The Cafe, a Coffee and a Job Interview - A Dangerous Brew

I work in a delightful complex. We have a small, efficient cafe in the middle of our office park run by a lady who has memorised the Christian name of every customer. I can't tell you how powerful this is. I don't care if the coffee is a bit 'burnt', or the sushi a bit dry. Nothing is more uplifting than the warm personal greeting she gives me when I drop by.

I make a point of not eating at my desk and getting out of the office for a 30 minute lunch break. These breaks are usually at our cafe. Inevitably I am privy to many conversations - the most common is a job interview.

I probably overhear a job interview once a week... and they make me cringe. I am almost tempted to breeze on over and say, "Excuse me, but I'm an expert in this area and the way you are doing this interview is going to tell you diddly squat about this person's ability to perform successfully, here's my card, please call me for some help." It's a tempting action, but manners always prevail - so far!

What is it about cafes and job interviews?

Is it the notion of relaxing the applicant in the hope of gaining more predictive information? Let me tell you, a general chit chat over a cup of coffee is the poorest predictor of future job performance.

At best it's going to cost you for the coffee and an hour of wasted time. At worst, if you hire that person, you are probably going to find that very pleasant, polite, well presented individual you interviewed 6 months ago at the cafe is totally different today; most likely one you'd like to throw a cup of coffee over!!

Maybe its privacy - "Let's get out of the office to some place quiet for a chat." There's nothing private about a café, I know, because I've sat at the next table and heard many an individual bare their soul.

In every case the interview questions we horrid - "So tell me about where you'd like to be in 5 years," or, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" The only information you'll get from these questions are opinions.
It's easy for applicants to give you opinions at an interview. An effective interview seeks to get concrete examples of past behaviour (as it relates to the position) because past behaviour reflects future behaviour.

Another common cafe observation - the hiring manager is doing all the talking and the applicant all the coffee drinking. Remember the 80/20 rule, when interviewing job applicants, listen 80% and talk 20% of the time.

The informal one-on-one cafe interview setting is a classic example of the unstructured interview - the worst kind of hiring tool. An unstructured interview leads to bias, snap judgements based on one's emotional evaluations - "I like this person, they seem very nice, articulate, well presented; they would be perfect for the job."

Remember, when conducting a job interview, this is the absolute best light you are going to see this person in. It's easy to be fooled by first appearances. When it comes to an unstructured interview we tend to "rush judge" people. Most managers make up their minds to hire, or not to hire, within the first five minutes.

The best and most valid interviews are conducted in a private setting, with two (or more) interviewers who present the same set of behavioural questions to each candidate. Each question represents a core competency of the job.

Here's an example: A key competency could be customer service - The question - "Can you please give me an example of the actions you took in a previous job when you were confronted with an abusive customer?"

Most jobs have about 6 to 8 core competencies, so a question for each one will do a good job and take about an hour to get through; I believe the limit for a good interview.

Here's another tip. Immediately after the interview discuss and rate each of the competencies in relation to the candidate's answers. This will help you recall the most suitable candidate(s) if you are interviewing several people over a few days.

There are numerous other pitfalls I've heard eavesdropping on cafe interviews, but suffice to say don't do them - these unstructured interviews are not only the poorest predictor of work performance, but the most expensive (cost of your time) of any tool in the selection process. No wonder employment lawyers are making a nice living and we have an overly worked employment advocacy service!
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