

Want To Hire The ‘Right’ Candidate? Take Them To Lunch With The Team



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Leadership Strategy

Choosing the right candidates to fit with your company’s mission and culture is important in any business, but the standard interview process doesn’t always provide insight into a candidate’s culture match.

In formal interview settings, applicants are on their best behavior. Their guard is up, and many of the questions we ask are expected. They present an image meant to help them land a job, and the real person only reveals themselves after they’ve been hired.

A good interviewer will try to break through in the interview by putting candidates at ease. If you can get them talking, hopefully they’ll relax enough to show a bit of their real self. But it’s hard for one person to build enough rapport to put the candidate at ease, especially within the context of a formal interview. There may be a better way.

One technique we discovered through our research is to combine a team interview with lunch. Neither having a team interview nor taking a candidate to lunch is particularly novel. But combining the two puts your candidate into a social setting and allows you to get multiple viewpoints on how well they fit your company culture. Read on to hear how Giroux Glass has executed this technique with great success.



Combining a team interview and lunch into your interview process can give you a better understanding of how well a candidate fits into your company culture. [-] GETTY

The relaxation of a meal, an informal setting, questions coming from peers, and the familiarity of casual conversation can reveal things about a candidate that you'll never hear in a formal interview.

Here's all you really need to make it work.

Start off with a screening process and standard interviews to weed out poor applicants and find candidates you'd like to hire. Once your leadership decides on a candidate, that's when you would schedule a group lunch.

Before you get started, make sure your company has a well-defined set of values that are ingrained in your culture. Your entire team should know the culture and be able to assess how well the candidate's cultural fits within it. It isn't about skills or likeability but rather the team should specifically assess the candidate's cultural fit as a standalone qualification.

Someone from your team (usually the hiring manager) should drive the candidate to and from lunch. The drive is just another opportunity to get the candidate to interact in a casual setting, and it's a valuable time to assess and debrief.

Schedule a group lunch with a handful of people from your company. This lunch panel should include people who will work directly with the new hire.

Paramount is that the lunch feel as informal as possible, with segments that aren't full of interview questions. The lunch should be used not only as a decision-making tool, but also as a way to draw in the right people. It helps you find candidates who match your company culture, and it demonstrates what your culture is and that hiring people who fit is a priority.

To that end, the lunch should be part “selling” the company to ensure good candidates take the company's offer and the team should share (towards the end of the interview) what the position is all about and what it's like at the company. If it's done well, this time even doubles as onboarding for the candidates you end up hiring.

It's also important to have an organized process for the team to come to a decision. This should start immediately after the lunch while memories are fresh. You should have scorecards and a voting system, along with a group discussion. Your process can be whatever makes sense to your company, but it should be applied consistently for every candidate.

As you use this process, you need to keep score, so you know that this approach is working for you. Are you picking good candidates or are you still hiring “misses?”

One of our research participants shared their experience on innovating this process. Headquartered in Los Angeles, CA, Giroux Glass designs and fabricates commercial, high-end glass and glazing products and installations.

Giroux Glass uses many standard recruiting practices, such as using recruiters and soliciting through LinkedIn. They saw a difference in the quality of people they hired by making their final hiring decision based on the candidate's cultural fit, as decided by a panel interview, but with a twist—a lunch.

After management has determined, through a fairly standard screening and interview process, that they want to hire the candidate, they ask partners or employees from a variety of departments to join a panel interview of the candidate, focusing only on how the candidate would fit in with the company's core values, which spell Giroux: Growth, Integrity, Respect, Ownership, Unity and eXcellence.

Giroux's President and CEO, Nataline Lomedico, recently told me about it.

"We'll invite employees who perform a variety of roles to interview the candidate, to see if they're going to fit in with how we do business. We tell them, 'this is strictly to gauge whether there's a culture fit.' It can be the receptionist, it can be an accounting person, can be an estimator, a CAD person, we mix them up. We want the diversity."

Because of a strong company culture, Lomedico says Giroux's employees are great judges of a candidate's fit. "The people that we bring together, they're employees that live and breathe Giroux," said Lomedico. "And so they all can feel if it's right. In every single time we've done this, the votes have all been thumbs up, or thumbs down."

After the interview, they have a group discussion about the candidate's strengths and weaknesses and why they think they'll fit in or what may be a concern. Then they vote. Top management always vote last so as not to influence the votes of the rest of the group.

If they get even one thumbs down, Giroux won't hire the employee. Lomedico estimates about 20% get to the panel interview and get a thumbs down.

Although it is time consuming and expensive, Giroux has found success in this process. Of the 15 candidates to be hired through this process in the past year, Giroux found that only one was a bad fit. Lomedico says it does get expensive. "But how much money are we spending if we make a hire that doesn't work out?"

We recommend that you have one person project manage this for each candidate to keep it fast. Slowing things down would be costly, but if you are organized you can make the process more engaging and lead to a better onboarding experience.

This process could be expensive and time consuming if you don't have a fast and effective screening process. If you move fast, you won't lose good candidates, and if you screen effectively, you won't waste time on group lunches for obvious rejects.

It can still be quite a commitment, but if it improves the success rate of new hires, it will be well worth it. And there are side benefits of reinforcing the culture to existing employees.

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