



THE PLAYBOOK

The Working Version

How I answered a hiring test by building the tool instead of describing it, and was hired before the call ended. The repeatable method behind that: make the smallest real version, run the meeting as a working session, and leave them holding the work. Plus the honest chapter on when a memo really is the right answer.

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Nobody else brought one

A consulting firm handed me a take-home problem instead of a list of interview questions. One vague brief, no template, no right answer on file:

THE BRIEF, IN THEIR WORDS

"Clients get so excited that the moment they sign, they start sending tasks before we have the background to handle them."

The test was framed as a presentation. Every candidate in a process like this faces the same quiet fork, usually without noticing it is there, and the choice matters more than anything said afterwards.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

THE SAFE MOVE

Describe a solution. A tidy document listing what you would do. Easy to write, easy to nod at, easy to forget by the next call. It asks them to imagine the result and trust that you could deliver it.

THE MOVE I MADE

Build a working version. A small, real tool that does the thing, live. Harder to make and almost impossible to ignore. It shows the result instead of promising it.

Figure: the decision that separates candidates before anyone says anything clever.

This playbook is the story of taking the right-hand branch, what happened in the room, and the repeatable method underneath it. It ends with the honest chapter: the situations where building is the wrong move, because a method that claims to always apply is a slogan.

A description competes with descriptions

Every serious candidate in the process submits roughly the same artifact: a competent memo. Ten pages or two, bulleted or prose, they are all the same move, and the reviewer reads them the same way, in a stack, with coffee, imagining.

A description asks for trust. It says: here is what I would do, please believe I can. The reviewer has to supply the imagination, and every candidate's memo draws on the same pool of it.

A working version removes the need for trust. There is nothing to imagine. The thing runs, in front of them, on their problem. The question "could this person deliver?" is answered before it is asked.

THE BET

A description competes with every other candidate's description. A working tool competes with nothing, because nobody else in the process brought one.

There is a second effect that surprised me. Building forces you to actually understand the problem. A memo can stay vague where your understanding is vague; a tool cannot. Halfway through building it, I understood their onboarding gap better than I could have by outlining it, because every screen demanded a concrete answer: which question comes first, what counts as a gap, what does the fix actually contain.

The vague brief turned out to be hiding more than a dozen distinct process gaps. I only know that because the build made me enumerate them.

The smallest real version

What I built was a live onboarding diagnostic. Not slides about a tool: the tool itself, running in the browser during the call.

ASKS

The right questions

It walks through the questions a good operator asks in week one, in plain language, one at a time.

FLAGS

The real gaps, live

As answers come in, it marks every place the process is missing a step, a channel, or an owner.

GENERATES

A tailored fix

It assembles a phased solution from their answers, with a ready-to-use template behind each fix.

The scoping rules mattered as much as the idea. The version that wins is the smallest one that is genuinely real:

Plain HTML, one file, no backend. It opens from a double click, works offline, and can be stored on their own systems. Nothing to install is nothing to object to.

Styled to their brand. Their palette, not mine. It reads as something that already belongs to them.

Theirs to keep. I said so out loud: even if I walked away that afternoon, the tool stays. A leave-behind converts a test into a gift.

Real content, not lorem ipsum. Every question and every template in it was a genuine answer to their brief, usable as written.

SEE IT YOURSELF

The tool from this story is live, along with the ten builder tools it routes to: **me.kabuhayan.app/tools**, under Onboarding clients. The direct link is me.kabuhayan.app/toolkit/Onboarding_Guided_Tool.html.

Run it as a working session

The test was framed as a presentation. I turned it into a working session, and that single move changed the dynamic in the room more than the tool did.

Step 01 Ask

Instead of talking at them, I ran the tool's discovery questions live and let them answer in their own words, the way a real first week would go.

Step 02 Capture

Every response went straight into the tool as we spoke, so they watched their own situation take shape on the screen.

Step 03 Assemble

The solution built itself from what they had just told me. Nothing generic, nothing pre-baked. All of it theirs.

THE SHIFT

A candidate being tested became a colleague solving a problem. That is a far better room to be in, and it is a room you can choose to create.

Two practical notes on running it. **Let silence work:** after each question, wait. The answers they reach for are the diagnostic. And **type their words, not your paraphrase:** when the generated solution quotes them back exactly, it lands as theirs, because it is.

If the tool breaks mid-call, and the first version sometimes does, narrate the fix calmly and keep going. Watching someone debug their own work under mild pressure is itself a hiring signal, and not a bad one.

What sold it

I was hired on the spot, before the call ended. Not on the strength of a pitch, on the strength of watching the work happen in real time. Looking back, two things did it.

THEY COULD SEE IT WORKING

Usable, real, and shaped to how they actually operate. No imagination required, and nothing left to take on faith.

THE WORK STAYED WITH THEM

They ended the call holding a tool they could keep, and a first-hand picture of how I think and how I ship.

STATED PLAINLY

You do not win the room by proving you could do the work. You win it by doing the work while they watch.

Worth being precise about what this is evidence for. One hire, one room, one firm whose pain happened to be tooling-shaped. The method travels; the guarantee does not. What generalises is the underlying trade: effort spent before the meeting converts into credibility inside it at a rate nothing else matches.

Four things worth stealing from the episode:

Build, do not just describe. A working thing beats a perfect memo. Make the smallest real version you can.

Turn the test into a working session. Ask, capture, and let the answer come from them.

Solve their problem, not a generic one. Adapt to their exact words, and let them keep the result.

Show up having already started. Arrive with something real in your hands, not a plan to make one later.

Building yours in a weekend

The method transfers to any role where the work is process-shaped: assistants, chiefs of staff, operations, project and delivery roles. The sequence that keeps it to a weekend:

Pick **One painful workflow, from their words**

Reread the brief or the job description and pick the single pain they named most vividly. Resist solving three things. One, done live, beats a suite described.

Shape **Choose the smallest real form**

A diagnostic that asks and recommends. A builder that fills a template. A checklist that generates a document. All of these fit in one HTML file with no backend.

Fill **Write real content**

The questions, the templates, the defaults. This is most of the work and all of the credibility: the tool is a container for judgement, and the judgement is what they are hiring.

Dress **Their brand, their name**

Pull the palette from their site. Put their firm name in the header. Ten minutes of styling does a disproportionate share of the landing.

Rehearse **Run it once, out loud, alone**

You are rehearsing the session, not the speech: the questions, the typing, the moment you turn the screen around.

THE TRAP TO AVOID

Do not let the build swallow the brief. If they asked for analysis and you deliver only a tool, you answered a different question. The tool accompanies the asked-for deliverable; on a vague brief, it can be the deliverable.

When not to build

A method that claims to always apply is a slogan. There are real cases where the memo, or something else entirely, is the right move.

When the test is judgement-shaped, not process-shaped. If the brief asks which market to enter or how to read a financial position, the deliverable is the analysis. A tool wrapped around thin analysis advertises the thinness.

When scope is genuinely unclear. Building the wrong thing confidently is worse than asking one clarifying question. If two readings of the brief produce two different tools, ask first.

When time is the constraint they set. If they said two hours, honour it. A weekend build against a two-hour brief signals you cannot hear instructions, which is its own answer.

When the audience cannot receive it. Some processes route everything through a portal that accepts documents only. Then the working version becomes an appendix link, and the document leads.

Even in these cases, half the method survives: **run the meeting as a working session anyway.** Ask, capture, and assemble on a shared document instead of a tool. The shift from performing to collaborating does not require software.

THE TEST TO APPLY

Would a working version answer the question they actually asked? If yes, build. If it answers a different, easier question, write the memo and build nothing.

Do the work while they watch

Before the call, one quiet decision: describe, or build. Everything in this playbook is downstream of choosing to build, scoping it small enough to be real, and running the room as a working session instead of a performance.

The polish, the confidence, the right words: all of it follows from having actually done the work. That is the whole game.

The artifact from this story did not stay a one-off. It became a published toolkit, one guided diagnostic and ten builder tools, free on this site, which is its own lesson: work built for one room can keep working long after the room empties.

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The build checklist

Run this before any take-home or working-session interview where you plan to build. If any box will not tick, chapter 6 applies.

BEFORE YOU BUILD

- ☐ The pain is process-shaped, and I am using their exact words for it
- ☐ One workflow only; everything else cut
- ☐ The form is the smallest real version: one file, no backend, opens from a double click

BEFORE THE CALL

- ☐ Real content throughout: questions, templates, defaults they could use as written
- ☐ Styled to their palette, their firm name in the header
- ☐ Rehearsed once, out loud, including turning the screen around

IN THE ROOM

- ☐ Ask their questions live; let silence work
- ☐ Type their words, not a paraphrase
- ☐ Say it plainly: this is yours to keep, whatever you decide

THE LIVE ARTIFACT

The tool from this story, and the ten builders it routes to, are free on the tools page: **me.kabuhayan.app/tools**, under Onboarding clients. The full hiring assessment behind it, survey cleanup, launch timeline, and report, is written up as case study 05 at me.kabuhayan.app/case-studies.