

Ask SCORE

I started my refrigeration repair business six months ago and am now at the point of needing to interview candidates for my first employee. I've never done this before. What tips can you offer?

We've all been through job interviews, but being the one asking the questions is not always easy. You want to be fair and thorough when evaluating prospective employees, but also confident that you'll gather sufficient information to make the right choice.

Fortunately, success on both sides of the interview comes from the same source—preparation. Doing your homework and taking a thoughtful approach to interviewing will make you as ready as you hope your prospective employees are.

Start small. If you've clearly defined the job's skill and experience requirements, screening applicants shouldn't be too difficult. Narrow the field down to four or five people who merit a personal interview. If you've requested applications or resumes, read each one thoroughly; you don't want to overlook anyone's strengths—or weaknesses.

Compose your questions. Develop general questions to ask all candidates, plus specific ones that may arise from reading the resumes/applications. The general questions should be broad enough to allow the candidates to share what they think is important for you to know, yet allow you to accurately compare their responses.

Choose a good place to meet. Not all interviews have to take place in your office. Another part of your store or facility, or a "neutral" location such as a coffee shop may make for a more congenial environment. If you do meet at your business, consider including a brief tour, demonstration of the job and/or brief chats with existing employees.

Be a good host. Do what you can to make each candidate feel comfortable and relaxed. (After all, you've been in this position yourself.) You want to give your undivided attention, so make sure your schedule is cleared and set your phones to go to voicemail (that includes silencing your cell phone). If you expect a call that simply can't be put off, inform the candidate at the outset of the interview.

Trust but verify. There's a reason for requesting references: you want to make sure you're getting the facts, and clear up any uncertainties. Professional background checks are a wise investment for highly sensitive positions, or those that involve handling substantial amounts of money.

Still not sure? Don't be surprised if you have more than one "best choice." Invite them back for a second interview where you can ask more detailed questions. You may also find no one measures up to the "ideal" hire. Look for other strengths or skills that may offset shortcomings. And if all else fails, bring in other candidates or restart the search. You're better off investing more time to find the right employee than trying to make up for hiring the wrong one.

This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit merrimackvalley.score.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

*Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to
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