

Catherine A. Lee

Are panel interviews the way to go?

The pros and cons of simultaneous interviewing

Recently, I had the opportunity to take part in an innovative interviewing experience—a panel interview. You may wonder, “What’s so novel about that?” It’s probably not, however, the type of panel interview that first springs to your mind. In this panel interview, all three candidates were interviewed simultaneously. Yes, you read right. We three prospective hires spent the entire interview day together, touring the library, meeting students and faculty, fielding questions from deans, eating lunch, and making brief presentations on predistributed questions.

In my professional career, I have been on many interviews, but this was a first for me. When I was initially invited for the interview, a member of the search committee described the panel interview process. I’ll admit, I was intrigued. Early in my career, I would have described myself as “anti-process.” I associated process with bureaucracy and barriers to getting things done. More recently, I have come to value certain processes that are collegial, participatory, and productive. I found myself, in this instance, fascinated with the process almost as much as the job. In theory, the process sounded good, but then I wondered why other institutions were not adopting the model.

I approached the interview day with an open mind. I looked forward to meeting the other “contestants” in this quiz show, which is how I had come to envision the day. I met Pam, another candidate, when a member of the search committee met us both at the hotel early that morning. Our first appointment was in the library with a pair of assistant deans. This is where we also met the third contestant, Susan.

After we were given an overview of the library, we were asked our first official question. Following a slight awkwardness about who would answer first, we each responded, in turn, in a very orderly fashion. That became the general order and flow of the day. One of us would take the initiative to answer first, followed in queue by the other two. No one candidate jumped in to answer every question first and one person didn’t always end up relegated to third place.

As a candidate, I found several benefits in this round robin response method. If a great answer didn’t come to me right away, it was easy to let one of the others answer first, and second, if necessary, so that I would have a little extra time to consider a thoughtful response.

I also learned some things, different approaches to problems and good answers to tough interview questions, from listening to the other candidates, and I found myself, in at least one instance, spinning a response off of another candidate’s answer. It was almost relaxing to not have to be “on” at every moment and to share the candidate hot seat with others.

The benefits

As someone who has also been on the hiring side of a number of searches, I observed several benefits. It struck me as rather practical, and economical, to have three candidates to campus on the same day. Instead of trying to recruit and schedule three itineraries on dif-

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ferent days, how nice it must be to coordinate only one day's schedule.

Here on my small campus, we often have difficulty getting enough students, and sometimes faculty, to meet with multiple candidates on different days, sometimes weeks apart. We often receive feedback from someone who has met only one of two or three candidates and therefore can't make a comprehensive comparison.

During my panel interview experience, all of the group appointments seemed to be well attended, including the presentation session and the meeting with students. I expect that the feedback received from the various constituents involved in this type of interviewing process could be very useful, since all of the candidates could be compared, contrasted, and, finally, ranked in one summary form. Plus, once the day is over, it seems that a committee could move quickly to collect feedback, reach consensus, and make an offer on a position.

The drawbacks

This is not to say that I didn't observe drawbacks, both small and potentially huge. Someone who is shy or introverted might easily be lost in such a format, and someone whose manner of responding to questions is more reticent and thoughtful could be considered slow or undynamic. The process itself might dissuade such candidates, or other very qualified prospects, from interviewing.

In an interview, each candidate expects the opportunity to present him- or herself in the best possible light and not in such a visibly competitive setting, à la *The Apprentice*. And one can imagine how disastrous the experience might be with an insensitive candidate, who lacks basic social graces and never learned to play well with others, dominating the interview. Yes, it would provide useful information for the interviewers, but it would also taint the process for the other candidates

I'm also concerned with confidentiality. Now, of course, in some states employment

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applications to state institutions are a matter of public record, but it seemed somehow unnatural to know who the other candidates were. At times I felt like I was breaking some sort of unwritten moral code about the sanctity of this private employment transaction. I also wondered how one might conduct individual negotiations that sometimes take place at the interview stage. When there were literally no private meetings between candidates and the prospective supervisor.

Overall, as a contestant in this three-way race for a job, I'll admit that I enjoyed myself. When was the last time that you could say that about a job interview? Do I think that this is the way that interviewing will go in the future? No. Even in a profession as collegial and open as ours, there is still such a thing as too much togetherness. //

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