

**Anne Offner, Ph.D.**

## AUGUST, 2007

*This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link:*  
<http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>

As I was talking with my newsletter editor about the topic for this month's newsletter, he came up with some interesting questions and went on to investigate the topic. I asked him to give me his thoughts, from a non-HR or OD perspective, on what he found. Following is a notable historical account of hiring practices in "Corporate America."



In 1943 wartime Washington, D.C., male and female applicants for a certain government job assemble as directed at a downtown address, climb into a windowless van and endure a drive to a country estate near Fairfax, Va. There, they disembark, trade their civilian clothing for fatigues and assemble in a large room.

A military officer appears. He tells the applicants to make up a name for themselves and a story about how they got there, other than arrival by windowless van. He leaves.

A female civilian enters. She hands out what looks like silk scarves. She tells the applicants they have eight minutes to memorize the design on the scarf, which is a map. After eight minutes she collects the scarves and administers a brief written test.

Another officer enters the room to announce "break-out" sessions. Sergeants group the applicants in twos or threes and herd each group into smaller rooms, containing file cabinets. They are told to find a file labeled, 'Operation Stovepipe.' After they've been rooting in the cabinets for several minutes, a helmeted, jack-booted German soldier bursts into the room, screaming at them in German, and brandishing a Mauser rifle.

*Tough day at the office.*

The 1943 applicants wanted to join the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency. The OSS was run by William Joseph "Wild Bill" Donovan, a Columbia law school buddy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a noted Wall Street lawyer when war broke out. Contrary to what some OSS applicants believed, Donovan got his nickname as a football player at Columbia, not as an executive concocting schemes to sort out job applicants.

However, Donovan did believe in testing and analyzing prospective employees in

the milieu in which they would be working. That philosophy has survived for more than 60 years since World War II and is gaining more credence today. Human Resources experts and prospective employees need to become ever more conversant in Wild Bill's philosophy so they can conduct the hiring process smoothly and knowledgeably.



In the 1950s, "Ma Bell," as the AT&T telephone monopoly was then called, began applying Donovan's work-based approach to hiring executives. The company set up "assessment centers," where candidates in their gray flannel suits were graded on how they would handle the content of their in-baskets, field telephone calls and dictate letters. This was an evaluation based on tasks that mimicked what they would be doing if hired.

However, many companies stuck with and remain believers today in the traditional interview – unstructured, rambling, unfocused.



Many executives think they're crackerjack interviewers and can move right through the process. They mentally dismiss the candidate at the outset because he or she is overdressed or overweight. This saves time. They talk about their sailing weekend. If the candidate is knowledgeable about sailing or at least shows an interest, that's

impressive. And his or her resume looks pretty good, too.

In many of these companies, the function of Human Resources has been to merely pass on applications to the manager in whose department the applicant would work.

Many of us, including Human Resource professionals, have suffered through such interviews. And, once hired, have thought, there must be a better way.

### Hiring Strategies

Some time ago, HR specialists began retaining organizational psychologists and asking, "What can we do?"

The organizational psychologists have said, "Well, there ARE some strategies, processes and tests that have been developed over the past 60 years."

Together the HR types and the organizational psychologists have – more often than not – worked out a hiring process more effective than the traditional one-on-one interview.

Job applicants have noticed this change. They've gone to other organizational psychologists and said things like, "Listen, I was blindsided by this unexpected, open-ended question in my last job interview. I mumbled what I thought was an ineffective answer. Can you help me avoid such an incident in the future?"

"Yes," say the organizational psychologists.

First, they tell the prospective job applicant, "Behavioral Interviews" have come into vogue. These involve several interviewers deciding the qualities necessary for the position they're going to fill and then *en banc* or individually asking

each candidate how she or he has demonstrated those qualities. The interviewers ask the same questions of each candidate and take notes, so they can meet later and compare answers. Ideally, a group of interviewers first question the candidate, followed by one-on-one interviews. Human Resources will ask about EEOC and OSHA requirements. The chief financial officer will ask about accounting.



The questions are open-ended, and not hypothetical but specific. For example, not "What would you do if . . .?" but "Tell me about a time when you . . ." What a candidate actually did in a previous job is a superior indicator of what he or she will do in the one being applied for.

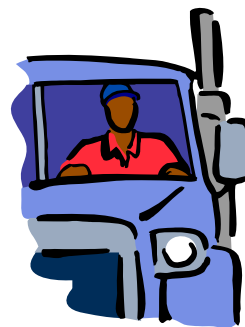
The interviewers next dig deep into the candidates' work experience: Sales margins, inventory control, and accounts payable problems might be addressed. This also combats resume fraud. It's tough to lie about sales margins and inventory turnover.

Then it's check, check, check. Human Resources might demand a dozen references. Some candidates will e-mail or fax them within an hour. Others are never heard from again. Interviewers telephone the references and ask probing questions. References who refuse to say anything negative about a candidate are set aside as questionable.

After the behavioral interviews, come assessment tests. These assessments fall into two categories (1) cognitive ability assessments, which ask SAT-like English

and math questions, and (2) personality assessments with questions such as, "Would you prefer spending an evening at home alone or at a rock concert?"

Assessments can turn up fascinating results. One Midwest trucking company was having difficulties with their drivers. Some were rude to customers; others were late with deliveries. All were well qualified and experienced on paper.



The company retained an organizational psychologist, who administered tests and found the drivers fell into two classes. The first contained voluble and gregarious drivers. The second contained introspective and quiet drivers. Human Resources put the first class of drivers on in-city deliveries, where they had to talk to many customers each day. They put the other class in the company's over-the-road rigs in which the drivers, traveling alone, had to navigate hundreds of miles of Interstate each day. The company's driver difficulties went away.

Many companies use behavioral interviews and assessments in tandem to predict results as to how candidates will do in the position for which she or he is applying. But as to the assessments, the companies' HR groups must not use the wrong test, i.e., one that is fine for predicting employee development but not for initially screening job applicants. In consultation with an organizational psychologist, Human Resources can develop its own test or chose from more than 2,500 on the

market. Many of these focus on hourly and entry-level applicants.

During the last 60 years, many executives and managers continue to believe their “gut instinct” will get them the best employees. This despite hundreds of studies, showing that structured interviews with testing produce hires that fit better and turnover less rapidly.

Humans do rely on feelings and judgments to make many important decisions throughout their lives – whether to fall in love, major in a certain subject or walk down a dark street. The science-based approach to hiring isn't perfect. It won't find every star or bar every slug. But it will give a fuller, more balanced and fairer assessment of potential employees.



My editor, an accomplished free-lance writer and former newspaper

editor, gives a very practical and no-nonsense view of the hiring process.

Candidates will have a better attitude toward the process and the company if they believe its hiring methods are respectful, fair, and smart. If they do get the position, they'll be even more motivated to do a good job. And if they don't, they'll spread the word, perhaps grudgingly, in the business community that the company is tough but fair.

Either way, the company gains better employees and the candidates gain either a job or knowledge of how to emphasize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses for their next application.

Anne Offner, Ph.D. is the owner/principal of Offner and Associates, a change management and leadership development consulting firm. She works with organizations & individuals to maximize performance, effectiveness and satisfaction in the workplace.

This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.

© Offner and Associates, 2006. All rights reserved.