of candidates, you get a much clearer picture of how they think and work,” said Kris Duggan, chief executive of BetterWorks. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/business/kris-duggan-of-badgeville-on-the-getting-stuff-done-index.html>)

Don’t Set a Deadline

Allow your candidates to set the deadline for the homework you assign. This allows you to determine their work ethic and how well they manage their time.

Mr. Duggan asks candidates to set their own deadline and then tracks very closely how well they perform relative to that. “That’s one way we can test for their behavior: Do they get it done on time, or do they make excuses because it’s late?” he said.

Trust Your Instincts

If you have doubts about a candidate, figure out why.

Once you've been through the entire interviewing process, and followed most of the suggestions above, you have to make a decision. What so many executives have told me is that they've sometimes made the mistake of not listening to the doubts they had about the person they were interviewing.

“What I've found from all the interviews I've done in the last 10 years is that whatever nagging suspicion you have during the interview process about their behavior will be magnified 10 times after you hire them,” said Mr. Duggan of BetterWorks.

It's always a tricky balance in hiring. You may feel some pressure to fill the role quickly — the work has to be done, or you're worried the slot may be taken away from you. So you may want to hire one of the first people you meet. On the other hand, you can't wait forever, endlessly interviewing people to find that perfect candidate.

At some point, it's a roll of the dice. Nobody has a perfect track record in hiring. But borrowing some of the strategies from all these chief executives should help improve your chances.

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