

MADE TO STICK

Dan Heath
& Chip Heath

Hold the Interview

Why it may be wiser to hire people without meeting them

WHEN THE ECONOMY finally turns around, you'll start hiring people again. You'll sift through dozens of impressive-sounding résumés—who knew there were so many VPs in the world?—and bring in the standouts for the critical final stage: the interview. You'll size them up, test the “culture fit,” and peer into their souls. Then you'll make your decision. This is the Official Hiring Process of America. And it ignores, almost completely, what decades of research tell us about how to pick good employees.

Here's the reality: Interviews are less predictive of job performance than work samples, job-knowledge tests, and peer ratings of past job performance. Even a simple intelligence test is dramatically more useful.

Most of the time, it's not easy to suss out the true value of interviews, because we don't hire people who do poorly in interviews. But in one study, reported by psychologist Robyn Dawes, a unique situation emerged that allowed the value of interviews to be assessed. In 1979, the University of Texas Medical School interviewed the top 800 applicants and scored them on a seven-point scale. These ratings played a key role in the admissions decision, in addition to the students' grades and the quality of their undergraduate schools. UT admitted only those students who ranked higher

than 350 (out of 800) on the interview.

Then, unexpectedly, the Texas legislature required the medical school to accept 50 more students. Unfortunately, by the time the school was told to admit more students, the only ones still available were the dregs of the interviewees. So the school admitted 50 of these bottom-dwellers, who'd ranked between 700 and 800.

Fortunately, no one at the school was aware who were the 700s and who were the 100s, so fate had created a perfectly designed horse race between the good interviewees and the lousy ones. And the performance difference? Nada. Both groups graduated and received honors at the same rate.

Well, sure, you scoff. The dregs

might do fine in the coursework, but a good interviewer picks up on social skills! So once the dregs started working in a real hospital, where relationships matter, it would become abundantly clear who was Meredith Grey and who was Quasimodo.

Nope, didn't happen. Both groups performed equally well in the first year of residency. The interviews correlated with nothing other than, well, the ability to interview.

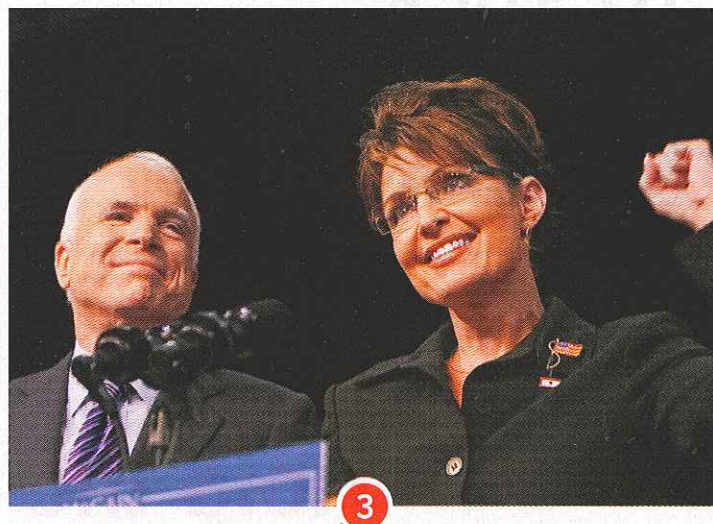
With so little proof that interviews work, why do we rely on them so much? Because we all think we're good at it. We are Barbara Walters or Mike Wallace, taking the measure of the person. Psychologist Richard Nisbett calls this the “interview illusion”—our

I DON'T

ABC's hit reality series *The Bachelor* forces hopeful singles to spend weeks answering an age-old interview question: Why should I invest in you? But once cameras stopped rolling, 16 out of 17 couples broke up.



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certainty that we're learning more in an interview than we really are. Dawes points out that in grad-school admissions, interviews are often taken as seriously as GPA. The absurdity, he says, is that "you and I, looking at a folder or interviewing someone for a half-hour, are supposed to be able to form a better impression than one based on three-and-a-half years of the cumulative evaluation of 20 to 40 different professors."

Imagine if baseball GMs, in recruiting potential players, ignored past batting statistics and instead had a beer with players at Applebee's to test their culture fit. That's what we're doing by betting on interviews.

So, instead, figure out whether candidates can do the job. Research has consistently shown that one of the best predictors of job performance is a

work sample. If you're hiring a graphic designer, get them to design something. If you're hiring a salesperson, ask them to sell you something. If you're hiring a chief executive, ask them to say nothing—but reassuringly.

In the process, you might be surprised. For instance, the head of marketing for an environmental nonprofit—call her Elizabeth—needed to fill a marketing-director position. One candidate in particular—call her Marge—stood out. Marge had come recommended by a board member, and

she had more than 20 years of experience. Even better, when Elizabeth called in Marge for an interview, the two of them immediately hit it off. "She was somebody I could see being friends with," Elizabeth says.

Then came the test. Elizabeth had created a simple, timed writing test, inspired by a couple of actual writing projects that were on her own to-do list. She was almost embarrassed to ask Marge to do it. (Twenty years of experience!) But when the test was over, Elizabeth was shocked by the samples of Marge's work. "They were awful," she says. "I never would have known in a million years from her résumé, or from meeting her." The job went to Roger, who aced the test. Unsurprisingly, he's aced the job, too, Elizabeth reports. (Question: Would your company have hired Roger?)

Giving job tests might be the easiest competitive advantage you ever acquire. While your competitors hire friendly people whose "biggest weakness" is "working too hard," you'll be discovering the true stars. **FC**



Dan Heath and Chip Heath have re-released their best-selling book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, featuring new content such as how to unstick an idea.

> Feedback: heaths@fastcompany.com

TALK IS CHEAP When first impressions lead to second thoughts

1. Oprah's Unrequited Love

When Herman Rosenblat, a Holocaust survivor, told Oprah Winfrey that he met his future wife when she tossed him apples over a concentration-camp fence, Winfrey dubbed it "the single greatest love story . . . we've ever told." He got a book deal, but just before *Angel at the Fence's* publication, Rosenblat copped to embellishment, leaving Winfrey's interview cred in a million little pieces.

2. RadioShack's Biggest Fan

Dave Edmondson got hired at RadioShack because of his "skills at capturing the attention" of then-CEO Len Roberts, first with a fan letter, then with a dynamic interview. When Edmondson became CEO, a journalist exposed lies in his résumé, forcing him to resign.

3. McCain's Palin Problem

After a brief meeting with Sarah Palin at his ranch, Republican presidential candidate John McCain asked the Alaska governor to be his running mate. "The sense you immediately get is how tough-minded and self-assured she is," a McCain adviser recalled. "She makes that impression in, like, 30 seconds." By late October, 59% of voters surveyed in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll said Palin was "not prepared for the job." —Dan Macsai