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## At job interviews, expect the unexpected

With fierce competition, employers are turning to some innovative tactics, and making candidates jump through many more hoops.

BY JENNIFER MYERS

When Grant Robertson wanted to hire a new logistics and warehouse manager, the chief executive officer of MediaWave Communications Corp. didn't really focus on candidates' résumés or what they'd have to say in a typical job interview.

Instead, he chose to try before he would buy.

Mr. Robertson paid six candidates to work in the Kamloops, B.C.-based online retailer's warehouse for an afternoon. Each rotated through six workstations, performing tasks routine to the job, from taking inventory to processing an order to responding to customer requests by e-mail.

Mr. Robertson also tossed in some twists: He assigned one task that would deliberately take less time than allotted, so that he could observe how candidates would spend the rest of the time. He also "accidentally" left a broom on the floor at the entrance to the warehouse. Would they ignore it, step over it or pick it up and put it away?

The workplace simulation proved invaluable, he says. It became evident fairly quickly who was predisposed to doing the minimum amount of work necessary, and who worked diligently, took initiative and made the extra effort, Mr. Robertson says.

In the end, he hired the only person who picked up the broom and put it away.

"I need people who can see what needs to be done, and just do it," Mr. Robertson says. "I believe that when you put them into the job, their true self will be revealed."

Mr. Robertson, like a growing number of employers, is no longer content to rely on traditional hiring methods. He, for one, doesn't put much stock in résumés.

"They are so self-serving, candidates are only presenting their best side," he says.

"Much of the time, the applicants haven't even written the résumé, they've used a professional writer.

"And interviews," he adds, "are not a whole lot better."

With so much information around on interviewing tips and techniques, today's job seekers can easily prep to ensure they put their best foot forward, agrees Farah Kotadia, principal of Action HR Consulting in Vancouver.

Worse, with today's soaring unemployment, pros say candidates are more likely to take literary license with résumés – and the fallout from a hiring mistake can be disastrous.

With so much at stake and such fierce competition for jobs, employers are making candidates jump through many more hoops.

They are turning to more innovative interview processes, making applicants strut their stuff in on-the-spot situations ranging from workplace simulations to group or panel interviews, to prove their skills and how they will fit in.

More unconventional tactics are being used all the way up the line, Ms. Kotadia says.

For executive positions, traditional one-on-one interviews are giving way to panel interviews, she says.

Those seeking middle to senior management jobs are increasingly being subjected to group interviews.

And they'd better be ready to prove what they say: applicants to a sales manager position, for instance, might be asked for a sample sales presentation, she says.

To leap the hurdles, experts say, applicants must be prepared to do their homework, substantiate their claims – and always expect the unexpected.

Job seekers can expect unconventional interviews at Search Engine People Inc. Jennifer Osbourne, senior vice-president of business development at the Ajax, Ont.-based firm that specializes in search engine optimization, says she's recruiting for IT jobs that didn't exist a few years ago.

Working on the bleeding edge means employees must be able to perform at a frantic pace without getting rattled, she says. They also need to be self-starters, adept at problem-solving and capable of thinking outside the box.

After a couple of hires that didn't work out, the firm revamped its interview processes to include more challenging questions and situations to observe how candidates react under pressure. Among the typical interview questions that Ms. Osbourne might throw out: "How many golf balls can fit on a bus?" Or: "Which freezes faster – an ice cube tray filled with hot water or cold water?"

Another favoured surprise tactic is asking candidates to prove they can do what they say. "If we're hiring a blog writer, for example, I'll provide a sample client profile and ask an applicant to write three blog posts for that company," she says. She makes no apologies for putting people on the spot: "Bringing in the right people is critical to our success."

Ms. Kotadia says that another practice gaining momentum is group interviews, bringing six to eight applicants into a room and interviewing them altogether. Such interviews are typically used by companies that place greater emphasis on teamwork and communication skills. Candidates may or may not be told of them ahead of time, she says.

Vancouver-based trash-removal-services firm 1-800-GOTJUNK? credits group interviews with helping it find first-rate employees. Initially conducted to save

time during a company growth spurt, other benefits soon became evident, recruiting manager Brian Kacso says.

Putting multiple job applicants through their paces together enables the company to stack them up against each other, comparing how they interact, communicate, demonstrate their energy level, enthusiasm thinking on their feet, and how they would fit in.

“You can’t get that one on one,” Mr. Kacso says.

Mr. Robertson says the candidate who excelled during his work simulation wasn’t the strongest prospect on paper, and he might have easily overlooked him. Instead, Mr. Robertson has a dedicated employee who has proved to be a great fit, he says.

“The tests were invaluable in our making a good choice,” he says. “The closer you can get to simulating the work environment, the better you are able to judge their performance.”

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## Ready to shine

Want to be shine in unconventional job interviews? Here is advice from experts Farah Kotadia, principal of Action HR Consulting in Vancouver, and Daphne Woolf, managing partner of HR consultancy Collin Baer Group Ltd. in Toronto:

### Do your homework

Visit a company’s website to determine its mission, values, vision and culture. Find out what type of format the interview will take, who will be interviewing you and if you’ll be meeting with more than one person. Check out chat rooms, newsgroups or Web forums for water-cooler talk about the company; connect with someone who works there to ask about the interview process.

### Expect the unexpected

Imagine scenarios you might face. Mentally walk through them. Have someone run you through role-playing exercises. Be ready to go with the flow, and to demonstrate skills on the spot.

### Handle curveballs

Remember that interviewers are not necessarily looking for a right or wrong answer to an off-the-wall question, rather at how you react, how you reach your response, and whether you can think on

your feet and outside the box. Remain calm and thoughtful. Buy extra thinking time by asking for clarification of the question. Look for clues on how best to respond.

### Find a balance

In group interviews, strike a balance between being too assertive and too timid. Arrive with an intelligent list of questions. Introduce yourself. Engage the interviewer and other applicants. Make eye contact as you speak, and nod or smile when others speak. Actively participate but be a good listener. Show you can work on your own or on a team.

### Exude confidence

Remember you’re being assessed from the moment you arrive, from your handshake to how you relate to others.

### Avoid appearing desperate

You might think showing up 30 minutes early demonstrates you’re eager, but pros say it only makes you appear desperate and, worse, disrespectful of an interviewer’s time. Keep personal hardships to yourself, too. The interviewer isn’t interested in your failed marriage or financial woes.

### Keep eye on Company

Maintain your focus on what you can do for the company, not what it can do for you.

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