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Hire for the Work

A Practical Guide to Interviewing and Selection

Hiring managers and interview teams

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The people, companies and figures in the case are fictional. Use the examples to examine your own decisions.

CHAPTER 01

The person everyone liked

Blair had two finalists for a branch operations lead. The first, Reese, gave a polished interview and told a compelling story about taking charge during a busy season. The second, Quinn, spoke more slowly and spent time explaining a handoff that had gone wrong. One interviewer called Reese a natural leader. Another said Quinn had given the clearer answer.

The panel had written “leadership” and “communication” on a shared sheet. They hadn’t agreed what either looked like in the branch. Blair could see how a discussion about the same two people would turn into a contest between different definitions of the job.

Ask the panel for evidence. “When you say natural leader, what did Reese say or do that relates to the job?” Blair asked. The interviewer named a clear producer update. The other interviewer named Quinn’s explanation of queue ownership. Both were useful observations. Putting them in different rows showed the panel where it agreed and where it needed a clearer definition. The discussion could now turn to which behavior mattered during the first week on the job.

The person everyone liked

This fictional hiring case follows a team from an unclear interview to a decision it can explain. Think of a role you've filled before. What were the three hardest things the person had to do in their first few months? Could you have recognized evidence of those things in an interview?

Write down one real work situation. For an operations lead it might be two purchase closings at risk at the same time. For a customer service lead it might be a queue of urgent requests after a system outage. Start with the situation and the decisions it requires.

Test a job description. Take one adjective from your current description and write a real task where it would show up. "Organized" might mean keeping owners and update times visible during a coverage change. "Collaborative" might mean asking the receiving team what a complete handoff requires. Ask a teammate whether the behavior is visible. If they would have to infer it from personality, choose a clearer task and decide how a candidate could show it.

CHAPTER 02

Describe success in work someone can observe

The branch needed a lead who could triage an overloaded queue, communicate ownership to producers, and coach the team so the same problem happened less often. “Strong presence” had been in the original description. It wasn’t clear how a panel could use that phrase consistently.

Blair asked the manager what a good first ninety days would look like. The manager named three outcomes: each urgent file had an owner, producers knew where to get a status update, and the team could explain its backup coverage. Now the panel had work it could ask about and examples it could recognize.

Rank the outcomes before the interviews. Blair asked the manager what the new lead would need on day one and what the team could teach. Naming an owner during a deadline conflict was essential. Using the branch’s preferred update template was teachable. That distinction gave the panel a better way to interpret a strong answer in a different format. It also helped them write a first-month plan for someone whose judgment was sound and who would be learning the branch’s process.

Describe success in work someone can observe

Write three outcomes with a verb and a result. “Clarify escalation ownership when two closings are at risk” is easier to evaluate than “be strategic.” Decide which skills must be present at entry and which can be learned on the job. Tie the criteria to responsibilities and agree on them before meeting candidates.

For a recruiting role, an outcome could be “record a meaningful next action after discovery.” For a sales manager, it could be “coach a stalled opportunity by identifying the specific decision the customer has left.” The role determines what evidence you need.

Write a simple success brief. Put three outcomes in order. For each, add the first situation where it will matter and an example of acceptable performance. Ask the manager what happens when the outcome is missed. That consequence can help you weight criteria before interviewing. If two criteria cover the same behavior, combine them. A smaller rubric is easier for an interviewer to use while they listen carefully and take accurate notes.

CHAPTER 03

Ask the same question, then probe for evidence

Blair asked both candidates the same question. “Tell us about a time several urgent requests arrived together and you had limited coverage. How did you decide what happened first?” Reese described the branch’s outcome. Quinn described the moment the team realized the usual owner was unavailable.

Both stories needed a follow-up. Blair asked, “What did you personally do, what did another person own, and how did you know your plan was working?” That gave the panel comparable evidence while letting each candidate tell the story in their own way.

Probe the same missing fact. Reese described that the branch had met all its deadlines. Blair still needed to know Reese’s contribution. “Which decision did you own?” Blair asked Quinn the same question after hearing about an incident. The follow-up gave both people a chance to explain the action they took. Record where you asked a probe so the panel can see which part of the answer was volunteered and which was developed through a fair prompt.

Ask the same question, then probe for evidence

Prepare a core question for each job outcome. Use short probes to ask about the situation, the candidate's action, and the result. "What did you do next?" often gets better evidence than "Would you say you're proactive?"

If someone answers in generalities, invite them to choose a specific example. If a candidate's past workplace worked differently, ask how they would transfer the relevant skill. Use the same kinds of prompts for each person, and record the actual answer before writing your interpretation.

Practice with two fictional answers. One candidate says "I told my team to prioritize" and stops. The second explains which deadline was first and who owned the updates. Ask both to explain their own action and how they checked the result. A complete answer may emerge after a second question. Document the behavior and outcome, and note any uncertainty. A candidate shouldn't earn a higher score simply because the interviewer helped them more than someone else.

CHAPTER 04

Give a work sample that respects the candidate’s time

The panel wrote a one-page fictional queue with three issues: a purchase deadline, a handoff with no owner, and a routine status question. Each candidate had the same twenty minutes and the same instructions. The task was to order the actions, assign ownership, and draft one update.

Reese prioritized the purchase deadline and drafted a clear producer message. Quinn did the same and named a backup owner for the unassigned issue. Quinn’s update was slightly longer. Now the team had material it could compare without trying to guess who would be effective based on the rhythm of an interview.

Build the twenty-minute sample. Give the candidate three fictional messages. An agent needs an update on a closing, a teammate has an unassigned request, and a producer wants a routine status. Ask for a priority order, an owner and backup for the urgent work, and one draft update. Leave enough information to make a reasonable decision. Give both candidates the same time and tell them whether asking a clarifying question is part of the exercise.

Give a work sample that respects the candidate’s time

Choose one representative problem with enough ambiguity to require judgment. Tell candidates the time, output, and information available. Use fictional data and a bounded task. Make the exercise accessible and use the same criteria for evaluating the result.

A small work sample can suit other roles. A recruiter might summarize a fictional call and propose a next step. A customer service lead might assign priorities after a shift change. Decide what a strong answer would show before seeing anyone’s work. The point is to learn about the role, with a reasonable investment of time from both sides.

Score the sample before you run it. A strong response identifies the deadline, assigns work clearly, and tells the producer when the next confirmed update will come. A response can be clear and still miss backup coverage. Decide how much weight each gap carries. Try your own exercise under the time limit. If the answer requires insider knowledge you haven’t supplied, improve the materials or choose a task that shows the skill without requiring that knowledge.

CHAPTER 05

Anchor the score to a behavior

One interviewer gave Reese a five for communication because the answer sounded confident. Another gave a three because the handoff lacked a backup. Blair separated two criteria: quality of the update and clarity of the assignment. Reese’s written update could earn a high score on the first while leaving a question on the second.

They adopted three anchors. A one meant the response gave no usable owner or next action. A two meant it named a primary owner but missed the backup or follow-up trigger. A three meant the owner, backup, and trigger were all clear and appropriate for the scenario.

Read the anchor against the work. Reese wrote a clear note that named the next update time. The sample lacked a backup. Quinn named the backup and the trigger, and the update took a few extra lines. Blair could score the two criteria separately. That was fairer than turning both answers into a single impression of communication. The panel also learned that its first rubric had bundled evidence from two different responsibilities into one number.

Anchor the score to a behavior

Use behavioral anchors for the few criteria that matter. Write what an incomplete, adequate, and strong answer would show. Include a separate “insufficient evidence” status for a question you couldn’t evaluate. Give each interviewer space to record a quote, action, or observed omission beside the score.

Test your scale on two fictional answers before the first interview. If one reviewer scores a polished answer highly and another scores the same answer low, compare their evidence. A shared rubric should make that discussion possible without requiring everyone to have identical impressions.

Build an anchor from a weak answer. Start with “I’d tell the team to take care of it.” Write the next stronger version with an owner. Then write the strongest version with a backup and a trigger for checking progress. Ask a second reviewer to score all three without seeing your labels. Compare any differences. A usable anchor helps both reviewers explain what they observed and which part of the work the answer would leave unclear.

CHAPTER 06

Debrief before opinions harden

The panel wrote its scores independently before discussing either candidate. Blair opened with one criterion at a time. “What did each person do when the usual owner was out?” The interviewer who favored Reese could point to a strong message. The interviewer who favored Quinn could point to a specific backup and trigger.

The disagreement became useful. Both people had noticed a genuine strength. The job called for both, and the branch had agreed that ownership during an escalation was especially important. The panel could see what evidence it had and what it still wanted to understand.

Keep the debrief on one criterion. When someone said, “I just felt better about Reese,” Blair asked which part of the sample made them feel that way. They described the producer update. Another interviewer mentioned Quinn’s backup decision. Blair recorded both and asked which matched the branch’s first-month responsibilities. The discussion took longer than voting on first impressions, but it gave the manager a decision they could describe and a reason to improve the next exercise.

Debrief before opinions harden

Run the debrief in the order of the job criteria. Ask for evidence first, then the score. If two people disagree, ask whether they noticed different facts or used different anchors. If you discover an important gap, define how you will follow up consistently and keep the decision grounded in the work.

Avoid letting the first strong opinion set the terms of the meeting. Independent notes preserve details that are easy to forget when the room starts talking about who felt like the better fit. You can make room for impressions while asking what observable work supports them.

Handle a missing answer consistently. If a required criterion has insufficient evidence, decide whether you can ask a focused follow-up and give both finalists the same opportunity where appropriate. Write the question and evidence you need before scheduling it. If the question would introduce a new criterion, discuss whether it belongs in this round at all. Keeping a clear line between an evidence gap and a changed standard protects the usefulness of the comparison.

CHAPTER 07

Let candidates evaluate the job too

Quinn asked about the reason the previous lead had left. Blair explained that the branch had changed its coverage model and still needed someone to improve the handoff. Quinn wanted to know how much decision authority the lead would have. The manager described which choices could be made on the spot and which required approval.

That exchange helped the panel, too. Quinn’s question exposed an assumption the manager hadn’t put in the role brief. The job was going to be easier to accept and easier to start once both sides understood how the decisions would work.

Make the trade-off visible. The manager said the lead could reroute an urgent file, but permanent coverage changes needed approval. Quinn asked who was available when the manager was out. That question uncovered a gap in the role brief and gave the manager an item to resolve. Candidates often ask better questions when they can picture an actual week. Let the answer be specific enough that a person can make a decision about the role.

Let candidates evaluate the job too

Give each finalist a realistic look at the work. Explain the demanding part of the job, what support looks like, and how success will be reviewed. Invite questions about a real week. Offer concrete examples where you can.

A candidate asking for clarity about authority or workload is showing you what they need to decide. Record which questions your team owes an answer to and follow through. You can make a thoughtful hiring decision while giving the other person the information to make their own.

Write a realistic preview. Name one demanding part of the job, one decision the person owns, and one source of support. Describe how each will work in a busy week. Ask the finalist what they would want clarified before deciding. If the team cannot name the support owner or the authority boundary, put it on the follow-up list. Clear expectations give the new hire a better chance to recognize the work they signed up for.

Ask one more role question. “What can this person decide if the manager is unavailable?” Include the answer in the job preview, so every finalist can picture how a hard day would work.

CHAPTER 08

Decide and connect the evidence to onboarding

The team chose Quinn. Both candidates could communicate clearly. Quinn had shown a more complete escalation decision in the sample and given an example of coaching a teammate after a missed handoff. Blair documented those observations and the criterion they supported.

The team also wrote a development note. Quinn would benefit from a short coaching session on the branch's preferred update format. The evidence from selection became a first-month plan. Reese received a clear update on the outcome through the team's usual process. The team kept its records focused on relevant work.

Write the evidence beside the choice. Blair's note said Quinn identified a primary and backup and named the event that would trigger escalation. Reese offered a strong update and gave a useful example of handling an agent's concern. The note connected the difference to the job's highest-priority responsibility. It also preserved a teachable skill for Quinn's first month. A later manager could read the decision and understand why the team chose this person for this particular work.

Decide and connect the evidence to onboarding

Write a short decision memo. Include the role outcomes, the strongest observations, any open question, and the rationale for the decision. Assign a first-month owner to support the person’s development. A hiring process that captures useful evidence can make onboarding more specific.

After thirty or sixty days, revisit the criteria. Which examples predicted the work well? Which evidence was less useful than expected? Use that to improve the next round. The point is to learn whether the process helped you see the work clearly.

Review the signal after the start. At thirty days, ask whether the chosen behavior showed up when it mattered. If the person knew what to do in the exercise but struggled on real work, review the training, authority and process before concluding the interview was wrong. If a strong signal predicted the work, keep it and document why. If a question produced similar polished answers from everyone, revise it to ask for a more specific example.

CHAPTER 09

Your interview plan

Choose one role. List three job outcomes. For each, write the shared question, two probes, and an example of strong evidence. Then design a small work sample that reflects one of the hardest decisions in the role. Give the panel the same instructions and behavioral anchors.

Use a scorecard with columns for criterion, evidence, score, and open question. Ask interviewers to complete it before the debrief. The score is easier to defend when someone can read the evidence beside it.

Try a complete scorecard. Use “assign a primary and backup” as the criterion, quote the observed response, and give it a one, two or three using your anchors. Add an open question if the candidate named a backup but gave no trigger. Then write a separate row for the producer update. The exercise should show whether two scores are really measuring different behaviors. Give the same sample to a teammate and compare the reasons behind each mark.

Mark two different strengths. One person names a backup but writes a vague update. Another writes an excellent update but misses the backup. Give each answer a separate score for ownership and communication. Then ask which gap can be coached in the first month.

Your interview plan

Before you decide, check whether you can finish this sentence: “We chose this person because we saw them do or describe these specific things that the role requires.” If you only have adjectives, return to the observations.

Once you decide, carry one strength and one support need into the first-month plan. Blair’s team could start a better onboarding conversation because it knew exactly what it had learned about Quinn. That is a useful test of the quality of your interview process.

Close the loop in writing. Put the three job outcomes and the chosen evidence in a short memo. Write a first-month support action with a named owner and a date. Ask what the unsuccessful finalist should hear through your normal process and who owes that update. A clear handoff can carry the same care through the last conversation as the first. Save the lessons from the process where the next hiring team will be able to use them.

Run a practice debrief. Give the panel the two fictional responses from the scorecard. Ask everyone to write a score and one piece of evidence before talking. End by naming a question you would revise before interviewing a real candidate.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action sheet

Role and observable outcomes

Shared interview question and probes

Work sample and timing

Evidence and scoring anchors

Decision rationale and first-month support

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