Hiring and retaining your science team

*Selecting, interviewing and orienting*.

*Checklists and interview guides*



Carl M. Cohen, Ph.D.

Science Management Associates

www.sciencema.com

carlmcohen@gmail.com

617 965 1826

**Resume review checklist**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Candidate name** |  | |
|  | **Parameter** | **Score 0-5** |
|  | **Technical skills** |  |
|  | **List specific skills if you need to rate them separately** |
| **1** | **Skill 1** |
| **2** | **Skill 2 etc** |
| **3** | **Appropriate and relevant educational background.** |  |
| **4** | **Appropriate and relevant work background.** |
| **5** | **Managerial or supervisory skills (if needed).** |  |
| **6** | **Language and attention to detail in resume and cover letter.** |  |
| **7** | **Other desirable or necessary skills** |  |
| **8** | **Skill 1** |
| **9** | **Skill 2 etc** |
| **10** | **Quality of previous scientific work and or publications.** |  |
|  | **Notes** |  |
| **Total score** |  | **0-30** |

**Candidate/PI phone interview checklist**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Candidate name** |  | |
|  | **Parameter** | **Score 0-5** |
| **1** | **Technical skills and background** |  |
|  | **List specific skills if you need to rate them separately** |
|  | **Skill 1** |
|  | **Skill 2 etc** |
|  | **Appropriate and relevant background** |
| **2** | **Communication (Articulate and clear phone skills)** |  |
| **3** | **Managerial or supervisory skills (if relevant)** |  |
| **4** | **Their preparation** |  |
|  | **Did their homework about us** |
|  | **Quality of questions they asked** |
| **5** | **Red flags?** |  |
| **6** | **Position specific questions (schedule, physical capabilities, travel, etc)** |  |
| **Total** |  | **0-20** |

**Candidate phone interview script and questions**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  | Contributes to score of item # |
|  | **Question** |  |
| 1 | **“Why are you interested in this position? “** | **1,4** |
| 2 | **Tell them about the position (include position-specific qualifications like technical skills, travel, lifting, etc).** |  |
| 3 | **“Tell me about yourself. Talk me through your background. Why are you a good fit for this position?” (including technical skills).** | **1,2,3,4** |
| 4 | **“Talk me through the work transitions you have made and why you made each one” (Especially important for candidates with multiple short term positons.}** | **5** |
| 5 | **“Tell me about your management or supervisory experience” (if relevant).** | **3** |
| 6 | **“What do you know about us?”** | **4** |
| 7 | **“What questions do you have for me?”** | **4** |
| 8 | **“As you read the position description and heard me describe the position, what aspects of the role do you think will be the most challenging?”** |  |

**Candidate/PI face-to-face interview checklist**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Candidate name** |  | |
|  | **Parameter** | **Score 0-10** |
| **1** | **Background and skills verification** |  |
|  | **A. Technical skills and know how** |
|  | **B. Relevant background and experience** |
|  | **C. Speaking and language skills during interview** |
| **2** | **Their preparation** |  |
|  | **A. Interest in and knowledge about lab or project** |
|  | **B. Quality of their questions** |
| **3** | **Seminar** |  |
|  | **A. Clarity and organization** |
|  | **B. Speaking skills** |
|  | **C. Thinking on feet** |
|  | **D. Responsiveness to questions** |
|  | **E. Relevance/novelty of topic** |
| **4** | **Personal attributes** |  |
|  | **A. Feedback** |
|  | **B. Manage emotions** |
|  | **C. Team mindset** |
|  | **D. Problem solving** |
|  | **E. Conflict management** |
|  | **F. Independent thinking/autonomy** |
|  |  |
| **5** | **Managerial** |  |
| **6** | **“Fit” with the group** |  |
| **7** | **Strongest characteristic** |  |
| **8** | **Red flags** |
| **9** | **Position specific questions verification.** |
| **Total** |  | **0-60** |

**Candidate PI face-to-face interview questions**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  |
| Checklist item 1 | **Background and skills verification** |
|  | **Briefly review the organization, the responsibilities and or department and the requirements for the position. Ask them again why they’re a good fit. Listen for appropriate background and technical skills.**    **A and B. Review their answers to phone interview questions and probe or clarify areas where you have open questions (background and technical skills). Discuss the technical aspects of the position and pose questions whose answers require the technical knowledge that you need. Again, make sure you’re asking every candidate the same questions. (“We’re having a problem in the lab with creating stable cell lines with the XYZ gene knocked out is that something you could help us with?”).**  **C. How well do they communicate and relate during the interview?**  **Score item 1 on checklist.** |
| Checklist items 2 | **Their preparation** |
|  | **A. Interest in and knowledge about lab or project.**  **PI Interview “Tell me about your interested in our lab/group/department.”**  **B. Quality of their questions.**  **PI interview. “What questions do you have for me?’**  **Score item 2 on checklist** |
| Checklist item 4 | **Personal attributes** |
|  | 1. **Ability to hear and use feedback**   **1. Interview “Tell me about a time when you were told that what you were doing wasn’t correct or needed to be done differently ? What was the situation? How did you handle it?”**  **Listen for: Openness to feedback, desire for feedback or seeking feedback. Lack of defensiveness.**  **2. Reactional: Watch how candidate responds to questions and critiques during their seminar or interview. Are they open to hearing critiques (“Yes, that’s definitely an alternative explanation. Thanks for the suggestion.” Or are they defensive (“No, we thought of that. It’s not likely. Let me keep going…”).**  **Optional: Score for A** |
|  | **B. Ability to manage emotions**  **1. Interview. ‘Tell me about a time when you got angry or upset about something in the lab. What happened, and what did you do?”**  **Listen for: Ability to manage feelings of anger, frustration, etc without ‘acting out,’ losing temper, blaming. Listen for ability to self-reflect (“I thought a lot about why that happened, and learned a lesson.”)**    **2. Reactional. Watch for candidates reactions to interview schedule changes, delays, unexpected occurrences etc.**  **Optional:Score for B** |
|  | **C. Team mindset**  **1. Interview. “Tell me about a time when you worked as part of a team on a project. Was any part of that difficult for you? Explain that to me.” And “Do you prefer to work as part of a team or on your own project? Why is that?”**  **Listen for: Whether candidate expresses a preference for working independently or as part of a team. Your evaluation will depend on the role for this person.**  **2. Reactional. Listen for the candidates use of “I” vs “we” when describing group or team projects.**  **Optional: Score for C** |
|  | **D. Problem solving – accessing help.**  **1. Interview. “Tell me about a time when you were stuck on a difficult problem.” Let them tell a story. “How did you resolve it?”**  **“Tell me about a time when you made a mistake. What happened?” “Have you ever felt that you were at a dead end in a project? How did you handle that?”**  **Listen for: Whether they asked for or sought out help or just persisted in trying to solve it themselves.**    **2. Reactional “Do you know anything about analyzing hemi-haplotype associated retrotransposon patterning? What would you do if you needed to do that in a project?” Listen for whether they ask for help or try say that they would figure it out themselves.**  **Optional: Score for D** |
|  | **E. Conflict management**  **1. Interview. “Can you think of a time when you had a serious disagreement or conflict with someone in the lab? Tell me about it. How did you handle it? Whose fault was it?”**  **“Have you ever disagreed with a decision that your supervisor or organization made? Tell me about that time and how you managed your disagreement.”**  **Listen for: Ability to negotiate solutions, ability to see the other persons perspective, ability to be able to manage a conflict in order to get work done. Be alert to: A tendency to ‘blame’ others, attribute fault, bear grudges.**  **Optional: Score for E** |
|  | **F. Independent thinking/autonomy**  **1. Interview. “What do you when you get to a point in a project where you need to make a decision about direction or strategy? Can you think of an example?” “Can you think of a project where you came up with the focus, strategy or approach?”**  **Listen for: An ability to arrive at independent conclusions. A comfort level with taking a risk through independent thinking.**  **2. Reactional. At your second face to face candidate meeting at the end of the day “Now that you’ve had a chance to meet with the lab members and hear what we’re working on, do you have any ideas for us?”**  **Optional: Score for F** |
| Checklist item 5 | **Managerial.**  **1. Interview**  **“How would you describe your management philosophy or approach?” This is a slow ball question. Once they answer it then ask**  **“Can you give me an example of a management challenge that you faced with an employee and how you handled that?”**  **“Tell me about a time when you had to discipline someone or when you had an employee who wasn’t performing to your expectations. What did you do? How did it urn out?”**  **Listen for: A comfort level with giving people performance feedback, not ignoring the problem.**  **2. Reactional:**  **“What if we had a person who was a management challenge – they had a hard time meeting deadlines and didn’t communicate well. How would you handle them?”** |
| Checklist item 6 | **“Fit” with the group. Several dimensions. Technical fit; personal /interpersonal fit – can you imagine working with this person? Do you foresee challenges?** |
| Checklist item 7 | **Strongest characteristic. What stands out as the greatest strength of this applicant?** |
| Checklist item 8 | **Red flags. Did anything the candidate do or said stand out as concerning, inappropriate, or worrisome? Gaps in their technical knowledge? Insensitive comments? Ignoring certain people in the group?** |
| Checklist item 9 | **Position-specific questions verification. Are there specific skills (technical, managerial, interpersonal, eyc) that the candidate needs?** |

**Team members’ checklist**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Candidate name** |  | |
|  | **Parameter** | **Score 0-10** |
| **1** | **Skills** |  |
|  | **Technical skills and know how** |
|  | **Relevant background and experience** |
|  | **Speaking and language skills** |
| **2** | **Preparation** |  |
|  | **Interest in lab and or project** |
|  | **Quality of their questions** |
|  | **Knowledge about the lab/group/dept. or organization** |
| **3** | **Seminar** |  |
|  | **A. Clarity and organization** |
|  | **B. Speaking skills** |
|  | **C. Thinking on feet** |
|  | **D. Responsiveness to questions** |
|  | **E. Relevance/novelty of topic** |
| **4** | **“Fit” with the group** |  |
| **5** | **Strongest characteristic** |  |
| **6** | **Red flags** |
| **Total score** |  | **0- 40** |

**Phone reference checklist**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Candidate name** |  | |
| **Reference name** |  | |
|  | **Parameter** | **Score 1-10** |
| **1** | **Confirm their position and employment** |  |
| **2** | **Confirm position responsibilities and or project goals** |  |
| **3** | **Technical skills (all rated 1-5)** |  |
|  | **Skill 1** |
|  | **Skill 2** |
|  | **Skill 3** |
| **4** | **Other skills** |  |
|  | **A. Presentation skills** |
|  | **B. Writing and language skills** |
|  | **C. Work habits (organization, neat?, careful?)** |
|  | **D. Creativity and idea generation (if appropriate)** |
| **5** | **Personal attributes (compare with interview; all rated 1-10** |  |
|  | **A. Handle feedback** |
|  | **B. Manage emotions** |
|  | **C. Team mindset?** |
|  | **D. Problem solving** |
|  | **E. Conflict management** |
|  | **F. Independent thinking/ autonomy** |
|  |  |
| **6** | **Managerial skills** |  |
| **7** | **Overall rating** |  |
| **8** | **Hire again?** |  |
| **9** | **Greatest strength?** |  |
| **10** | **Areas for improvement?** |  |
| **11** | **Is there anything you would want to know if you were hiring this person?** |  |
| **Total score** |  | **0-60** |

**Phone reference interview questions (use with score sheet).**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  |
| Reference name |  |
| 1 | **Confirm their position and employment** |
| 2 | **Confirm position responsibilities and or project goals** |
|  |  |
| 3 | **Skills** |
|  | **Technical skills (1-5)** |
|  | **How would you rate X on their lab skills (specify specific skills if appropriate) on a scale of 1-5?** |
| 4 | **How would you rate x on their presentation skills? On their writing and language skills? (1-5)** |
|  | **How would you characterize X’s works habits? Is X organized in the lab and/or in X’s notebook? Is X good at planning in advance?** |
|  | **How would you rate X’s ability to be creative and/or to generate ideas? (1-5)** |
| 5 | **Personal attributes** |
|  | **A. Ability to hear and use feedback.**  **“Can you think of times when you gave X some feedback or critiqued their performance or work? How did they respond to that? Do they get defensive? Are they able to take responsibility for errors or mistakes?”** |
|  | **B. Ability to manage emotions.**  **“Can you think of a time when X got angry or had any kind of emotional reaction? Tell me about it.” If answer is ‘No” then ask “How does X react when criticized?” and “How does X react when under stress? Can you give me an example?”** |
|  | **C. Team mindset.**  **“Did X work as part of a team ? Can you describe X’s relationship with other team members? Did conflicts or disagreements arise at any point? How did X manage these? Can you give an example?”** |
|  | **D. Problem solving.**  **“Can you think of a time when X was stuck on a tough problem? What did X do? How did X handle it?”** |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | E. Conflict management  “Was X ever involved in a conflict or disagreement with anyone in the lab or group? Can you tell me about how X handled that” “How does X react when someone disagrees with her?” |
|  | **F. Independence**  **“Can you give me an example of X’s independent thinking?”**  **“Do you consider X a self-starter? Can you give an example?”** |
|  | **G. Self-management**  **“How did x handle situations where she had a lot on his plate or multiple possibly conflicting deadlines?” “Did X ever over extend himself? Can you give an example?”** |
| 6 | **H. Managerial skills**  **“Did X have supervisory experience?”**  **“How would you characterize X’s effectiveness as a manager?” “ Can you think of a specific example that illustrates X’s ability as a manager of others?”** |

**Candidate summary scoresheet**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  | | |
| Phase 1 |  | Range | Score |
| 1 | Resume | 0-30 |  |
| 2 | Phone interview | 0-20 |  |
| *Phase 1 Subtotal* |  | ***0-50*** |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Phase 2 |  |  |  |
| 1 | Face to face interview | 0-60 |  |
| 2 | Team members interviews (average of all members) | 0-40 |  |
| 3 | Reference phone interviews (average of all references) | 0-60 |  |
| *Phase 2 Subtotal* |  | ***0-160*** |  |
| Grand Total |  | **0-210** |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Strengths |  | | |
| Red Flags |  | | |

**Management candidate checklist**

**Use at least five (or use them all), but do the same with every candidate.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  | |
| 1 | **Coaching and mentoring** | **Score (1-5)** |
| 2 | **Negotiation and mediation** |  |
| 3 | **Managing performance** |  |
| 4 | **Managing up** |  |
| 5 | **Managing to a deadline** |  |
| 6 | **Hiring** |  |
| 7 | **Managing uncertainty** |  |
| 8 | **Managing silos** |  |
| 9 | **Dealing with failure and disappointment** |  |
| 10 | **Letting people go** |  |
| Total |  |  |

**Management candidate interview checklist**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Candidate name |  |
| 1. | Coaching and mentoring  “Have you ever had an employee who wasn’t performing up to your requirements? How did you handle that? How did it turn out?” “Have you ever had an employee who was a very high performer? How did you acknowledge that?”  Look for:  +: An ability to provide useful performance feedback that helps an employee improve. An awareness that employees need and want feedback. An ability to recognize and encourage an employee’s work and to help them advance if appropriate.  -: An inability or unawares of how to provide constructive guidance to low-performers. Not recognizing the need to recognize high performers. |
| 2. | Negotiation and mediation  “In your management role have you even had a situation where you had a disagreement with another manager or with your manager? Tell me about that and how it turned out.”  “Have you had a time when two or more people reporting to you had a disagreement? How did you handle that?”  Look for:  +: Recognized the conflict and dealt with it productively. Intervened successfully and helped mediate a solution. Open mind about whose ‘fault’ it was.  -: Ignored it, thinking or hoping it would go away by itself; let junior people ‘work it out’ so they can ’learn.’ |
| 3. | Managing performance and holding people accountable  “How to you go about letting people know what’s expected of them?”  “Have you had a case where someone wasn’t performing up to your expectations? How did to manage that?”  Look for:  +: A clear idea of goal setting and managing to expectations. Frequent meetings with feedback and guidance. For poor performers, seeking the root cause, giving clear advice and feedback re performance before it becomes a big problem.  -: “People just know what I think of their work,” “We cover that in lab meetings,”  “They get feedback from other lab members,” “ I give people ultimatums to shake them up.” “ Around here its sink or swim.” |
| 4. | Managing up  “Have you had occasion to disagree with a decision or request made by someone senior to you? What did you do?”  Look for:  +: A willingness to engage authority in collegial discussion about differing views. An ability to “choose your battles.” An acceptance that sometimes people in authority can call the shots.  -: A tendency to denigrate or badmouth authority figures whose decisions they disagree with. |
| 5. | Managing to a deadline  “Have you had a situation where you needed to get something done by a deadline and were concerned that those responsible for the work couldn’t or wouldn’t be able to make that happen? What did you do? What would you do?”  “Have you had to manage someone who failed to deliver on time on multiple occasions? What did you do? what would you do?”  Look for : An ability to convey priorities to employees and to sense which ones need help in developing strategies to meet deadlines and prioritize work. An ability to coach underperforming employees. |
| 6. | Hiring  “Have you hired people? Tell me how you go about that and what you look for.”  “Have you ever made what turned out to be a bad hiring decision? Tell me about that.”  Look for  +: Good balance between technical skills and personal traits. Consulted with team. Spoke with references.  -: Exclusive or over emphasis in technical skills at the expense of personal traits. Made the decision solo. |
| 7. | Managing uncertainly  “Have you been in a situation where you were unable to give your team the information of guidance they wanted or needed because of uncertainty within the organization? How did you manage that?”  “Have you ever felt that as a manager you lacked crucial information about a project or program in your organization? How did you manage that?”  Look for:  +: Ability to be able to keep team motivated in spite of uncertainty. Absence of resentment or “acting out” against senior management. Absence of blaming. |
| 8. | Managing silos  “In your previous positions, were there silos or organizational culture clashes separating different parts of the organization? Did this affect your ability to get work done? How did you manage that?”  Look for  +: Ability to build bridges and form alliances with other parts of the organization.    -: Any sign of disdain or stereotype focused on parts of the organization. |
| 9. | Dealing with failure and disappointment  “ Have you had a project or program fail? How did your team or group take it? what if anything did you do or say to help them?”  Look for:  +: Willingness to confront “failure” openly and to learn from it. appreciation that employees need closure and support.  -: Resistance, fear or inability to address a failure. Lack of appreciation for how this affects employees. |
| 10. | Letting people go  “ Have you ever had to let someone go? Tell me about that. How did it come about?”  Look for:  +: The ability to pick up on poor performance early before it becomes a problem. Willingness to get HR involved in problem cases rather waiting for performance failure.  -: Be alert for a tendency to wait too long before either coaching a poor performer or letting go of someone who is unlikely to improve. |
|  |  |