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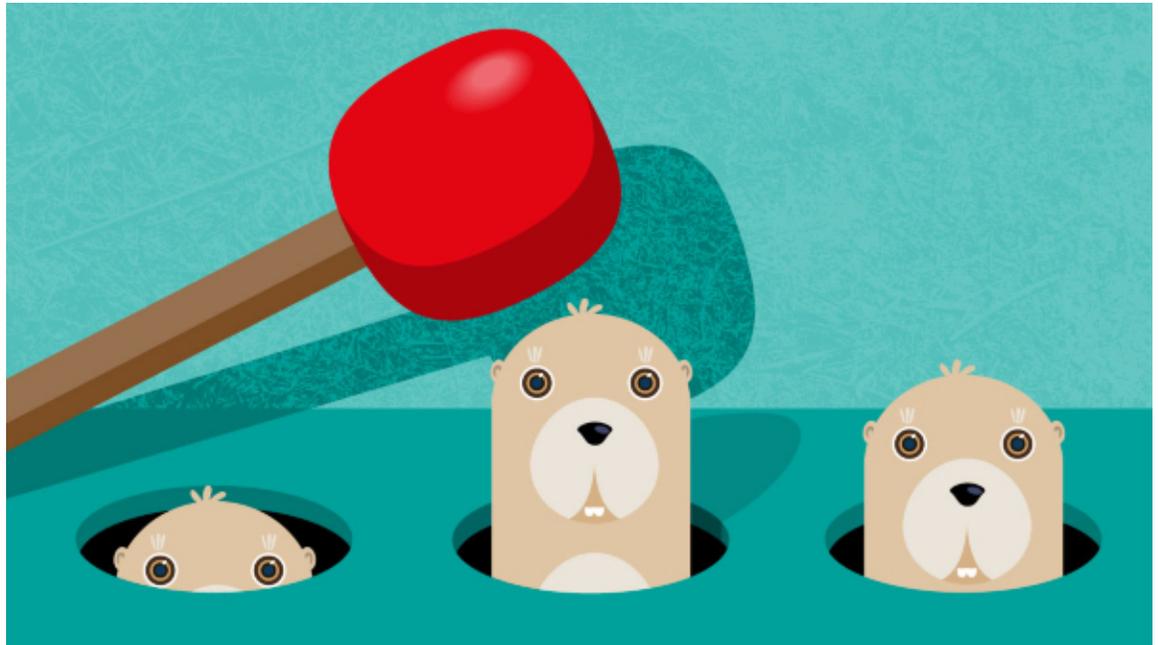
6 Ways to Screen Job Candidates for Strategic Thinking

by John Sullivan

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Every organization needs strategic thinkers. In a [2013 Management Research Group survey](#), when executives were asked to select the leadership behaviors that were most critical to their organization's future success, 97% of the time they chose being strategic.

This is because people who are able to think strategically add value in four ways. First, by being forward-looking, they help ensure that an organization is fully prepared for a difficult-to-predict

future. Second, their big-picture perspective helps a firm avoid major problems and conflicts by connecting the dots and seeing the interrelationships between business elements. Third, their external focus keeps everyone aware of emerging trends in the economy and the industry. And fourth, they have a global perspective.

Unfortunately, assessing whether a candidate is a strategic thinker is far from easy. Most people tell you that they are one if you ask, and most assessments give you false positives. The job interview is often the best opportunity to accurately separate out people who have this relatively rare talent from the high volume of candidates that only have tactical capabilities.

Don't rely on your job applicant to tell you whether they are strategic. Instead, use one of these six interview approaches.

Give Them a Real Problem to Solve

This is the most effective approach by far: Provide promising candidates a problem to solve during the interview. You can use a real unsolved problem, which has the advantage of providing you with several potential solutions. Or you can use a problem that you've already solved, which means you'll already know the critical steps that should be included in an answer. With either option, you should verbally describe the problem or provide a written description, give the candidate a few minutes to think, and then ask them to walk you through the steps they would take to investigate and resolve the problem.

What you should look for in a response will vary according to the particular problem you've asked them to solve, but there are essential steps that should be included in every answer:

- compile a list of potential problems
- check the strategic plan
- review company and industry multiyear forecasts
- identify and track key industry and economic environmental factors
- identify and consult with key stakeholders across departments and business units

Depending on the question, you may also look for these steps in their answer:

- identify interconnected and interdependent functional areas, including predictive metrics
- pretest solutions with your customers
- measure success after implementation and use data to make adjustments

In most cases, omitting a critical step such as checking with the customer would be a clear knockout factor for any candidate.

In addition to assessing the individual steps, you should also look out for an answer that includes too many tactical steps and not enough of a strategic focus.

Ask Them to Review a Flawed Strategic Plan and Identify Potential Problems

A second tactic is to provide an early draft of your organization or department's current strategic plan and ask candidates to identify any significant flaws or omissions. Since you already know the problems that occurred, it should be relatively easy to evaluate a candidate's ability to identify potential issues. If the individual can't find a significant percentage of what you know to be the flaws and omissions, it's unlikely they are a strategic thinker.

Ask Specific Interview Questions

There are several questions that can reveal whether a candidate has strategic thinking skills:

- How would you go about connecting the dots and identifying the interrelationships and interdependencies in a proposed strategic plan?
- When you are working on a strategic project in your current job, how do you go about identifying the relevant stakeholders across the firm?
- What are the steps that you have taken during your career to become a more strategic thinker? What measures or indicators do you have for growing the skill?
- What are the steps you'd take to identify which candidates for a job are strategic thinkers? (The answer here is helpful in two ways. It will give you ideas to improve your assessment, and it will provide insight into the candidate's depth of understanding on the topic and how they describe themselves against that criteria.)

Look for Strategic Phrases Within the Answers to Your Standard Interview Questions.

Few strategic thinkers actually label themselves with the phrase, but fortunately there are many other words that can indicate the skill: "strategic goals," "multiyear," "cross-functional," "increasing profitability and margins," "connecting the dots," "data-driven decisions," and "root cause analysis." Individuals that routinely quantify their results in dollars or revenue impacts are highly likely to be strategic. After a candidate uses one of these phrases, the interviewer can ask them to define the phrase and explain its importance. This will help distinguish interviewees who are using catchphrases to impress you from those who truly understand these words and phrases.

Ask Questions That Reveal How Much They Value Strategic Thinking

If you ask a candidate to list their capabilities from most to least important, you can get an understanding of how important they think strategic capabilities are. Alternately, you can ask them to list a few ideal or dream projects they'd like to work on in the future and then consider what percentage of those dream projects are strategic. Because strategic thinking involves continuous learning, you can ask candidates to name the specific learning sources that they use to expand their capabilities. They should be able to immediately name resources, and you can compare those with sources that your current employees use. Ask them questions about your firm's strategy, your strategic products, your recent strategic blunders, your strategic competitors, and the most strategic firms in the industry. The best candidates will have done this research in advance. If they haven't, you should pass on them.

Consider the Questions They Ask You

The right candidate will proactively ask their own questions related to strategy. You should take note of the number and quality of the strategic questions that they ask, and be suspicious when a candidate doesn't ask any. For example, you should give positive points when a candidate asks a question like, "How does this job fit into the corporate strategy?" The best candidates may ask questions related to planned changes to future corporate strategy, the opportunities they'll have to contribute to strategy, and the strategic things that are happening within the department. Because the best thinkers are action-oriented, expect them to ask questions related to the implementation of ideas.

I'm often asked by executives what percentage of employees in a firm should be strategic thinkers, leaders, and innovators. My answer is always the same: You can't have too many. Unfortunately, few companies ever end up with a surplus of this exceptional talent, in part because their interview approach doesn't accurately identify them. It's time to start asking the right questions.

John Sullivan, Ph.D., is a professor of management at San Francisco State University and an internationally known HR thought-leader from the Silicon Valley. He's a prolific author with over 900 articles and 10 books covering all areas of talent management.
