Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I'm Hiring Someone and Everyone Seems Great in the Interview

How to Conduct Job Interviews, Assess Competencies, and Reduce Your Own Biases Without Choosing the Person Who Simply Tells the Best Story



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

I'm Hiring Someone and Everyone Seems Great in the Interview

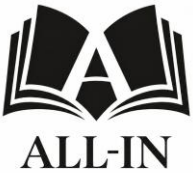
How to Conduct Job Interviews, Assess Competencies, and Reduce Your Own Biases Without Choosing the Person Who Simply Tells the Best Story

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INTRO

The candidate has just finished describing the most challenging project of her career. There was an impossible deadline, a demanding client, several unexpected complications, and a team that apparently needed rescuing. She tells the story beautifully. Every setback becomes an opportunity, every difficult decision demonstrates leadership, and the ending is so satisfying that you almost want to applaud. You write "excellent problem-solving skills" in your notes. Then you glance at the clock and realize something uncomfortable: you still don't know which decisions she personally made. You know the project succeeded. You know she was involved. You also know she could probably narrate a documentary about office furniture and make it sound like a corporate thriller.

Welcome to the fascinating world of hiring, where the ability to describe great work can occasionally receive more attention than the ability to perform it.

A job interview is a peculiar professional arrangement. One person is expected to demonstrate their abilities through conversation, while another attempts to predict their future performance from what they hear. Both participants know the stakes. The candidate wants an opportunity, and the employer wants someone who will solve problems rather than introduce an exciting new collection of them. Unfortunately, the interview itself creates an artificial environment. People prepare stories, anticipate questions, choose flattering examples, and practice delivering difficult answers. None of that is dishonest. Preparing well is sensible. The difficulty arises when we mistake interview

performance for comprehensive evidence of job performance.

Consider how much time people spend learning to interview successfully. They study common questions, rehearse descriptions of achievements, and develop polished explanations for career changes. Entire industries exist to help candidates become more convincing. Meanwhile, the person doing the hiring may have received approximately twelve minutes of instruction, most of which concerned how to book a meeting room. The resulting imbalance is remarkable. One side has prepared an impressive professional presentation. The other has a job description, a rapidly cooling cup of coffee, and the vague belief that experience has given them an excellent instinct for people.

That instinct can certainly be useful, but it deserves less authority than we sometimes give it. We form impressions quickly, notice familiar qualities, and respond emotionally to the way people communicate. A candidate who speaks confidently can seem more capable. Someone who shares our professional background may feel immediately trustworthy. A person who hesitates before answering might appear uncertain, even when they are carefully considering the question. These reactions are human, not necessarily evidence of deliberate unfairness. The problem begins when we convert them into judgments about competencies we have not actually examined. Feeling comfortable with someone is a real experience. It is not, by itself, proof that they can manage a budget, diagnose a technical problem, or lead a difficult negotiation.

Imagine hiring someone to oversee operations for a subscription-based service. One applicant enthusiastically

describes transforming customer retention through strategic initiatives. Another explains how they discovered a recurring billing error, traced it to a specific process, worked with the relevant teams, and checked whether the correction was effective. The first story sounds bigger. The second provides more detail about observable decisions. Does that make the second applicant better? Not automatically. You still need to understand the role, the circumstances, and the quality of each person's contribution. But the difference reveals a useful principle: an impressive story and informative evidence are not always the same thing. Hiring gets easier to reason about when you stop treating them as interchangeable.

It also helps to recognize that employers are not always clear about what they need. A vacancy appears, somebody retrieves an old job description, and the organization starts searching for a person who is proactive, adaptable, analytical, resilient, collaborative, independent, detail-oriented, and exceptionally creative. The list grows until the ideal employee would need several personalities and a remarkably cooperative nervous system. Yet the essential question remains unanswered: what will this person actually have to accomplish? If the business cannot explain the work, the interviews are likely to reward general attractiveness as a candidate rather than preparation for a particular role. A wonderful applicant can still be the wrong hire for a poorly defined position.

This book is about replacing that uncertainty with better questions, stronger evidence, and more thoughtful decisions. You will learn to distinguish claims from demonstrated abilities, explore past experience without simply rewarding polished storytelling, and use practical

exercises when they genuinely reveal something important. You'll examine how to compare candidates without pretending that a numerical score eliminates human judgment. You'll also learn when an apparent weakness matters, when it deserves further investigation, and when it is merely something unfamiliar about the person sitting opposite you. The aim is not to transform every conversation into an interrogation. Candidates are people, not malfunctioning devices awaiting a technical inspection.

Fairness matters throughout this process. Two applicants should not face fundamentally different standards simply because one reminds the interviewer of a favorite former colleague. Personal background, communication style, appearance, and other characteristics unrelated to the work should not quietly replace relevant qualifications. At the same time, fairness does not mean ignoring important differences in ability or pretending everyone must receive the same assessment regardless of their answers. It means identifying what the job requires, offering a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate it, and grounding decisions in job-related information. Recruitment practices must also respect applicable employment and privacy laws, which vary by jurisdiction. Professional curiosity does not give an employer unlimited access to someone's personal life.

There is a practical complication, of course: most hiring managers do not have unlimited time. You may be interviewing between client meetings, covering an understaffed department, and receiving increasingly enthusiastic messages from your boss asking whether the vacancy has been filled. Perhaps you have no recruitment specialist, no assessment budget, and no experienced colleague available to evaluate technical skills. This book

takes those limitations seriously. A useful hiring process doesn't need to resemble a diplomatic summit attended by seventeen evaluators. Sometimes it needs a clear definition of the role, a handful of meaningful questions, an appropriately designed work sample, and enough discipline to record what was actually learned. Additional complexity is worthwhile only when it provides information that improves the decision.

You'll also discover why the candidate's perspective matters. Hiring is not simply an employer choosing from a collection of applicants. The person you select must decide whether to trust your description of the job, the team, and the opportunities available. If you advertise a supportive workplace but conceal impossible expectations, even an excellent hiring decision may lead to a disappointing working relationship. Honest explanations, reasonable expectations, and respectful communication are part of effective recruitment. So is telling unsuccessful candidates that the process has ended. Vanishing after promising an update is not a sophisticated recruitment strategy, although some organizations practice it with impressive consistency.

None of these methods will make hiring completely predictable. People develop, circumstances change, and an interview provides only a limited view of someone's abilities. A carefully selected employee can struggle in a poorly organized workplace. A candidate with less conventional experience can flourish when given the right responsibilities and support. The purpose of better assessment is to reduce avoidable uncertainty, not to claim supernatural insight. You should be able to explain why you selected someone, which competencies support your decision, and which important questions remain. That is a more realistic standard than

demanding absolute certainty before anyone receives an offer.

Before your next interview, take a look at one of your previous candidate assessments. Notice how many comments describe impressions rather than actions. "Very professional." "Strong personality." "Great potential." "Excellent fit." For each important judgment, ask yourself what the candidate actually said, did, or demonstrated that supports it. You may find solid evidence. You may discover that an interesting ability was never properly explored. Either outcome is useful, because it tells you something about the information behind your decision rather than merely confirming how strongly you feel about it.

You do not need to become a psychologist, a detective, or an expert in decoding facial expressions to hire more thoughtfully. You need to understand the job, listen for meaningful information, question your assumptions, and recognize the limits of what a conversation can establish. You can remain friendly, curious, and human throughout. A candidate is allowed to be nervous. An interviewer is allowed to be imperfect. Neither is required to perform a flawless corporate ceremony.

And the next time someone announces, "Every candidate was fantastic!", you might have a much more useful question ready: "Fantastic at what, exactly?"

That is where good hiring begins.

Chapter 1 - Everyone Sounds Brilliant: The Interview's Most Convincing Illusion

The interview room at a small cinema company has become an unexpectedly impressive place. Three candidates have arrived to discuss a venue manager position, and all three have delivered performances worthy of a standing ovation. The first speaks confidently about increasing customer satisfaction. The second describes leading teams through organizational change. The third explains how she transformed operational challenges into opportunities for growth. Nobody hesitates. Nobody struggles to describe an achievement. By lunchtime, the hiring manager has written "excellent leadership potential" beside every name. Unfortunately, one of these people will soon be responsible for handling staff shortages, malfunctioning projectors, customer complaints, and emergency schedule changes. The manager has learned that all three candidates are comfortable discussing leadership. Whether any of them can keep a cinema running on a Saturday evening remains an entirely separate question.

The strange thing about interviews is that they often feel informative even when they provide little evidence. A candidate tells a compelling story, the interviewer asks an intelligent follow-up question, and both participants leave feeling that something meaningful has been established. Sometimes it has. But a pleasant conversation can also create the impression of knowledge without supplying enough detail to justify it. The interviewer recognizes familiar

professional language and unconsciously fills in the missing information. "I improved team performance" becomes evidence of effective management. "I handled difficult stakeholders" becomes proof of negotiation skills. "I delivered results under pressure" somehow turns into confirmation that the candidate can operate calmly during a crisis. Each conclusion sounds reasonable until someone asks what actually happened.

This is not necessarily a problem of dishonesty. Job applicants are expected to present themselves favorably, and most sensible people prepare for important conversations. They select experiences that reflect well on their abilities, organize events into clear narratives, and practice describing what they accomplished. Employers encourage this behavior by asking for examples of success, leadership, and problem-solving. Then they sometimes appear surprised when candidates arrive prepared to discuss precisely those subjects. The real difficulty lies in treating the quality of a prepared account as sufficient evidence of the quality of the underlying work. A well-delivered explanation deserves attention, but its professional significance depends on what it actually reveals.

The difference between telling a story and demonstrating a skill

Consider an applicant who describes rescuing a poorly performing cinema location. He explains that ticket sales had fallen, employees were disengaged, and customer complaints were increasing. He introduced a new approach to operations, encouraged the team, and helped achieve a substantial improvement. It sounds excellent. Yet the account leaves several possibilities open. Perhaps he personally analyzed attendance patterns and redesigned

staff schedules. Perhaps an experienced colleague developed the changes while he supervised implementation. Perhaps the cinema benefited from a major film release that increased attendance across the region. These possibilities are not equivalent when assessing someone's ability to manage another venue.

A useful interviewer does not need to challenge the candidate's integrity. The better response is curiosity about the details. What information suggested that staffing was contributing to the problem? Which decisions were his responsibility? What alternatives were considered? How did the team know that the changes were working? The aim is to understand the candidate's contribution, the conditions surrounding it, and the reasoning behind important choices. Even a truthful account can initially be too broad to support a meaningful assessment. Asking for specifics helps distinguish genuine responsibility from simple proximity to a successful project. Being present when a company achieved something impressive is experience, but it is not automatically ownership of the achievement.

The language of professional success makes this distinction especially challenging. Candidates quite reasonably use expressions such as "we implemented," "we delivered," and "we transformed." Teamwork is often essential, and demanding that every achievement be described entirely in the first person would create its own distortion. Nevertheless, you need to understand where collective responsibility ended and individual decisions began. A candidate who recognizes colleagues' contributions may actually provide a more credible account than someone who claims personal ownership of everything accomplished by a department. You are looking for clarity,

not a heroic story in which the applicant single-handedly saved the organization while everyone else stood around admiring the spreadsheet.

There is another complication. Some people are naturally skilled at organizing memories into stories, while others recall the same type of experience through technical details or disconnected events. An applicant might need time to establish the circumstances before explaining a decision. Someone else might start confidently with an impressive conclusion and only later reveal important qualifications. Neither communication style automatically determines the value of the underlying experience. If clear presentations are central to the role, the ability to explain information deserves appropriate attention. If the job primarily requires careful analysis or reliable operational decisions, however, polished storytelling should not quietly become the dominant selection criterion.

Imagine a second cinema manager candidate who describes a staffing dispute without much theatrical flair. She pauses, corrects an earlier detail, and explains that her first proposed solution failed. She then describes how she gathered additional information, changed the schedule, and involved employees in developing a workable arrangement. The story is less elegant than the previous applicant's account. It may nevertheless provide better insight into her judgment, willingness to reconsider decisions, and understanding of operational constraints. Those qualities cannot be evaluated simply by deciding which conversation was more enjoyable. Sometimes the candidate who makes the story slightly less impressive makes the evidence considerably more useful.

The interviewer is part of the illusion

It's tempting to imagine the interviewer as a neutral observer collecting information from candidates. In reality, the interviewer shapes the entire exchange. The questions asked, the patience shown, the reactions given, and the amount of time allowed all influence what the candidate can demonstrate. When someone immediately seems promising, you may encourage them to elaborate, ask helpful questions, and give them the benefit of the doubt when an answer is incomplete. When someone makes a weaker initial impression, you may move on more quickly or interpret hesitation negatively. Later, you compare their performances as though both people had been given identical opportunities to show their abilities.

This is where the familiar halo effect becomes relevant. A strong impression in one area can influence judgments about other qualities that have not been established. A candidate with excellent conversational skills may begin to seem organized, decisive, and trustworthy without having supplied evidence of those competencies. The effect can operate in reverse too. A minor awkwardness might lead you to question someone's professional judgment despite a strong technical answer. Recognizing this possibility does not require treating every impression as meaningless. It means checking whether your conclusions extend beyond the information available. Someone can be genuinely charming without necessarily being good at managing a venue. Both facts can exist peacefully in the same person.

Similarity creates a related problem. Suppose an applicant previously worked at a company you admire, enjoys discussing familiar management techniques, and shares your opinions about customer service. You quickly establish rapport and begin anticipating each other's answers. The

conversation becomes wonderfully efficient because very little requires explanation. Unfortunately, that ease can conceal assumptions. You may believe the candidate understands your expectations simply because you use the same expressions. Another applicant from an unfamiliar environment may require more explanation while possessing equally relevant capabilities. Familiarity makes understanding feel effortless, but it cannot establish competence by itself.

Even the order of interviews can distort assessments. After a particularly disappointing meeting, an adequately prepared applicant may appear exceptional. Following an extraordinarily polished candidate, someone equally capable but less engaging may feel underwhelming. Fatigue adds another layer. By the fifth interview, you may be less willing to explore a complicated answer or challenge your initial opinion. None of this means hiring managers are incapable of making sensible judgments. It means that comparisons based entirely on memory and overall feeling are especially vulnerable to context. A tired interviewer is still a professional, but professional status does not create an unlimited supply of concentration.

One way to reduce these problems is to make individual assessments before discussing candidates with colleagues. Record observations while the relevant information is fresh, using the requirements established for the role. Avoid deciding that someone is the strongest applicant simply because they were more impressive than the person interviewed immediately beforehand. The comparison should concern relevant competencies, not the emotional trajectory of your afternoon. When candidates are assessed against clear expectations before being ranked against one

another, there is less temptation to let a single memorable performance redefine what good looks like.

What did you actually observe?

The most useful improvement to your notes is surprisingly ordinary: separate what the candidate claimed, what they specifically described or demonstrated, and what you inferred. Suppose an applicant says she is excellent at managing customer complaints. That is a claim. She then describes a particular complaint, explains her response, and identifies how the situation ended. That is a specific account, although it remains her account until independently corroborated. Your conclusion might be that she appears capable of resolving complaints involving delayed refunds. This is a more defensible assessment than writing "outstanding customer management" based on the atmosphere of the conversation.

The distinction becomes especially valuable when evidence is incomplete. Perhaps the candidate has managed complaints involving routine service failures but has never dealt with a serious safety incident. You need not mark her as incapable of handling the latter. You can acknowledge that the relevant ability has not been established. This prevents uncertainty from quietly becoming either praise or criticism. The same principle applies when candidates describe projects of different sizes. Someone who has coordinated six employees may possess transferable skills, but that experience does not automatically establish readiness to manage sixty. Context matters, and the extent of what can reasonably be concluded matters just as much.

Another useful habit is to ask what information would change your opinion. If you think an applicant is exceptionally capable, what important uncertainty remains?

If you feel doubtful, is the concern connected to a specific requirement or merely to the way the applicant communicates? Consider an interviewer who describes someone as "not confident enough" because they asked for clarification before making a recommendation. If the position requires careful operational judgments, requesting necessary information could be entirely appropriate. On the other hand, if the candidate repeatedly avoids making decisions even after receiving sufficient details, that may reveal a genuine concern. The observable behavior must be interpreted in relation to the work.

This is also why being nervous should not automatically count against someone. Interviews are unusual situations involving evaluation, limited information, and potentially significant consequences. A candidate may speak less comfortably in that setting than during familiar professional tasks. Of course, certain jobs genuinely require effective communication under pressure. Even then, it matters which type of pressure and communication the work involves. Handling an irritated customer is different from answering unexpected questions about your entire professional history. If you need to assess performance under particular conditions, create a relevant opportunity rather than treating ordinary interview anxiety as a universal measure of resilience.

None of these adjustments requires turning the interview into a suspicious interrogation. In fact, candidates often provide more useful information when questions are clear, the atmosphere is respectful, and they understand what is being discussed. You can remain warm and interested while asking for specific explanations. You can appreciate a persuasive story without accepting every conclusion it

encourages. The goal is neither to catch people making mistakes nor to reward them for creating the most flattering impression. It is to understand the abilities they can reasonably be expected to bring to the role.

Before leaving the room, consider whether you could explain your assessment to a colleague who never met the candidate. Could you identify two or three job-related observations supporting your conclusions? Could you distinguish an important uncertainty from a demonstrated weakness? Would the explanation make sense without the phrases "I just liked them" or "they seemed really impressive"? If so, the conversation has probably produced something more useful than enthusiasm. If not, the problem may be insufficient evidence rather than an inadequate candidate.

The best interviews do not necessarily leave you feeling that you have discovered an extraordinary person. They leave you understanding something specific about a person's experience, decisions, abilities, and limitations. That understanding may be less exciting than the sensation of instantly recognizing a future superstar, but it is considerably more useful when the projector fails, the Saturday shift collapses, and the person you hired is expected to know what to do.

Chapter 2 - Are You Hiring an Employee or Ordering a Corporate Superhero?

The vacancy announcement for an operations manager at an online furniture retailer begins innocently enough. The successful applicant will coordinate deliveries, oversee customer service, and improve operational performance. Then the requirements begin multiplying. They must possess exceptional leadership ability, advanced analytical skills, extensive industry experience, outstanding creativity, excellent attention to detail, and the capacity to thrive in a constantly changing environment. Knowledge of inventory systems is essential. Digital marketing experience is preferred. Familiarity with website development would be advantageous. By the final paragraph, the company appears to be searching for a logistics manager, software specialist, business analyst, customer service director, and motivational speaker. The advertised salary, meanwhile, suggests that the organization expects all five professionals to share a single bank account.

Nobody necessarily intended to write an unreasonable advertisement. The logistics director requested someone with delivery experience. Customer service wanted better communication. Finance insisted on analytical skills. Senior management added strategic thinking because it sounds important and has never made a job advertisement less impressive. Every department contributed a sensible requirement from its own perspective. Unfortunately, nobody asked whether all those requirements belonged to the same job, how frequently each skill would be used, or which abilities were genuinely essential. The resulting

description became a collection of preferences rather than a practical definition of work. Once interviews begin, the hiring manager faces an impossible comparison: candidates have different strengths, but there is no clear agreement about which strengths matter most.

The remedy begins with an apparently simple question: what must this person actually accomplish? Not which adjectives should describe them, which prestigious companies should appear on their resume, or how impressive their professional introduction ought to sound. What problems are they being hired to solve? What decisions will they make? Which responsibilities belong to them, and which remain with other people? A role becomes easier to assess when you can describe its work without relying on phrases such as "support business objectives" or "drive operational excellence." Those expressions may have their uses in presentations, but they offer limited guidance when deciding whether someone can handle an angry customer whose dining table has been delivered without its legs.

The job behind the impressive title

Imagine examining the furniture retailer's actual operations. Deliveries are frequently delayed because warehouse information does not match the stock shown on the website. Customers receive inconsistent updates, and returned products sometimes remain unprocessed for days. The customer service team repeatedly contacts the logistics department for information that should already be available. The new operations manager is expected to improve coordination, identify recurring failures, and establish clearer responsibilities. This description reveals much more about the role than the original advertisement. It suggests the

importance of process analysis, communication across departments, practical decision-making, and the ability to follow problems through to resolution.

The distinction matters because candidates may demonstrate different kinds of expertise. Someone with extensive experience managing large warehouse teams might understand logistics extremely well but have limited exposure to customer communication. Another applicant may have improved order fulfillment processes in a smaller company without ever managing a substantial team. A third might be brilliant at producing performance reports yet struggle to persuade departments to change their working practices. None can be assessed properly until the company decides which responsibilities the new manager will actually own. Otherwise, the choice may favor the applicant whose experience most closely resembles the interviewer's idea of an impressive career, even when that career is poorly matched to the work.

A useful job definition includes outcomes, but outcomes must be interpreted carefully. You might want fewer delivery complaints, more reliable stock information, and faster resolution of returns. These are legitimate business goals. However, the new manager may not control the transport provider's performance, the purchasing budget, or the technology team responsible for updating the inventory system. Holding someone accountable for improvements they cannot meaningfully influence creates a misleading picture of the position. Distinguish what the employee must personally deliver from the wider results they are expected to help achieve. A manager can identify a system defect and organize a credible response without possessing the authority to replace the entire system by Thursday.