

Hiring People: Questions to Ask

Knowing What to Ask to Find the Right Person



In your organization, are the right people in the right jobs? Or have you experienced a string of disappointments (such as poor attendance, attitude problems and personality conflicts) because you failed to find that right fit?

If so, you'll recognize the missed opportunities and declining business productivity that these causes, as well as the lasting damage to customers, reputation and profitability.

But it doesn't have to be that way. If you take the time to plan your hiring process carefully, you will see a huge payoff in the end. The people you hire are your most valuable resources and choosing who to hire doesn't need to be a gamble if you approach it strategically.

A key part of the hiring process is developing good questions to ask in the interview. Know what you want to ask candidates beforehand. If you don't, you run the risk of the interview turning into an informal conversation, and you'll end up hiring someone because you like him or her, not because he is the best person for the job.

To take the gamble out of the hiring process, employers are turning in droves to behavioral, or competency-based, interviews. A competency-based selection process focuses on the key competencies needed for each job.

The thinking behind this type of interview is that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. In a behavioral interview, you ask candidates questions designed to uncover how well they have previously demonstrated the competencies you're looking for. By getting candidates to talk about what they did in a specific situation, you get a glimpse of how they will likely react in a similar situation in your company. What's more, with careful questioning you can start to understand the values and motivations of the person you're interviewing, and from this decide whether they have the positive attitude that you want in your organization.

This article helps you structure questions to do this and gives some good examples.

Note:

There is no "correct" set of competencies, and each business needs to analyze their operations, culture and strategy to determine the qualities they value the most. One company might focus on communication and stress management, while another may emphasize creativity and service orientation.

Discovering that combination is key to hiring the right people for the job. One way of doing this is to understand the qualities of existing top performers in the job. Another is to talk to managers and team members about the qualities they appreciate in people who do the job well.

Question Structure

An interview is an opportunity to find concrete evidence that candidates can do what they say, and that what they do results in a positive outcome. Anyone can say they drive a forklift, but how often they have driven one into a wall is much more important. You need to understand the following associations before and during an interview:

Experience ≠ Accomplishment
Education ≠ Competency
A Given Responsibility or Activity ≠ Positive Result
(≠ means "not equal to")

You must dig deeper than face value and confirm that what candidates say they did was actually advantageous to the company. When candidates describe what they did, don't assume it was done well.

A question that gets asked during almost every traditional interview goes something like this: "What do you think are your strengths as an employee?"

The applicant responds with an equally predictable answer like, "I'm very loyal and I put 100 percent effort into my work."

You can take that information at face value and form a high opinion of the applicant, or you can ask for proof of the person's loyalty and commitment by asking a question like this: "Tell me about a time when you demonstrated loyalty. Why do you think this specific example shows loyalty?"

Use the following three key elements when creating behavioral questions:

1. **Ask about a specific situation or for a specific example.** Typical lead-ins include:
 - Tell me about a time when.

- Give me an example of.
- Please describe a situation where you.

2. Tip:

Remember this as the SOAR model:

- **Situation:** Tell me about a time when.
- **Objective:** What were you trying to do?
- **Action:** What happened?
- **Result:** What was the outcome?

3. Use open-ended questions. Don't ask questions that can be answered with one-word responses like Yes or No.

The lead-ins above are all open. The respondent must describe a situation in her own words in order to respond. It's easy to inadvertently close off questions, as the following examples show:

- Was there ever a time when. Can be answered with a Yes or No.
- Can you give me an example of. Can be answered with a Yes or No.
- When did you have to . Can give a date or time.

4. Use probes. Follow up on your questions to get more information about the situation being described, and to uncover the values of the person being interviewed. These requests also help candidates stay on track and help you listen effectively.

Some effective probes include:

- Why – Why did you do that in that way? Why do you think that's important?
- How – How did the client react?
- When – When did this happen?
- Where – Where was your boss during all of this?
- Who – Who else was involved?
- What – What was the outcome? What did you gain from the experience?
- Tell me more.

- Give me an example.
- Lead me through the process.

Tip:

If you're not getting useful information from someone, try "contra-behavior" questions: "Tell me about a time when this didn't work? What went wrong? What did you do to correct the situation?"

Great Interview Questions

To get the best information from your candidates, you want them to be comfortable with you. To do this, it is best to start off with questions that they are expecting and for which they will likely have fairly well-prepared answers. This puts candidates at ease and gives you an opportunity to develop rapport with them.

Get-To-Know-You Questions

- What aspects of your last job did you really enjoy?
- What have you accomplished in the past that makes you particularly qualified for this position?
- What areas do you need to further develop in order to meet your career goals?

By building trust and confidence at the beginning of the interview through questions like these, you will be in a much better position to discover the candidate's attitudes, beliefs and past patterns of performance. Candidates who are confident with their responses at the beginning of the interview will likely remain confident in giving you honest and candid answers even as the questions become more probative and demanding.

Remember to use probes here if what the candidate tells you sparks further discussion. These aren't behavioral questions; however, you can make them so by using them to lead into specific examples of past behavior. For example:

Q: How would your last supervisor describe you?

A: He would definitely say I am very creative, and I take initiative.

Probe: Great, tell me more about your creativity. Describe a situation where you used your creativity to solve a problem.

After you've warmed-up candidates, you can then move to questions that tell you how well they have demonstrated the competencies that you have determined are critical to your workplace and culture.

Competency Questions

You need to ask questions that show both a positive and a negative application of each of the competencies you have identified as being important for a particular position. The positive questions determine how well candidates will perform in your workplace. The negative questions can help you discover how well candidates learn from their mistakes, as well as how willing they are to admit mistakes and take responsibility for them.

You can use this formula to develop a behavioral interview for any position. Here are some great interview questions for the most common competencies evaluated in modern workplaces.

Communication

- How do you ensure that someone understands what you are saying? Tell me about a time when you had to use these skills in the workplace.
- Describe a situation where you missed important details that were communicated to you. What was the outcome? How did you resolve the situation?
- Describe the last written communication you had with your boss.

Interpersonal Skills

- Tell me about your relationship with a co-worker with whom you work well.
- Describe the most difficult working relationship you've had with an individual. What specific actions did you take to improve the relationship? What was the outcome?
- Describe a time that politics at work affected your job. How did you handle it?

Motivation

- Give me an example of a significant professional goal you met. How did you achieve it? What were the obstacles? How did you overcome them?
- All jobs have their frustrations and problems. Describe examples of specific job conditions, tasks or assignments that have been dissatisfying to you.
- How have you motivated yourself to complete an assignment or task that you did not want to do?

Initiative

- Give me an example of when you were given a project and did more than was required in order to exceed someone's expectation.
- Tell me about a suggestion you made to improve the way job processes/operations worked. What was the result?
- Describe a situation in which you recognized a potential problem as an opportunity. What did you do? What was the result? What do you wish you had done differently?

Stress Management

- Describe a time when you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.
- Describe a project or goal that caused you frustration.
- Describe a situation in which you were under pressure and you feel you handled it well.

Problem Solving/Analytical Skills

- Describe a difficult problem that you tried to solve. How did you identify the problem? How did you go about trying to solve it?
- Describe a major project that you worked on where things did not go exactly as planned.
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- What steps do you follow to study a problem in order to understand the situation fully?

Decision Making

- Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make. What information led you to make the decision that you made? What other possible solutions were there? What was the final outcome?
- Recall for me a time when you had to choose between several alternatives. How did you evaluate each alternative?
- Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision without all the information you needed. How did you handle it? Why? Were you happy with the outcome?

Teamwork

- Think of a time when you worked effectively in a team situation. Describe how you felt about the contributions of the others on the team.
- Give me an example of one of the most significant contributions you made as a member of a high performing team. What, in your opinion, made it a high performing team?
- Tell me about one of the toughest teams/groups you've had to work with. What made it difficult? What did you do?

Time Management/Organization

- Tell me about a project that you planned. How did you organize and schedule the tasks? How did you develop your action plan?
- Describe a time when you missed a deadline. What was the result and what did you learn from the experience?
- Tell me about a time when you rushed to complete a project and sacrificed quality for efficiency.

Key Points

Great interviewing takes preparation and practice. To do this, begin by analyzing the competencies of the position you are recruiting for so you fully understand what you want to know before you prepare your interview questions. This is critical in helping you to form a clear picture before the interview of the qualities you're looking for, so you can make a fair evaluation of the candidate.

Then, by using a behavioral approach to interviewing, ask questions that will give you the best predictive information about how well candidates will perform on the job. When asking your questions, if the candidate's answer is not complete, probe until you get the details you need.

This recipe for interviewing success will allow you to create great interview questions of your own for any competency you require. It's a great formula and one that will bring you much success at interviewing.