

Get Ready For Group Interviews: Use of Multiple Screeners Increasing as Job Market Gets Tighter

By: Joann S. Lublin, The Wall Street Journal

Anxious about meeting a key hiring manager? Your job-search jitters may intensify when you confront the ultimate stress test: a panel of interviewers.

Group grilling has long been popular among academics, government agencies and non-profit organizations – sectors that prefer decisions by consensus. As the job market becomes more competitive for people at every level, this practice is spreading to law firms, management consultancies and high-tech businesses.

Employers, who now have the luxury of being picky with candidates, see selection committees as an efficient way to measure applicants' meddle. Some prospects get no warning before they face several screeners. "The first time you have one of these interviews, it will throw you off a little bit," cautions Scott Erker of Development Dimensions International, a leadership consulting firm in Pittsburgh.

Until five years ago, Development Dimensions rarely used panel interviews for senior promotions – but it does so about half the time today, says Dr. Erker, who has a doctorate in industrial/organizational psychology. He thinks the approach identifies people who work well in a group setting, an essential skill at a business that "demands team collaboration."

An executive recruiter can offer additional insights. Gwen L. Feder, partner-placement director for PeterSan Group, a New York legal search firm, counseled a prospect before his joint interview with three law firm partners she knew well. She described each partner's interaction with colleagues and their expectations of lieutenants. The candidate "made a great impression" and remains in the running, she recalls.

To defuse the tension and stiff formality that tends to come with panel interviews, “show how friendly and important you are,” recommends Ruth Haag, a management consultant and CEO of Haag Environmental, a hazardous waste cleanup business in Ohio. “Shake everybody’s hand. Look everybody in the eye. And sell yourself really hard.

Body language offers further clues. MBA student Kara Dyer landed a 2006 internship in the Chicago office of management consultancy ZS Associates after a panel interview. Three senior officials grilled her about a hypothetical thorny problem for a corporate client. One manager never smiled, said little and sat “with his arms crossed,” she remembers. “I took extra care answering his questions and looked at him a little more” than the rest.

Ms. Dyer was ready for that screener’s tough queries. She had practiced case-study presentations before groups of fellow students at MIT’s Sloan School of Management. She says the rehearsals made her less nervous during the interview. She joined the Evanston, Ill. firm full time last year.