

Developing interview questions

Using the job description as a guide, develop questions based on each major task, responsibility or core skill. Avoid questions that will only prompt a “yes” or “no” answer, use Behavioral Interview techniques to elicit a comprehensive view of the candidates past behavior which is the best predictor of future behavior. Examples of behavioral interview questions for a variety of themes are included at the end of this document as a starting point for you. Please see HR for additional support.

It is critical to conduct lawful interviews with candidates for your open positions. The guiding principle behind any question to a candidate should be, “Can the employer demonstrate a job-related necessity for asking the question?” The intent behind the question, as well as how the information received is used, determines if any discrimination has occurred. Before asking the question of a candidate, ask yourself whether the information is really necessary in order to judge the applicant’s qualifications, level of skills, and overall competence for the job in question.

Acceptable and Unacceptable Inquiries for Interviews and/or Applications			
<i>Topic</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Unacceptable</i>	<i>If Unacceptable, What Is the Reason?</i>
<i>Attendance/reliability</i>	What hours and days can you work?	How many children do you have?	Could be viewed as discriminatory toward females
<i>Attendance/reliability</i>	Are there specific times that you cannot work?	What religion are you?	Could be viewed as religious discrimination
<i>Attendance/reliability</i>	Do you have responsibilities other than work that will interfere with specific job requirements such as traveling?	What are your child care arrangements?	Could be viewed as discriminatory toward females
<i>Attendance/reliability</i>	Do you have a reliable method of getting to work?	Do you own a car?	Could be considered racial discrimination
<i>Citizenship/national origin</i>	Are you legally eligible for employment in the United States?	What is your national origin? Where are your parents from?	Could be considered national origin discrimination
<i>National origin</i>	None	What is your father’s surname? What are the names of your relatives?	Not only are these irrelevant, but they could be considered national origin discrimination
<i>Arrest and conviction</i>	Please see Human Resources for guidance	Have you ever been arrested?	Could be considered racial discrimination
<i>Disabilities</i>	Can you perform the duties of the job you are applying for?	Do you have any disabilities?	Could be considered discrimination against disabled persons

<i>Disabilities</i>	None	Have you ever filed a workers' compensation claim? Have you ever been injured on the job?	Could be considered discrimination against disabled persons
<i>Credit record</i>	None	Do you own your own home? Have you ever declared bankruptcy?	Irrelevant and could be considered racial discrimination
<i>Military record</i>	What type of education, training and work experience relevant to job did you receive while in the military?	What type of discharge did you receive?	Irrelevant and could be considered racial discrimination
<i>Language</i>	What languages do you speak and write fluently? (if the job requires additional languages)	What is your native language? How did you learn to read, write or speak a foreign language?	Could be considered national origin discrimination
<i>Organizations</i>	Inquiry into an applicant's membership in organizations that the applicant considers relevant to his or her ability to perform job	List all clubs, societies and lodges to which you belong.	Could be considered racial or national origin discrimination
<i>Race or color</i>	None	Complexion or color of skin.	Could be considered racial or national origin discrimination
<i>Weight, height, eye color</i>	None		Could be considered racial or national origin discrimination
<i>Religion</i>	Only if there is a bona fide occupational qualification	What is your religious denomination, religious affiliations, church, parish, pastor? What religious holidays do you observe?	Could be considered religious discrimination
<i>Gender</i>	Only if there is a bona fide occupational qualification	Do you wish to be addressed as Mr.?, Mrs.?, Miss? or Ms.?	Could be considered gender discrimination.
<i>Education</i>	Do you have a high school diploma or equivalent? Do you have a university or college degree? (if relevant to job performance)	What year did you graduate from high school or college?	Could be considered age discrimination

(Adapted from Society for Human Resource Management)

Sample Interview Questions

Hiring managers should create a selection of questions specific to the competencies and requirements of the posted position. We have included a list of potential questions as a starting point. Best practice would include meeting with your interview team prior to candidate interviews to review the position requirements and your interview process.

Employment & Education Background

1. What is the highest level of education you have received? Where did you earn this degree/diploma?
2. Please tell me about any other education or training that is relevant to _____ position.
3. Who is your present or most recent employer?
4. What are/were your major responsibilities in that position?
5. What did you like best about that position? What did you like least? What was the most difficult part?
6. Tell us about the skills required for your current/prior position. What skills have you acquired that will make you more competitive for _____ position?
7. Which accomplishments in your present/most recent prior position are you proud of and why?
8. Why are you planning to/did you leave that position?

Teamwork

1. How do you go about developing relationships at work?
2. We have all had to work with someone who is difficult to get along with. Give me an example of when this has happened to you. Why was that person difficult? How did you handle it? What would you do differently today?
3. Give me some examples of when one of your ideas was opposed in a team discussion/decision. How did you react? Were you able to influence?
4. We all have ways of showing consideration for others. What are some things you've done to show concern or consideration for a co-worker?
5. Describe a situation when you wished you had acted differently with someone at work.
6. Tell me, specifically, what you have done to be a good team player at _____.
7. Give me some examples of when one of your ideas was opposed in a team discussion/decision. How did you react? Were you able to influence the team to a greater understanding of your point of view?

Communication Skills

When assessing communication skills, it is important to observe the candidate as they respond throughout the interview. Consider if the applicant is able to express himself/herself effectively and in a well organized manner.

1. We've all had occasions when we misinterpreted something that someone told us – due date, complicated instructions, etc. Give me a specific example of when this happened to you. What was the situation? Why was there a misinterpretation? What was the outcome? What would you do differently?
2. What kind of reports/proposals have you written? What are the most challenging parts of these reports/proposals?

3. Give me an example from your past working experience where you had to rely on information given to you verbally to get the job done.
4. What different approaches do you use in talking with different people? How do you know you are getting your point across?
5. What is the worst communication problem you've experienced? How did you handle it?

Analytical Problem Solving

1. Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to gain information needed to solve a problem. Then tell me how you analyzed the information and came to a decision, if applicable.
2. Give me an example that demonstrates your ability to use a variety of approaches in your work.
3. Tell me about a time when you were assigned a project with you had little or no experience. What strategy did you adopt to plan and complete the assignment?
4. Tell me about a difficult problem you solved for a customer or colleague.
5. Describe a position you have held where your problem solving skills were regularly tested.
6. Tell me about a time when you had to quickly analyze a situation and quickly come to a decision. What were the trade-offs you made and why? What was the result?
7. What steps do you follow to study a problem before making a decision? Walk me through a specific example.
8. What is the most difficult decision you have ever had to make at work? Why was it so difficult? What process did you go through in order to get to your decision?
9. Tell me about a time when you used multiple data sets to determine a solution. What tools and methods did you use?

Leadership

1. What leadership skills and experience do you have that would qualify you as an effective leader? Be specific.
2. Describe how you have influenced someone to do something new. What were the obstacles? Walk me through how you did it. Were they ultimately successful?
3. Explain a situation where you had an opinion that differed from your manager or other leadership within the organization. What happened? Did you ultimately persuade others to agree?
4. Tell me about the difference you see in management vs. leadership, provide specific examples of when you have been in each role? What was different? What was the same?
5. Tell me about a time when you had to take a firm stand with a colleague. What was the situation? What was difficult about the colleague? What was the firm stand you had to take? What was the outcome?
6. Describe a time when you had to establish/re-establish the mission and values of an organization? What was going on at the time? How did you formulate the need to take action? How did you do it?
7. Tell me about a time when you failed? What was happening? What were your mistakes? What was the organizational impact? What did you learn from it?
8. Walk me through your approach to strategic planning. What scope of programs have you worked on? Who do you include? What major steps do you take? How do you implement a strategic plan effectively?

Motivation

1. Give me an example of when you worked the hardest and felt the greatest sense of achievement.
2. Tell me about the most boring job or task you have had. Why was it boring? What did you do about it? How did you handle the boredom?
3. Tell me about a time when the duties and responsibilities available in a specific position overlapped with duties and responsibilities that brought you personal satisfaction.
4. Why did you choose this (career, type of work)?
5. What job values are important to you?
6. What was the most useful feedback you ever received?
7. How do you like to be recognized for doing good work? Tell me about a time you appreciated it most.

Initiative

1. Please tell me about a project or idea (not necessarily your own) that was carried out successfully primarily because of your efforts.
2. What new ideas or suggestions have you come up with at work? What problem were you solving?
3. What things do you do to make your job easier or more rewarding?
4. Tell me about a time when you recognized a problem before your supervisor or others at the organization. How did you handle it?
5. How do you know if you are doing a good job?
6. What career accomplishments are you most proud of?
7. What risks did you take in your last position?

Planning & Organization

1. How do you organize your day?
2. How do you establish priorities in scheduling your time? Give specific examples.
3. Tell me how you establish a course of action to accomplish specific short and long term goals.
4. Do you postpone things? What are good reasons to postpone things? How do you manage the impact to others?
5. How do you catch up on an accumulated backlog of work after a vacation or conference?
6. What did you do to prepare for this interview?

Technical and/or Position Specific

1. What training have you received in _____?
2. On a scale of one to ten, ten being you are a perfect technical match for this position, where would you rank yourself? Why? Please give examples.
3. What would you add to or subtract from your technical background to make you more qualified for this position?
4. Describe how _____ process can best be performed. Have you discovered any short cuts? How do they work?
5. Walk me through the procedures you would follow to _____.
6. Do you consider your technical abilities basic, intermediate, or advanced? Why?

Work Standard

1. What are your standards of success in your job? What have you done to meet those standards?
2. What do you consider the most important contribution your department has made to the organization? What was your role?
3. What factors, other than pay, do you consider most important in evaluating yourself or your success?
4. Tell me about a time when you weren't very pleased with your work performance. Why were you disappointed with your performance? What did you do to turn around your performance?
5. When judging the performance of others, what factors or characteristics are most important to you?

Mission Alignment

1. How would you describe the mission of the University of Portland?
2. How do you see promoting this mission in this position?

Consider Common Interviewing Biases

There are several problems that interviewers run into when they allow biases to get in the way. These include:

Stereotyping: Forming an opinion about how people of a given gender, religion, race, appearance, or other characteristic think, act, respond, or would perform the job - without any evidence that this is the case.

Inconsistency in questioning: Asking different questions of each candidate leads to a skewed assessment of who would best perform the job. Questions designed to get particular information about a specific candidate are only appropriate in the context of a core set of questions asked of all candidates.

First impressions: An interviewer might make a snap judgment about someone based on their first impression - positive or negative - that clouds the entire interview. For example, letting the fact that the candidate is wearing out-of-the-ordinary clothing or has a heavy regional accent take precedence over the applicant's knowledge, skills, or abilities.

Negative emphasis: This involves rejection of a candidate based on a small amount of negative information - a common occurrence. Research indicates that interviewers give unfavorable information about twice the weight of favorable information.

Halo/horn effect: The "halo" effect occurs when an interviewer allows one strong point about the candidate to overshadow or have an effect on everything else. For instance, knowing someone went to a particular university might be looked upon favorably. Everything the applicant says during the interview is seen in this light. ("Well, she left out an important part of the answer to that question, but, she must know it, she went to XYZ University). The "horn" effect is just the opposite - allowing one weak point to influence everything else.

Cultural noise: Since the candidate wants the job, she or he will provide the words the interviewer wants to hear, even if those words are not entirely truthful. For example, an applicant might say that he has no problem reporting to someone younger, or working in a team setting, when this is not the case. Interviewers should prepare questions that probe for specific examples and stay away from questions that elicit "yes" or "no" answers.

Nonverbal bias: Undue emphasis might be placed on nonverbal cues that have nothing to do with the job, such as loudness or softness of voice, or the type of handshake given.

Contrast effect: Strong(er) candidates who interview after weak(er) ones may appear more qualified than they are because of the contrast between the two. Note taking during the interview and a reasonable period of time between interviews may alleviate this.

(Adapted from Society for Human Resource Management)

As always, HR is available and happy to advise through any part of the interview process. Please contact Nicole Bresnahan at bresnaha@up.edu or 503-943-8752 for assistance or coaching at any point in your hiring process.