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## How effectively interviewing for a job is often like speed dating (essay)

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While hiring new colleagues is one of our most important tasks, we must best use the limited time that we have to make these decisions. The campus interview is an intractable tradition, despite the extensive literature on the inadequacy and even the misleading nature of this ritual. We have all made the mistake of hiring a practiced interviewee who turns out, once hired, to be far less skilled at doing the job.

I'm a strong proponent of the project interview, which involves asking finalists to perform a relevant task. We do that when we require prospective faculty hires to perform a teaching demonstration. Similarly, we should ask candidates for public relations positions, for example, to design and write a mini campaign. Josh Wyner, vice president and executive director of the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program, recently told a group of university presidents about the institute's success in hiring someone to design curriculum because the candidate was asked to prepare a sample curriculum design. (What a concept!)

But the candidate interview will not disappear any time soon. After years of experience in interviewing and being interviewed for campus positions, I have distilled the interview questions into the equivalent of speed dating, starting with three: Why You? Why Us? Why Now? These questions can keep candidates focused on what we really need to know.

**Why You?** This question is designed to ascertain why candidates think they are right for the job. Frankly, I don't want to hear extensive details about wondrous accomplishments in their current positions, unless those achievements pertain to the job they are seeking with us. It's astonishing that finalists for senior positions -- even some who list professional advancement seminars on their CVs -- have done very little thinking about their passion for the job they are interviewing for.

A few years ago, I asked a finalist why she wanted to be a provost. Her answer: "People have told me I am ready." If it had not been for the rules of hospitality, I would have immediately called a car service to take her to the airport. Preparing to respond to the "Why You?" question requires doing homework, reflecting on one's own philosophy and interests, and understanding the nature of the new job.

**Why Us?** The next question also depends on extensive thought and research. When we conduct interviews, we are mainly interested in the potential abilities of candidates to address and perhaps solve our institutional problems. If a candidate is drawn to an institution because of its prestige or location, that is not enough. We want to ascertain what candidates

know about our university -- the good, the bad and the ugly. No one wants to hire someone who is destined to be unhappy in the new position. If our university has received national recognition, we want candidates to know about it.

And the fact is, Google makes it easy. Has the candidate read, for example, the article in *Inside Higher Ed* about our university's commitment to assigning only full-time faculty members to teach first-year students? I would like to know how that commitment affects the candidate's understanding of the job -- even if the job at hand is in the financial area rather than the academic. From another vantage point, what do candidates for academic positions understand about the Illinois budget stalemate? It's important that they have informed themselves about the issues and are prepared to ask relevant questions.

**Why Now?** This question pertains to candidates' reasons for making a transition. It's vital to give candidates the opportunity to outline their career paths, culminating in their interest in our opening. I want to understand gaps in the CV and what seem to be too-brief tenures at other institutions. Candidates' responses also allow them to be convincing about the appeal of the new job and to navigate -- tactfully, one hopes -- problematic issues with their current employer. Diplomacy is of the essence. No matter how miserable the candidate's current situation, it's a red flag to dump on one's previous institution. Dare I extend the speed-dating comparison? Complaints about one's ex are off-limits.

As much as possible, this speed-dating interview should be conversational, inviting questions all along the way. But candidates should be prepared near the end of the interview to ask appropriate questions, not ones that are fact based or easily found on the university's website.

Finally, it's a good idea to ask candidates whether they would like to tell us something that we haven't asked and that does not appear on their CV. Recently, a candidate for a senior financial position at my university courageously told me that he is an introvert, not always immediately comfortable with people he doesn't know but always ready to develop greater ease as he works with colleagues. That led to a discussion of Susan Cain's book and TED talk, *Quiet* [1]. I was impressed with the candidate's self-knowledge and candor and by the fact that he explained his introversion in terms of his joy in working with spreadsheets (a crucial part of the position he was interviewing for) and his commitment to moving from introversion to collegiality. We offered him the job.

Interviewing, like speed dating, is never a guarantee of finding the right fit, but focused questions can get both the candidate and us closer to understanding what we need to know.

### **Author Bio:**

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://crownpublishing.com/news/quiet-the-power-of-introverts-in-a-world-that-cant-stop-talking-by-susan-cain/#.V-LDA2dTEdU>

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