Executing the Candidate Interview, Five Pillars to Effective Candidate Qualification

A guide for IT recruiting professionals for qualifying, interviewing and closing IT candidates

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Introduction

Today's professional IT recruiter is expected to possess functional and technical knowledge of the latest web, mobile and enterprise software including servers, databases, programming languages, and development and QA tools, not to mention the latest networking and cloud computing technologies. They're also expected to be a knowledgeable resource on employment law and the authoritative expert on candidate pay rates (salary) *by skill set and years of experience.* Today's IT recruiter is also expected to be part "ATS expert," part "recruiting process expert," and most likely parts of a half-dozen other roles.

IT recruiters are responsible for possessing a deep understanding of their customer's business including their technology stack, products and services. They're also responsible for staying on top of the latest trends and best practices in the IT industry including technologies, methodologies and tools. And let us not forget, IT recruiters have their full time job in which they're responsible for sourcing, screening, interviewing, qualifying and closing candidates. Naturally, they're expected to execute candidate salary and pay rate negotiations with laser-like precision.

Today's IT recruiter also faces intense competition from dozens and in some cases hundreds of other IT staffing firms *in the same market*; not to mention offshore recruiters. If that weren't enough, more and more mid-market and enterprise customers are adopting a MSP or VMS model to manage their contingent labor. This shift, combined with the increased competition, puts intense pressure on IT recruiters to accelerate their time to market. In short, it's all about getting to the candidate first, and *being the first to submit*.

Finally, It's no secret that we're living in a candidate-driven market, with the demand to fill open positions far outstripping supply across all major U.S. markets. This means recruiters face a demanding and competitive talent market in which candidates are working with multiple recruiters and receiving multiple job offers.

While many IT recruiters continue to thrive under the pressure of competition and sky-high expectations, many others are struggling. Many IT recruiters are missing red flags in their screening, qualifying and interviewing process while many others are getting their candidates to the offer stage only to be blind-sided with a competitive offer or other competitive intelligence that's costs them placement fees.

The remainder of this paper is designed to provide recruiting professionals with a practical, step by step guide for effectively screening and qualifying IT candidates. The five pillars to qualifying IT candidates has been designed for screening and qualifying IT consultants under consideration for contract or consulting positions but can and should be applied by recruiters focused on direct hire or perm placement.

The Five Pillars to Effectively Screening & Qualifying Candidates

Qualifying The Candidate's Current Situation

It is important to keep in mind that as a recruiter, when we launch a new sourcing effort and initiate contact with a candidate for the first time, we assume we're **early** in the recruiting cycle. What we often forget and fail to

recognize however is, *where is the candidate in their job search process*? While we may be early in the recruiting process, the *candidate may be late in the recruiting process with another opportunity*.

Qualifying the candidate's current situation refers to understanding the candidate's current employment situation including their availability to interview and begin work. It also includes the recruiter gaining a deep understanding of any and all other commitments and obligations the candidate has to other parties such as friends, family, colleagues and current, past or future employers that could impact their ability to accept a new job offer and begin work.

Recruiters should always begin their screening and qualifying process by qualifying the candidate's current situation. Qualifying the candidate's current situation answers the following questions for recruiters:

- Is this candidate worth pursuing now, for a current opportunity?
- If I do pursue this candidate, do I stand a realistic chance at placing this candidate for a current opportunity?

To communicate to your candidate that you would like to better understand their current situation, you could say something like the following:

"<insert candidate first name>, before we dive into the details of the opportunity and your background, I'd like to spend a few minutes discussing your current situation. Specifically, I would like to understand what your current employment status is and what other obligations you're committed to. I also want to gain an understanding of the opportunities you're currently considering so that I can understand your timeline and availability which will allow me to manage my expectations and the expectations of any employers we present you to. Does that sound fair?"

Below are a few sample questions for recruiters to ask to qualify the candidate's current situation.

- Tell me about your current employment status?
    - Full time? Contract? Unemployed?
- How is your job search going?
    - Which are you seeking, full time work or consulting/contract work?
        - Why?
- What sort of notice have you given your current employer?
    - If not, why (what is holding them back? Are they truly committed to leaving their current employer)?
    - When do you plan on giving them notice?
- I know your phone must be ringing off the hook tell me about the opportunities you're currently considering.
- Where are you at in the interview process (for each opportunity)?
    - How many interviews have you been on?
    - What are the next steps?

- When are they scheduled for?

- What offers do you currently have in hand?
  - Why haven't you accepted?
  - What are your planned next steps and timeline?

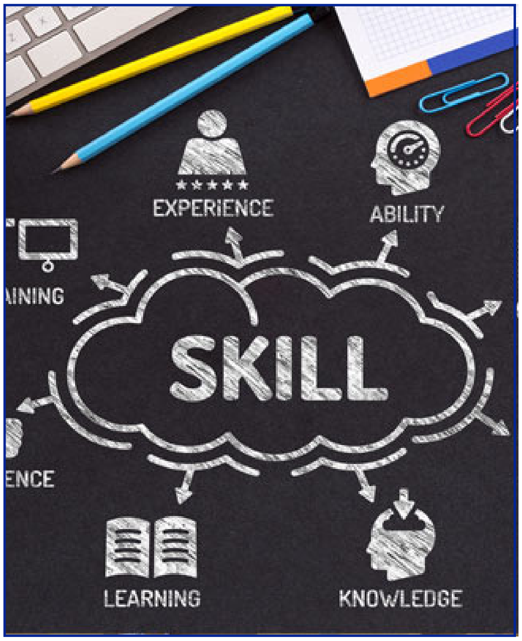
These are all real-world scenarios that IT recruiters face every day (when speaking with candidates). The recruiter's ability to uncover and understand where their candidate is in the search for his or her next project or full-time job is the essence of understanding the candidate's "current situation." Recruiter's who fail to uncover and understand their candidate's current situation tend to struggle with delivering candidates on a consistent basis because they simply *don't know what they don't know*.

Finally, these are just a few sample questions to qualify the candidate's current situation. Keep in mind that for every question asked, the recruiter will likely receive a candidate response which will require the recruiter to ask a follow up, clarifying question to get additional information. Asking follow up, clarifying questions is the key to effectively qualifying the candidate's current situation.

Qualifying The Candidate's Skills & Experience

Once the recruiter has qualified the candidate's current situation and determined they want to pursue the candidate for an existing opportunity, they should transition the conversation to qualifying the candidate's skills and experience. To make this transition, the recruiter might say the following:

"<insert candidate name>, now that I have a good understanding of your current situation I would like to transition the conversation and talk about your work history and background so that we can determine if this is a good fit for you and the client company. Can we take some time to discuss that?"



Communication like this is a great way to disarm the candidate and put them at ease because the recruiter is explaining to the candidate what information they need and why *before they actually ask the questions*. When recruiters explain their rationale behind the questions they want to ask they disarm the candidate because the candidate knows the recruiter doesn't have an ulterior motive.

The challenge for many IT recruiters with qualifying and screening IT candidates is that most IT recruiters don't have an engineering background. In short, they've never written code, designed a network or managed a project. So, how can IT recruiters with no IT experience or educational background in IT systems effectively screen and qualify IT candidates?

Let's first acknowledge the fact that in all likelihood, IT recruiters without an engineering background will never be able to conduct a technical interview at the same level as the IT hiring manager. But that is OK, because there is an approach and qualifying questions IT recruiters (without an engineering background) can ask that will not only help them qualify a candidate's skills and experience but also help them differentiate themselves from other recruiters.

To understand the approach to screening and qualifying candidates, IT recruiters first need to understand what it is IT hiring managers want, need and expect from IT recruiters.

Let's assume as the recruiter you're screening and qualifying a candidate for the following position.

As the data architect you will define how XYZ Company implements enterprise data, manages reference databases, and exposes APIs access to subsequent technologies, applications, and to end users for their consumption.

- Candidate must have extensive experience with implementing, migrating and managing data platforms in an enterprise cloud computing environment
- Candidate will demonstrate the ability to work with business partners and stakeholders to build consensus.
- Candidate must have subject matter expertise with the following Cloud Service Providers: Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Microsoft Azure

Here is a series of questions that most, typical IT recruiters would ask:

- Have you implemented data platforms in a cloud environment?
- Are you comfortable managing data platforms in a cloud environment?
- Do you have experience with AWS or Azure?
- How many years have you worked with AWS? Azure?

The problem with these questions is they're close ended which means the responses will not reveal insightful information about the candidate's experience let alone their true capabilities. These questions do nothing more than simply "validate" the information on the candidate's resume. Hiring managers don't need IT recruiters to regurgitate information to them that they can already see and read on a candidate's resume.

Instead, what hiring managers want, need and expect IT recruiters to tell them is:

- Where their candidate solved the same problem they need resolved
- What steps the candidate took to resolve the problem they need resolved
- What solution they implemented and how they implemented it
- What challenges the candidate ran into while implementing the solution and how they overcame them
- What the final results were of the solution

This is what IT hiring managers want, need and expect to hear from IT recruiters when presenting candidates. Uncovering this information doesn't require IT recruiters to have a degree in Management of Information Systems or experience writing code.

A good IT recruiter qualifying a candidate for the right skills and experience for the position above would ask questions like:

- Tell me about a time where you implemented or migrated a data management platform into an enterprise cloud computing environment?
  - What was the data? How much data was there?
  - Where did the data reside (what was the data platform(s))?
  - What steps did you take to migrate the data?
  - What tools did you use to migrate the data?
  - What challenges did you encounter and how did you overcome them?
  - What was the final work product or deliverables you produced?
  - What were the results?

Notice that this line of questioning consists of all open ended questions. Also, notice that all six of these questions only focus on the first bullet point of the job description. The point is, these questions really dig into the details to determine what the candidate's experience is with implementing and migrating data platforms. No, there are no specific technical questions being asked. But, these questions will unlock a story about the candidate and what their experience has been.

Moving on to the second bullet point of the job description, effective qualifying questions to be asked by the IT recruiter might include:

- Tell me about a time where you had to work with business stakeholders to build consensus.
- Who were the stakeholders (from which teams or departments)?
- What were you trying to build or gain consensus on?
- What were the sticking points that people didn't agree on?
- How did you address and overcome team disagreement and conflict?
- What steps did you take to get the team to arrive at a consensus?
- What challenges did you have to overcome and how did you do it?
- How did getting the stakeholders to come to a consensus impact the business?

Qualifying The Candidate's Pay Rate and/or Salary History

After qualifying the candidate's relevant skills and work experience, the recruiter should pivot the conversation to discuss the candidates pay rate and salary history. The objective here is to arrive at a salary or pay rate that is fair and equitable for the candidate, recruiter and employer. To do that, IT recruiters need to establish the candidate's salary history or pay rate history.

To make this transition, the recruiter might say the following:

"<insert candidate first name>, now that I have a good understanding of your current situation as well as your skills, work experience and background including the types of problems you have solved for your past employers and the solutions you've implemented, I would like to transition the conversation to discuss your salary history so that you and

I can agree on a pay rate that is fair for you and commensurate with your experience and the market. To ensure that you and I are on the same page and that I properly manage our client's expectations, would it be O.K. for me to ask you some salary related questions?"

Money is a funny thing in our culture. In some circles, including friends and family, its taboo to even discuss money. Most people don't go around asking other people how much money they make or what they paid for their house or car. This is because money is emotional. But to be successful in IT recruiting, recruiters must be comfortable discussing money.

One way to 'take the sting out of' asking candidates sensitive questions such as those regarding salary and pay rate is to preface the question(s) by asking for their permission to discuss the topic before launching into the actual questions. If you carefully read through the script above you will notice that the script does just that. Using this approach to pivot the conversation to discuss salary will make the candidate and recruiter feel better about the conversation because the candidate knows the salary related questions are coming.

The reason why recruiters must establish a candidate's salary or pay rate history is to ensure

- Candidates don't get overpaid or underpaid
- Clients don't over pay
- Recruiters get paid fairly
- There is room for the candidate to receive salary or pay rate increases upon promotion

Many recruiters struggle and others even intentionally skip this aspect of the candidate interview because they're so uncomfortable discussing money. Many other recruiters simply say "what are you looking to make?" This is NOT how to qualify or establish a candidate's pay rate or salary.

To properly establish a salary or pay rate history with a candidate, IT recruiters should conduct a chronological review of the candidate's work history. Starting with the candidate's current or most recent job or project, they should ask the candidate:

- What was your starting salary or pay rate?
- What was your end salary or pay rate?
- How much did you earn in bonuses and other variable compensation?

This process should be repeated for the candidate's three most recent jobs or projects (if they're working as a consultant). By going back three projects, recruiters can get a full, comprehensive history of how the candidate's pay rate increased (or decreased) based on their career trajectory.

Qualifying the Candidates Compelling Event, Motivators

After establishing the candidate's pay rate or salary history, the recruiter should pivot the conversation to discuss the candidate's compelling event and motivators. The objective here is for the recruiter to identify and understand what is motivating and compelling the candidate to make a change in their current employment situation and accept a new opportunity. The recruiter might say something like the following:

"<insert candidate first name>, now that we have established clear expectations on pay rate, let's move on

so that I can understand what is compelling you to find a new opportunity in the first place. I want to really understand your motivations for leaving your current job or current situation and what would motivate you to take a new opportunity. Specifically, I want to understand what you seek in your next opportunity and why those things are important to you. Can we take a few minutes and talk about that now?

In the world of recruiting IT consultants, a compelling event is a direct response to moving away from a pressure or problem that has an emotional and/or economic value associated with taking no action. The action taken by the candidate is expected to relieve the candidate of that problem.

If a candidate can't articulate to the recruiter how and why NOT taking a new position would negatively impact them, then the likelihood of the candidate accepting any new job offer is questionable at best. Keep in mind that for most people, leaving one job to accept another is one of the more stressful life events, right up there with getting married, having children and purchasing a house. Candidates need to be able to convince IT recruiters with a compelling argument articulating how and why NOT leaving their current situation and accepting a new employment opportunity would negatively impact them.

Consider the following questions to qualify your candidate's compelling event.

- Why not just stay in the role that you're in today?
  - How would maintaining your current status quo negatively impact you personally?
- What is compelling you to take action and make a career move at this time?
  - Why is this so important to you?
- What would happen if things stayed the same and you decided to remain in the position you're in today on an indefinite basis?
- How does leaving your current situation help your personally?
  - Why is that important to you?
- How does accepting my opportunity fit into your overall career goals?
- Why is achieving this goal or resolving this issue so important to you?

The stiffest competition that IT recruiters face is not other opportunities the candidate is considering but rather, compelling the candidate to leave their "status quo" (existing situation) for a new opportunity. From the candidate's perspective, it's typically much easier and less risky to remain in their existing role (status quo) than it is to accept and take on a new opportunity. After all, it's safer to work with the devil you know than the devil you don't.

Qualifying The Candidates Decision Making Process

After qualifying the candidates compelling event the recruiter should pivot the conversation to discuss the candidate's decision making process. The objective here is for the recruiter to understand *how* the candidate will evaluate and compare opportunities and arrive at a final decision. The objective is also for the recruiter to identify which attributes are most important to the candidate.

The recruiter might say something like the following:

"<insert candidate first name>, I have enjoyed the conversation and really appreciate your time. In order to manage my own expectations and those of the client/employer, I need to discuss one more thing with you and that is your decision making process. I would like to ask you a few questions to understand exactly how you will arrive at your final decision and how much time you will need in order to make a decision once an offer comes in. May I ask you a few questions?"

When I ask recruiters,"tell me about your candidate's decision making process" I usually get a response of "what do you mean?" This is a big mistake. Recruiters can't expect to close candidates and generate placement fees without first understanding how the candidate will make a decision. Here are three examples of why this is so important.

How Will The Candidate Arrive at a Final Decision?

Will the candidate discuss the decision with a friend, family member or mentor? Will they draw a line down a piece of paper and weigh the pro's and con's of each opportunity in order to arrive at a final decision? Will they have their spouse or significant other make the decision?

These are just a few of the key elements that an IT recruiter must uncover and qualify to ensure they're appealing to all of the people and factors influencing the candidate's decision making process. Without this information the recruiter has no context for helping the candidate make their final decision.

What is the Decision Making Criteria?

Another element to qualifying the candidate's decision making process requires the recruiter to identify and understand the candidate's specific decision making criteria and order of importance.

For example, a candidate may consider the following criteria as they evaluate two separate job offers:

1. Base salary
2. Bonus
3. Stock options
4. Quality, challenging work
5. Comfort level with new supervisor
6. Commute (distance, time in car)

Recruiters must qualify their candidate's decision making criteria and order of importance in order to intelligently position and align their opportunity with their candidate and what they value.

One technique for qualifying a candidate's decision making criteria is to play out scenarios. For example, imagine the following scenario in which Jim the recruiter qualifies Dan's (the candidate) decision making criteria.

Jim the Recruiter: "Dan, what if the other opportunity comes in at a pay rate of 5% more than my opportunity and you can work from home 1 day a week but my opportunity comes in with better benefits and the opportunity to move into your dream job of chief software architect in as little as 18 months, how will you make a decision then?"

By playing out a hypothetical scenario with the candidate the recruiter begins to gain insight into the candidate's thought process and how they will evaluate their options. This gives recruiters the insight they need to most effectively position and shape their final offer. This is how a recruiter shapes their strategy.

How Much Time is Needed Before You Can Make a Decision?

This is really, really important. Asking candidates, "how much time will you need to make a final decision once you receive an offer?" is a key question recruiters must ask. But keep in mind that the answer to this question is relevant to the candidate's current situation. If you know very little about your candidate's current situation then this question will leave you needing to ask additional clarifying questions.

More important than understanding how much time a candidate needs to make a final decision is understanding why they need the time they do. When recruiters identify and qualify why candidates need the time they need to make a final decision, they gain insight into how their candidates think and what is most important to them. This insight also aids in shaping their strategy for closing candidates.

Finally, when recruiters understand their candidate's decision making process they gain visibility and predictability into their recruiting cycle which enables them to more effectively forecast which of their candidates and job orders will close and which will not.

Questions to qualify your candidate's decision making process include:

- Walk me through your decision making process?
- How (what criteria) are you going to use to evaluate each opportunity?
- How will you make a decision?
- Who else will help you make this decision?
- How much time will you need to make a decision once you receive an offer? Why?
- How can I support you and encourage you to make the best decision?

About the Author

Dan Fisher is the founder and owner of Menemsha Group, a sales enablement solutions company dedicated to helping IT staffing and IT service firms improve sales win rates, accelerate their sales cycles, and increase overall quota attainment. Dan is a 20+ year sales veteran and thought leader in the IT staffing and consulting industry and has authored a proprietary sales methodology and recruiter methodology designed exclusively for IT staffing professionals as well as a Developmental Coaching methodology for Sales Managers and Recruiting Managers.

Thousands of sales reps and recruiters in the IT staffing and services industry apply Dan's methodologies including scripts, playbooks, job aids, tools and templates, from Menemsha Group's SaaS based sales enablement platform and mobile app. Dan has coached and mentored hundreds of sales leaders, business owners and CEOs. Dan has also designed and implemented sales processes for IT staffing, IT Managed Services and IT professional services organizations across the country.

About Menemsha Group

Menemsha Group is a provider of sales enablement solutions for IT staffing and IT professional services organizations. We provide the technology, tools, training, coaching, content, methodologies, processes, and instructional design and authoring capabilities to ensure recruiters and salespeople are "conversation ready" across all stages of the sales cycle, leading to predictable revenue.

Our sales enablement platform leverages video, asynchronous, mobile and micro-learning to create a fun, engaging learning experience. With Menemsha Group, our clients accelerate time competency, consistently and accurately deliver on message, confidently handle objections and quickly replicate top performing sales behaviors across the organization.

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