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# Is the interview still so important?

Business technology leaders are iterating the interview process to meet the changing needs of candidates.

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# Introduction

**Technology candidates are highly empowered and the events of the 2020s have changed their priorities.**

Traditional interviewing methods and selection processes are no longer fit for purpose. This means that the interview has had to modernise too. In order to find the right candidate, to meet both parties' expectations, interviewing has become collaborative, part sales pitch and deeper.

Across Europe, there is an acute skills shortage of technologists. CIOs and CTOs are fighting harder than ever to recruit and retain talent, which is leading business technology leaders to improve the interview. A broader style of interviewing is increasingly prevalent. Business leaders are sloughing-off of old "academic" testing methods and embracing the insight and opinions of their teams.

Over 70% of European businesses state that they lack staff with adequate digital skills, according to European Commission research. This is impacting investment and productivity across the region. Competition for technologists is high, with CIOs and CTOs across all vertical markets and geographies

struggling. "I haven't seen the same challenge in recruitment and retention at any time in the last 30 years," says Mark Thompson, a travel industry veteran CIO who has led technology for industry giant TUI and is now with challenger travel operator Palatinat Group.

Exacerbating this demand is the continued impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The global lockdown has led to a well-documented change in priorities for workers of all types. Blessed with greater portability, technology workers have been amongst the most transient. Covid-19 also triggered a great awakening amongst senior leadership teams that technology-led business models and processes are vital. During the lockdowns, organisations had no choice other than to use technology to meet the needs of customers and operate their businesses. Productivity increased, and costs often decreased for most organisations.

That realisation has led to CEOs demanding greater use of technology to deliver business outcomes. Customers, too, have changed their behaviour and expect a higher level of digital interaction with an organisation, no matter the vertical market. "People's priorities

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have changed," says Natascha Polderman, IT Director of major law firm Schillings. She adds that technology has always had an element of skills shortage: "I have never found a role where I thought 'there are loads of high-quality candidates out there who are available,'" but says, as do her peers, that the situation will be exacerbated in 2023.

Despite these challenges, the interview is still a pillar of the recruitment process. Therefore a good interview will deliver an outcome - a recruit. A poor interview will further add to the skills shortage within an organisation and its inability to deliver on its digital remit. Although tenure has increased over the last 15 years, having reached the heady heights of the C-suite, CIOs and CTOs have been through many interviews, and this experience has shaped how they conduct recruitment. "A good interview experience is when the person conducting the interview has the right level of respect for the person being interviewed," says Gideon Kay, a Partner and CTO for global accounting services firm Deloitte. Kay knows this is not always the case: "I have been to interviews where it is for a Group CIO role at the board level, and then they ask if you are able to write code or fix a printer. So there is a mismatch between what they ask and what they want in the role they are recruiting for."

Thankfully the interview is improving. "The old traditional interviews of 'tell us about your strengths and weaknesses', that has gone," says Polderman. "After all, the interview doesn't tell you much; a better approach is to do something practical, have you work with them for a day, for example," she says.

Even calling it an interview causes some unnecessary tension, and it is a scenario that is not reflective of the role that a technologist, CIO or CTO will work within once in the role. David Henderson, Chief Technology & Product Officer at Global, the media and entertainment group, says interviews have to be a balanced combination of structured questions and answers but also a discussion between both parties. "I try not to let people do surface-level answers only, so use situational questions and then go into how they were in the room at that point in time and ask for multiple examples, not just one." He says this is vital as many candidates are good at an initial high-level answer, but when you ask for other examples, you can learn so much more about the depth of the candidate. "You don't want them to just use the one well-polished answer." Kay at Deloitte adds: "I want to look for the motivation within that person, how they operate and how they learn."

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## Improved interviewing

As with technology, interviewing technologists and business technology leaders is iteratively evolving and largely improving.

In the modern technology organisation, the interview is not just about clarifying the qualifications of an individual. Businesses are looking for skills as well as cultural fit. The latter is a challenging task for business leaders, recruits need to be able to work collaboratively and creatively with colleagues, but organisations need diversity too. Diversity is well proven to benefit organisations in terms of successful outcomes. In 2019 business advisory firm McKinsey found that organisations with diversity at the executive team level were 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability. However, only 15% of the technology workforce in the UK is from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background and gender diversity is at 19%. The figures are not that dissimilar across Europe, according to industry bodies.

"Think about the tendency to hire in your own image," warns Henderson of Global. On improving his interview technique, Henderson says: "I have structured questions and then think explicitly about cultural fit and if they

are a bar raiser. So I ask fewer questions but go deeper, as it is in the depth that people reveal their true selves," he says. Kay adds of balancing the two: "You focus a lot more on the situational question to ascertain how people will react to issues. As a leader, you try to get across what the challenges they will face are, as if you paint too rosy a picture, it will lead to problems later on."

Covid-19 and the digital skills shortage have added a new dynamic to interviewing - remoteness. In order to secure the talent that organisations need, business technology leaders are increasingly hiring from a far wider geographic region. The pandemic demonstrated that teams and organisations can work from kitchens, garden sheds and spare rooms anywhere in the country or even the continent. The need for employees to be based at a head office in a major city is no longer necessary and, in fact, decreases the pool of talent available to CIOs and CTOs. Conducting interviews using communication and collaboration software not only allows organisations to assess candidates across borders or hundreds of kilometres away but also allows business technology leaders to carry out the first screening interviews.

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Again, the new demands of candidates are impacting remote interviews, says Georgina Owens, CTO with Fintech firm Liberis. "So many of the men we have interviewed cannot do a meeting at 3 pm as they had to do the school run," she says. Adding that this is a positive development in society and another factor that business technology leaders need to consider.

"I'm used to a global environment where people are comfortable with video," Polderman in the legal sector says. It is possible that other business lines have found the move to remote job interviewing harder than technology, which has long had a global element to it. Polderman advises: "You have to be more attentive when you interview people on video, as there are subtle clues to pick up on. I am very mindful when interviewing and pay a lot of attention to making them comfortable. But generally, I find they are more relaxed on camera, and you get a better experience." She says that if possible, the first interview can be done on video and then the second interview can be face-to-face. Accounting firm Deloitte is not dissimilar to the international law sector, and Kay says: "We haven't had to change the way we interview; we were already doing a lot more remotely. It tests the ability to engage and react," he adds.

The rise of remote working has led to collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom becoming essential tools for the recruitment process. In our research we saw little use of new technologies to determine the recruitment process, but business technology leaders do believe advanced tools will begin to shape the interview process. "I can see a time when all interviews are done within a virtual setting. The virtual reality (VR) element will attempt to bring the candidate closer to the interviewee and offer a better experience," Polderman says. Whilst the much vaunted use of artificial intelligence (AI) will disrupt recruitment agencies, if those agencies are not adding sufficient value, she says. "You should be able to enter the specifics of a role and the type of candidate you are looking for and just get a well-curated shortlist of names. The skills and experience have been checked and the interview is about finding what makes that individual unique, human, how they interact with others, their communication skills and how they solve problems." The problems with using AI in recruitment at e-commerce giant Amazon have, for now, set the technology back.

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## Panel strengths and weaknesses

The panel interview has become cinematic, with the image of the candidate sitting alone facing a large oak table and a rank of business leaders firing a barrage of questions. "You don't get the depth, as each person on the panel gets just one question to ask. So panels tend to go too broad," Henderson says of why he no longer uses panel interviews.

"As an employer, you are trying to get to know how they operate and how they think, so you need to get down from that high level."

"As an interviewer, they are harder as it is hard to build a rapport," adds Kay. For business leaders looking to go deeper in an interview, Henderson advises: "two people from your organisation in the room and you get more diversity in question, and both of them get time to think about the questions they want to ask and write down the candidate's answers." He also adds that having candidates present their insights to a group of three from the organisation can be powerful.

Panel or not, transformational business technology leaders agree that it is vital to have a wide range of people from the technology

team involved in the interview process. "I get more people involved in the interview process as I was prone to make snap decisions," says Owens honestly of managing your own behaviour as an interviewer.

## Psychometric testing

Hard on the heels of panel interviews in the history of the job interview was Psychometric testing. These verbal reasoning and numeracy challenges became very popular for senior technology roles through the 1990s and early 2000s. However, in recent years the value of Psychometric testing has been questioned. The rise of Psychometric testing tutors and coaches has led business technology leaders to wonder if they are getting the real candidate from this often costly process.

"You have to respect the seniority of the candidate and anybody with more than 10 years experience, I would not insult them by putting them through a Psychometric test," Kay at Deloitte says. "I never use it in the team," Polderman says. She adds that the MBTI tests run by the Myers & Briggs Foundation are more useful.

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## A new future

The skills shortage is well documented and known. This has empowered candidates. Today an interview is a two-way process with the candidate interviewing the CIO or CTO as much as they are being interviewed themselves. "Culture is hugely important and people want to hear and see what that looks like," Owens says. "Flexible working is massive," she adds.

This has led to the interviewing being, in part, a sales pitch to get the best candidates to select your organisation. However, Polderman says this is also the case for CIOs and CTOs and is a positive development. "The best interview I ever had was here at Schillings, as they had to convince me to consider them. I met two of the most creative and technology-aware people in the organisation, and they shared with me the 'what if' for the company, and we really fed off one another, and at that moment in time, I was convinced of the art of the possible here.

"I felt their culture and who they are and I walked away feeling I can make a difference," she says. The law firm then began the more practical side of the process with an interview with the most senior partner. Returning to our opening topic of buying a house or a car, in both cases, the sellers engage the emotions first and foremost before moving on to the practical details. Recruiting technologists and business technology leaders has become a similar process; organisations need to engage the emotional response first and then get to the small print.

"In the last 10 years you have gone from 'you need us the employer' to now 'we need you', and we are selling," agrees Henderson. "That would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. When you are recruiting for roles like Director of Data Engineering, you know they have five offers on the table, so you are trying to sell to them in your questions," he says. Business technology leaders find they have to keep this in mind and be ready to understand the unique needs of the individual. In recent months some members of the political classes and business leaders have questioned the validity of remote and flexible working. For business technology leaders

looking to secure talent there is a concern that if they cannot provide the level of flexibility that candidates demand, those candidates will vote with their feet. "Working parents could feel they are being locked in again. It is a case of not having to race for the train every day versus productivity. Productivity is about other factors than the return to the office, these include the state of the economy. We need to keep working on it," Polderman says. She adds that: "remote working has lifted so much pressure on people".

## Interviewing the future

It is clear that the interview is and has already changed. This is unsurprising given the pace of change that technology has placed on organisations and, therefore, business technology leaders and their teams. Covid-19 has brought about the greatest change by, in effect, democratising the relationship (another common theme within technology) between the potential employer and the candidate.

Accepting that the relationship has changed, business technology leaders and their partner organisations need a new approach to recruitment. An example that the industry might learn from is television and film. No longer is the interviewer an employer looking to bestow a job on someone that needs employment; instead, technology leaders are akin to casting directors, looking to put together the right cast of protagonists to deliver the outcome. Candidates are now actors. They want to know that by joining the cast, they will be sharing a stage or set with talent that will stretch them and develop their skills. They want to be working with directors and technicians that bring value and expertise to the storyboard.

As a CIO or CTO, you are a leader, and it is a positive development in the role that you are not, as Gideon Kay says, able to fix a printer, but you are the director and casting manager for one of the most important stories in your organisation's opus. The interview, therefore, is the casting room for leaders and candidates and provides both actors with an exciting stage.



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## Takeaways

1. Candidates priorities have changed and will not revert to pre-Covid expectations
2. Use structured questions and open discussion
3. Use situational questions
4. Ask for multiple examples to avoid surface level answers
5. Avoid the tendency to hire in your own image
6. Describe the challenges that candidates will face
7. Remote interviewing requires increased levels of attentiveness
8. Avoid panel interviews, use two of your team members to go deeper on key issues

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