



Aaron Wallis

Career Success Masterclass

How to Effectively Interview

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Recruiting the very best sales professionals for your team is imperative to your success as a sales leader. With employment at close to 93% together and with 7% of the population unwilling or unfortunately unable to work, the UK is about as close to full employment as you can get. A good sales professional, someone who can dramatically increase your business revenue, is a rare commodity and in this 'candidate led' market it is imperative that you set the right environment and prepare beforehand to effectively interview.

The most common and recommended approach is to hold interviews over two stages. The first stage should be relatively informal and the Aaron Wallis bespoke interview questions will help you to quickly penetrate into the psyche of the candidate and improve your ability to get beneath the skin of the 'interview façade'. We recommend that the second interview is more of a formal business meeting perhaps involving a presentation or formal discussion document that you ask the candidate to prepare beforehand.

It is imperative that you sell the company and the opportunity to each candidate – remember you are against competition in this 'candidate driven' market for the best talent and we recommend that the first interview puts the candidate at ease so that they are 'bought in' to your company, your personnel and your opportunity.

The first stage should be a test of personality, character and basic culture fit. It should be a test of basic competence and ability but most of all a fact finding mission for both parties. Someone once likened the perfect first interview to 'two strangers meeting in a pub for the first time' and I feel that this is a good analogy to get the setting right. At the second interview we recommend that you ask the candidate to prepare a formal document – a presentation, a formal discussion document matching their experience and skills to your needs, a business plan, a SWOT analysis or even 'a day out in the field'. In asking the candidate to prepare something for the meeting you will not only see the candidate's ability to research and prepare but the exercise will really help focus their mind in deciding whether your business is right for them.

Here are some really solid general hints and tips to improve your ability to effectively interview. They are simple tips but effective ones!

- Make a list of the required competencies, qualities and minimum skills/experience that you require an individual to possess in order for them to succeed. This may sound obvious yet most interviewers don't take the time to do this. This exercise will make interviewing a natural process where you gather the evidence from each candidate on each point to ensure that you make the right hiring decisions.
- Do read every candidate's CV to get a 'flavour' of them before the interview. We find that by just remembering where the candidate lives, their personal information, hobbies/interests and current employer will make them feel more comfortable in the knowledge that you've taken the time to read their CV.
- The Aaron Wallis personality questionnaire that we provide on each candidate gives an invaluable guide to holding an effective interview. Probe the personality traits in greater depth and use the recommended questions to quickly gauge whether the candidate has the prerequisite traits. For help and advice on interpreting and using the questionnaire please do not hesitate to contact an Aaron Wallis member of staff.
- I personally highlight (or underline if I don't have a highlighter to hand!) areas of each CV and the personality questionnaire to probe. This not only helps to get to the 'meat' of the interview but tangibly proves to the applicants that I've taken the time to read their CVs!
- Leave enough time for the interview itself *and* making notes afterwards. Set each interview at intervals of 15 minutes *more* than you feel you will complete the interview. Try not to over-run and keep candidates waiting.
- Avoid distractions. Interviewing to get the right staff for your team is one of your most important responsibilities. Take the time out to interview effectively in an environment where you won't be disturbed. At Aaron Wallis we offer fully furnished and equipped interview facilities to every client on a zero-cost basis. Make sure you switch off your mobile phone!
- Remember first impressions count – and that also counts for you! Make sure the reception area is tidy and welcoming. If you are running late let the candidate know.



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- Think of how you will position the interview. Do you want the formal, traditional, opposite a desk approach or do you want to interview at right angles. Being able to see the whole person will enable you to read all of their body signals (and feet movement give a lot away – see our 'Improve your Reading of Body Language for Sales Success' for more information!)
- Start by setting an agenda. How long the meeting will take, what you would like to get out of the meeting and invite the candidates to ask questions throughout the meeting.
- For the first meeting take a conversational approach to the interview and ask wide open questions. One of the best ways to start an interview is asking the candidate to tell their 'story' in five minutes both in work related and personal terms. This approach will throw up a whole heap of questions to probe as the meeting progresses and will put the candidate straight at ease which will aid you tease out the required information in a very natural way.
- Ensure that you take the time to detail why you are recruiting and the vision and direction of your business.
- Research has shown that an ideal first interview is 60% candidate talk and 40% interviewer talk and I would guess that this will probably rise to nearer 70%/30% in second and subsequent meetings.
- Types of questions:
 - Open – who, where, why, when, how and who (sorry to patronise you!) encourage the candidate to answer freely. However use questions beginning 'why' sparingly as they can come across as confrontational;
 - Closed – Used to acknowledge, check facts, reiterate points and clarify;
 - Leading Questions, i.e. 'we need someone to open doors in the healthcare sector, do you have experience in this field?' used to lead the candidate to detail their experience/skills/qualities;
 - Multiple questions – 'What brings you here today? Why are you looking to leave your current employer? What are you looking for in a role?' allows the candidate to answer all of the questions in a single answer;
 - Competency Based, i.e. 'give me an example of when you have.....' the best, most valuable and recommended way of questioning to gather both information and to fairly select an individual from a pool of candidates'; Similar to Competency questioning is example questioning 'Can you give me an example when you have.....?' again, useful to gather evidence and information;
 - Hypothetical Questions, i.e. 'What would you do if.....?' Personally I think that they have little use as you will get a standard interview façade answer rather than what they would do in the actual event;
 - Behavioural Questions – how they've handled particular issues/scenarios/events in the past and focussing more on their personal qualities;
 - Probing Questions, used to ladder or funnel questions, i.e. drilling the detail of a particular answer. Competency based laddering questions are some of most useful ways to interview – 'Well why did you do that', 'why did you think that was the right decision', 'what could you have done differently', etc.
- Remember to listen! Acknowledge what the candidate is saying and be aware of your body signals, nod your head in agreement, smile, use open hand gestures. Be aware of looking at your watch, out of the window, at your phone/blackberry, etc! Clarify, acknowledge and summarise to demonstrate your understanding of what has been said.
- Observe everything and if intuitively you do not feel that their body signals and words match probe deeper
- Keep to timings and don't be afraid to 'reel the candidate back to the agenda' if they embark on a journey of anecdotes!
- Make notes throughout the meeting. It is amazing how much you will forget between first and second interview.
- A professional way to recruit and select is by listing the required skills/competencies/qualities/experience and mark each candidate out of a score of five or ten. This will help you to select based on 'fact' rather than 'intuition' (By law you should have a centrally kept list of how a candidate would score two out of ten, three out of ten, eight out of ten, etc. as the candidate has the right under the data protection act to read your notes and see how you've judged them to be a particular score)
- Don't ask surreal or 'showboat questions' – i.e. 'If you were an animal what would you be and why?' Unless you are a trained psychologist they offer little value!
- Manage the candidate's expectations – detail the next stage, when they'll hear feedback, etc. Unless it is the last candidate that you are meeting in a pool of candidates do not offer them the next stage opportunity unless you are convinced they will be at the next stage!

Good luck with your interviews. To help you to interview we have also put together a list of common questions that we hope you find useful.



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The Most Common Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself?
What do you know about our company?
What interests you about this job?
Why do you consider yourself ideal for this role?
Give me five reasons why you want to join our company?
What are your strengths?
Do you prefer working alone or in a team?
What are your development areas (weaknesses?)
What motivates you?
What are you going to achieve in the next 3 years/5 years/10 years?
What do you like about your current job?
What do you dislike about your current job?
Why are you looking to leave your current role?

Sales and Business Development

What is the worst objection that you've ever had to handle? Talk us through how you tried to handle this objection?
What is your preferred technique to handle objections?
How do you ensure that your sales targets are exceeded each month?
What is your favourite closing technique?
How do you pick yourself up after losing a potentially large order?
How do you create a sense of urgency to speed up the sales process?
What is the largest account that you have ever won and talk me through the stages from start to close?
What is the largest account that you have lost and talk me through the stages?
What is the most difficult piece of business that you have ever won?
Have you ever walked away from a sale and why?
What do you consider to be the single most important sales skill?

Sales Management

What does effective Sales Management mean to you?
What personal qualities should a Sales Manager possess?
What are the personal qualities that you possess to make you a successful Sales Manager?
What is more important 'managing' or 'leading'?
Talk me through the most difficult employee that you have ever had to 'lead'?
What is the biggest learning curve that you have worked through in your path to becoming a successful Sales Manager?
What is your Management style? Do you think this style is the most effective?
Who is the best Manager that you have ever worked for? What qualities did they possess that you have modeled to improve your ability to lead sales teams.
How important is it that sales professionals are effectively managed?
How do you manage egos within your sales team?
What is the best example that you can give me that describes your management style?
What have you personally done to develop your management skills?
How do you handle responsibility?
How do you keep a distance between yourself and your reports?
Your worst performing sales executive has a personal crisis and needs significant time off – how would you support them?
From the choice of Churchill, Gandhi, Alex Ferguson or Richard Branson, who is the most effective leader and why?

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Planning and Prioritising

How do you plan each day?
What are your objectives each day?
How do you measure yourself against your objectives?
What importance do you place upon planning each day/week/month/quarter/year?
Think of a sentence that would describe your mission each day – your personal daily mission statement?
How do you prioritize your accounts?
How do you ensure that you are the most effective that you can possibly be?
Why would you prioritise one account over another? What criteria would you use to prioritise accounts?

Presentation and Pitching

What experience do you have in making presentations?
What is the largest audience that you have ever made a presentation to?
Talk me through an example of a piece of tender led business that you have won?
What makes your presentations a success?
What techniques do you use to handle difficult clients during a pitch?
What is the typical structure of your business presentations?
How would you describe your PowerPoint skills – non existent, Basic, intermediate or advanced
Talk me through the most difficult pitch that you have made?

Decision Making, Risk and Judgment?

What is the greatest risk that you have taken in your business career? What happened?
What would you detail as the biggest failure of your business career?
For every decision that you get right how many do you get wrong?
How do you make a decision that potentially carries enormous risk? What steps do you go through? What minimum information do you require?
What experience do you have in working in pressure situations?
How do you make decisions in these pressurized situations?
How would one of your reports describe your decision making ability?
What is the worst decision that you have ever had to make in your business career? What happened?
What is the best decision that you've ever made in your business career?

Teamwork

Are you more effective on your own or as part of a team?
What is the best team that you have ever worked in and why? What part did you play in the team and what contribution did you make to the success of the team?
What are the characteristics of a great team?
How important do you feel the 'leader' is in creating a successful team?
What types of characters do you work best with?
What kind of people do you find difficult to work with?

Personal qualities - Confidence

On a scale of one to ten how confident would you describe yourself? Why?
How would your existing team describe your confidence?
Talk me through a situation that demonstrates the level of confidence that you have in yourself?



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Personal qualities –Interpersonal

How would your best friend describe you? 5 adjectives

How would your closest work colleague describe you? 5 further adjectives

Describe the relationship with your current/previous line manager?

How would your current/previous line manager describe you? 5 further adjectives

What is the single biggest issue that your current/previous line manager has with you?

Describe a confrontation that you have had with your current/previous line manager when they were in the wrong? What happened?

When was the last time that you lost your temper at work? What happened? What did you learn from this?

What kind of people do you find difficult to work with?

How do you handle criticism?

Who is your worst enemy? What happened? How would they describe you?

What is the most unpopular decision you've ever taken? What happened?

Personal qualities – Values

What are your values?

How would you like to be remembered?

What is an ethical line that you will not cross?

Have you ever lied to win a sale? What happened?

Would you ever lie in the interests of your company?

Have you ever gone over your current/previous line manager's head to get a decision?

On a scale of one to ten how would the term 'maverick' describe you?

What habits or behaviours that you possess would you like to change/improve?

Who have you worked with that you have the most respect for? Why? What did you learn from them?

Aaron Wallis are a specialist sales and marketing recruitment business centrally based in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire. [Contact Aaron Wallis](http://www.aaronwallis.co.uk)