



Asking Applicants the Right Questions

SSPA Members Share Best Practices for Support Rep Interviews

By John Ragsdale, Vice President of Research, SSPA

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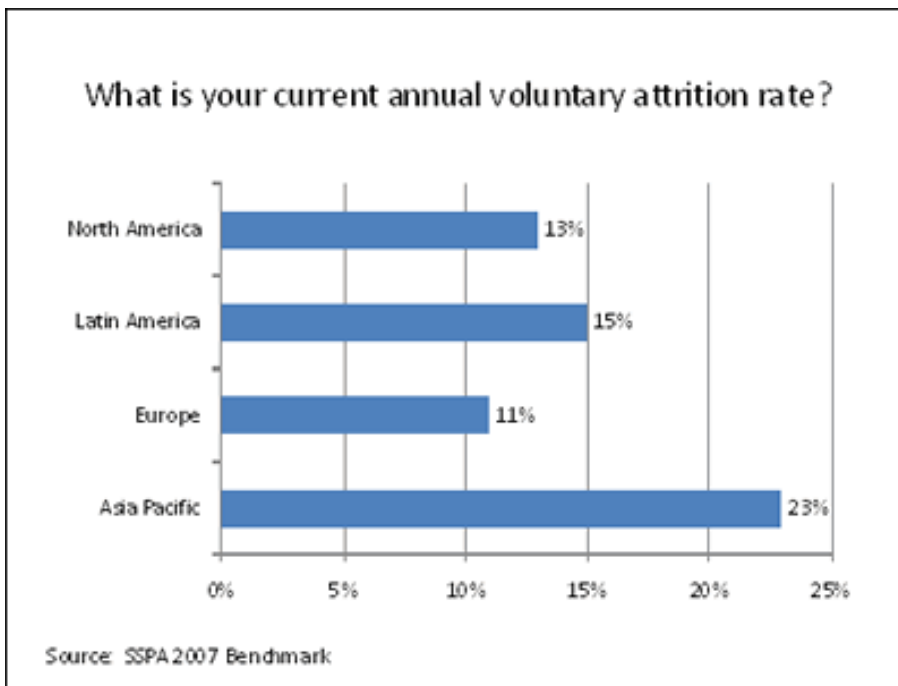
In a recent collaboration event attended by SSPA's SMB (small and medium sized business) members, the topic was, "What are 'best practice' behavioral questions to ask when interviewing technical support representative candidates?" As always, members were willing to share ideas, specific interview questions, and in one case, an entire document on preparing for, conducting, and scoring support representative interviews. Behavioral questions help assess applicant potential in many areas key to support representative success, including problem solving skills, communication skills, teamwork, cultural fit, and tolerance for stress. While identifying technical aptitude and diagnostic abilities remain important, according to members there is renewed focus on recruiting strong customer service skills and a good attitude—something difficult to instill with training.

According to SSPA Benchmarking data, support management is definitely spending time interviewing candidates, with average annual attrition rates for support representatives ranging from a low of 11% in Europe to a high of 23% in Asia Pacific.

Figure 1: Average Annual Attrition Rates by Geographic Region

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So how do you make sure you are picking the right candidates? The following sections provide some guidance and sample interview questions.

Problem Solving

Let's face it, not everyone has an analytical mind. Understanding how a candidate approaches complex issues to identify a failing component or workaround is important. Rob Druhot, Manager of Technical Support for SSPA Member **Advanced Solutions International**, provided these questions to help assess diagnostic abilities:

- Describe a complicated problem you had to deal with on the job. How did you identify or gain a better understanding of the problem?
- At one time or another we have all thought we had successfully handled a problem only to find we had really only affected a symptom of a larger problem. Can you tell me about a time this happened to you?
- If we are lucky, we can sometimes identify a small problem and fix it before it becomes a major problem. Can you provide an example of a time when you were able to identify a small problem before it became a large one?

For candidates that struggle to come up with examples, Mark Dunn, Executive Director, Customer Services, for SSPA Member **The Cobalt Group**, offers an interview question that gets to the heart of the matter: "You receive a call from a customer who is unable to insert a tape into the VCR. How would you approach this?" By asking the candidate to walk a customer through diagnosing a simple problem everyone can relate to, their ability to think on their feet and relate to non-technical customers is put to the test.

Customer Service and Communication Skills

Technology skills and aptitude are no longer the major factor in selecting tech support reps. With more focus on the Customer Experience, 'top box' and Net Promoter scores, customer service skills are more important than before. According to John Rein, Director, Customer Service Operations for SSPA Member **Snap-on Business Solutions**, "In the past, we sought highly technical people to man our support center. Now we look for those that are 'trainable' in technology (they do need to have command of the basics) but who demonstrate great attitude and solid qualities (empathy, listening and verbal communication skills) in the soft skill areas." The sense of empathy is particularly important—a strong desire to help other people.

And just how do you assess those abilities during interviews? SSPA members offer these 'best practice' questions.

- Sometimes we have to deal with a customer who has unreasonable demands. Tell me about an occasion when you had to handle such a situation. What did you do?
- Give an example of when you fulfilled a commitment to a customer. Give an example when you failed to appropriately follow-up.
- Tell me about a time when a customer was so mad that he/she didn't listen to your suggestion. How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with a serious communication barrier (technical or verbal). How did you handle it?
- Delivery of "bad" news is sometimes necessary in customer service. Describe a situation you have been in that demonstrates your ability to present difficult information without undue tension.
- Describe a time you had to ask questions and listen carefully to clarify the exact nature of a client's problem.

Teamwork/Cultural Fit

During the tech boom of the late 90s, there were several popular adages about hiring non-traditional candidates, or as some supposed HR experts pontificated, "Hire weird people." Personally, my experience has been that too weird doesn't work—the extreme creativity or 'outside the box' thinking may be great during the brainstorming phase, but team dynamics can suffer dramatically when the "weird people" are part of a project team needing a consensus. Especially in the fast paced environment of support, support reps need to be a good cultural fit for the operation and function well as part of a team. Here are some questions, based on actual member interview scripts, to help assess a candidate's cultural fit, and/or ability to work as part of a team.

- Give an example of when you were part of a team, and one team member was uncooperative or did not complete assigned tasks. How did you approach the situation, and how did the team solve the problem?
- Give an example of a team project in which you volunteered ideas

or suggestions that helped the team succeed. Were your contributions acknowledged by the team?

- If you overhear a coworker helping a customer resolve a problem, and you think they are providing an incorrect answer, what would you do? How would you handle the situation?
- Occasionally we all disagree with a new policy or procedure. Describe a time you disagreed with a policy or program and what you did to resolve it.
- Sometimes the 'tried and true' approach to a situation doesn't work. Tell me about a time that using the usual approach didn't work, and how you arrived at a new and creative approach to the problem.

These questions help highlight how a candidate will react in certain situations, or help identify if certain traits are present. In the example of the 4th bullet, we see how the applicant handles conflict, and in the 5th bullet, what their creative process may be. If your company has identified specific traits that are desired as part of company culture, devise questions that shed some light on if the candidate possesses these qualities. Members report that they ask questions to assess an applicant's initiative, innovation, judgment, and organizational skills.

Tolerance for Stress

Longtime support professionals tend to take stress in stride, and many work well in the fast paced, crisis-oriented environment of the customer service team. But not everyone has this ability, and identifying candidates who can handle the pressure of high incident volumes and customer emergencies is important. Advanced Solutions asks these questions to help judge a candidate's ability to work in a stressful environment:

- Describe a time you were experiencing conflicting work demands. What were those conflicting demands? How did you respond?
- Work interactions can be difficult at times. Describe a highly stressful interaction you've had with your manager. How did you react?
- Sometimes we are faced with very challenging deadlines on our projects. Tell me about an important project you were working on that had a highly challenging deadline. How did you react?

In addition to asking about work related stress, you might also ask questions to understand any 'hot button' issues that may contribute to stress in support centers. For example, how would the candidate deal with last minute schedule changes, being asking to stay late or come in early to deal with a particular customer problem, or being placed on a special project with a different group for a period of days or weeks?

In a related area, something that causes stress for many people is change, and support centers are in constant change, with new products being rolled out to customers, new technology being tested for supporting customers, frequent process changes, mergers and acquisitions, etc. To

help gauge how a candidate adapts to change, The Cobalt Group asks these questions:

- Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the burden of job responsibilities? How did you handle it? How did you set priorities?
- What are some of the most stressful interactions you have had with customers, peers or employees at work? Describe a specific situation and your actions or reactions.
- Describe a time when you faced a particularly demanding rush situation (emergency, deadline). How did you react?
- Tell me about a time that you received constructive negative feedback from a manager. How did you handle the situation? What did you do with the information?

The SSPA Recommends

Behavioral interviewing, in which applicants are asked to describe how they reacted to specific circumstances in the past, has emerged as an accurate way of assessing the ability to perform a job satisfactorily. Previous skills-based approaches, which determined the presence or lack of specific skills, are still good for preliminary screening (i.e., technical training, education, previous work experience), but in the real world, having a skill and using a skill are very different. We've all had applicants say how much they loved working with people, only to find later they were closet nihilists. When considering changes to your current employee interview process, factor in more behavioral questions using this approach:

- **Define your culture.** You can't assess 'cultural fit' if you can't define your culture. What habits or abilities are recognized and rewarded in your organization? This could be a good exercise for your next support offsite: what behavioral characteristics do support reps feel are the biggest benefit to successfully servicing your customers and working well with team mates?
- **Define your questions.** What questions will provide insight into whether applicants have the desired traits? For experienced support candidates, asking questions about previous support experiences is a great approach, but for first time support reps or new college grads, look for examples in everyday life to use instead. For example, consider the VCR question used by The Cobalt Group.
- **Define your interviewers.** Multiple members reported that they assign various behavioral categories to different people in the interview process. While team managers may be the best ones to assess initiative or problem solving, asking peer support reps to interview for teamwork aptitude makes sense.

About John Ragsdale.....

John Ragsdale is Vice President of Research for the SSPA. Ragsdale spent 10 years managing tech support operations before moving to Silicon Valley where he held product management and marketing positions at eService and CRM vendors. He spent 5 years at Forrester

Research as VP and Research Director before joining the SSPA.



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