

How to Conduct a Job Interview

By Brian Libby

Got a key position to fill? Hiring good employees is the foundation of any successful business. But selecting the right ones is hard work, and the interview process is often the most important step in the process. Here's how to figure out if the candidate sitting across from you is likely to become your next Employee of the Month.

Things you will need:

- None—unless it's offsite, in which case the employer picks up any tab.
- Figure at least 45 minutes per interview.
- **A clean, well-lighted place:** Windowless conference rooms don't foster honest dialogue. Consider meeting in your own office or at an off-site coffee shop.
- **Multiple interviewers:** Several members of your team should meet key hires. The more perspective you get on the candidate, the smarter your decision will be.
- **Note-taking materials:** It could be a pen and paper or a laptop and digital recorder, but don't rely on memory alone to track responses.
- **A plan:** Know the order in which you'll proceed with questions and how they'll be divided up among team members.

Step 1 - Do Your Homework Beforehand

Goal: Minimize the back-story and maximize the time you spend with the candidate.

Going into an interview, each interviewer should have already studied a dossier on the person they're about to meet face to face. At the very least, become familiar enough with his or her resume, cover letter, or other submitted materials so you don't waste the first half of the interview re-learning basic biographical information.

Make sure you have the information you need to get a sense of what each candidate is all about—and what they might bring to the position—before you conduct the actual interview. Google, a company that prides itself on its creative approach to the hiring process, uses tailored questionnaires that candidates answer online. Given that it's a tech company, many of the questions are, well, technical. One candidate was asked to design a system that would produce a report of the top 1 million Google search requests—using only custom-written applications and free open-source software. Other Google questions seek out extracurricular experience: answers have included accounts of climbing mountains and writing novels. "If we find individuals who have done interesting things, they seem to make a better connection with the community here," says Google staffing director Arnon Geshuri.

Increasingly, blogs and websites like MySpace and Facebook are making it easy to learn a wealth of personal information about people, even though those sites were not posted with you in mind—and may have no bearing whatsoever on a candidate's job fitness. "We regard

that as a personal thing, and we don't seek it out," says General Electric recruitment manager Steve Canale. "But I tell my children, 'Don't put anything out there you don't want everybody to be able to see.'" Candidates who learn that their personal websites have been weighed along with their resume may be angered by the invasion of privacy and the irrelevance to the job. An honorable rule of thumb is to ask in advance if the candidate has any online presence they'd like you to check out.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

Keeping It Legal

The interview process is subject to numerous employment laws designed to protect applicants' privacy and ensure them a fair shot in the selection process. Employers cannot ask questions about religion, national origin, age, height, weight, marital status, disability, or gender unless they represent genuine qualifications essential to the operation of the business. (For example: a church can ask potential ministers about their religious background; a contracting firm can ask if candidates are physically able to perform certain tasks.)

No one should be required to provide personal information, and some in the employment field recommend keeping the interview process tied strictly to job relevance. If asking about off-hours pursuits, say so in an open-ended way, such as, "We're seeking well-rounded, passionate people. Is that how you'd characterize yourself?"

Step 2 - Beware the Three-minute Judgment

Goal: Choose the best person for the job—not your new best friend.

It's human nature to base your opinion about a candidate on the gut feeling you develop during the first few minutes of the interview. To some extent, that tendency can be harnessed as a kind of intrinsic sixth sense. But have faith in the process as a whole. Many of the best employees might not make a great first impression, but their talent reveals itself more and more over time.

"When I've done training for interviewing, I've noticed that people fantasize about the concept of having a buzzer under the desk that you could push to say, 'No thank you,'" says industrial psychologist Charles Handler of Rocket-Hire.com, a firm that advises companies on their hiring processes. "But you need to think, before you hit that imaginary buzzer, why do you want to hit it? You have to suspend judgment and think about collecting data that will help you make a good decision in the end."

Handler adds that for the most part, people want to hire people like themselves. "The key is reducing subjectivity and making the process more job related," he says. Remember: you want to create a team with a true diversity of personalities, perspectives, and talents. That's crucial to keep in mind when biographical details related to hobbies, cultural tastes, and other outside pursuits come up. If you're too easily swayed by your shared passion for Harry Potter books or old David Bowie albums, you're not going to focus properly on concrete, practical information about aptitude and suitability. For a more detailed discussion of how not to conduct a job interview, read about the ["10 Mistakes Managers Make During Job Interviews."](#)

Case Study

The Anthropologist in You

Despite having been founded only a few years ago, the New Seasons grocery chain in Portland, Oregon, has nine stores and is continuing to grow quickly. The company focuses on organic produce and products geared toward sustainable living, and it's often praised for the conspicuous good cheer of its employees—it's the kind of attitude you just can't fake with a robotic smile and generic "Have a nice day." Head recruiter Bill Tolbert is trained as a cultural anthropologist, and he says the key is to look for people who want to be there. So when conducting interviews, he works hard to form a sense of candidates' lives, their personalities, what matters to them, and how the company fits into that picture.

"I don't see it as an interview so much as a conversation," he says. "I steer away from conventional questions and open up the floor. I just want them to talk about things they're interested in and what they love to do. It could be snowboarding, going to museums—anything. I listen not to what they're saying but to the message behind it."

Tolbert recommends taking notice of the attitude a prospective employee shows in talking about his or her favorite pursuits, be they career, hobby, or something in between. How does the job they're seeking fit? Does their attitude change when the subject comes back to the job? For some, there is an even-keel attitude that traverses work and play. For others, work is a waiting game until it's time to clock out. Tolbert says he looks for someone who has a vibrant, balanced life outside work but doesn't put a mental fence between work and play. "We can teach people to a large degree," Tolbert says. "But what you can't do is change a person."

Step 3 - Ask Plenty of Behavioral Questions

Goal: Keep the interview rooted in practical, job-related skills and information.

Behavioral questions require candidates to give examples from their past experience and describe how they used specific skills that are relevant to the job. They're a great opportunity for candidates to demonstrate leadership or other desirable kinds of performance. An applicant may make statements like, "I deliver great customer service," but that's meaningless unless they can provide a concrete example showing how they walked the talk.

A good interviewer should be able to sift through the information a candidate provides to see what it really says about experience and ability. For example, anecdotes should show balance in a candidate's sense of his own importance. "A candidate shouldn't try to take all the credit for work done in a team," says Brant Williams, recruiting coordinator for Adidas America. "Instead, you want them to clearly identify what their role was and how they contributed to the team outcome." Dissecting the meaning of what's said will require close attention, so write down any responses that give you pause, as well as the good ones.

Hot Tip

Sample Behavior-Based Questions

- **If you're looking for leadership:** "Tell me about a time when you accomplished something significant that wouldn't have happened if you hadn't been there to make it happen."

- **If you're looking for communication:** "Describe a situation where you persuaded team members to do things your way. What was the effect?"
- **If you're looking for customer service:** "Tell me about a time when you had to deal with an irate customer."

From "Fifty Behavior Based Interview Questions"

Step 4 - Throw 'Em a Curveball

GOAL: Get candidates to think on their feet.

Although the majority of the interview should be practical, throwing a more abstract question with no right or wrong answer into the mix can shed light on a candidate's reasoning power, outlook, and comfort in negotiating ambiguity. Asked why the sky is blue, a strong candidate might pontificate about the science of climate and atmosphere or its more conceptual impact on people, culture, and art. "You want people who think differently from each other," says Scott Pitasky, general manager of recruiting for Microsoft. "Otherwise you'll end up with a group of very talented people who always come up with the same answer as each other." Such questions can also be a measure of attitude. If a candidate rolls her eyes and shrugs, she may balk at more important tasks, as well.

For Example

Why Microsoft Loves Manholes

One of Microsoft's abstract questions of choice has long been, "Why are manhole covers round?" One longtime employee, Brian Groth, has posted a list of his favorite answers on his [blog](#):

- Because the hole is round (duh!)
- Because animals dig round holes, so it feels natural to humans, too.
- Because a circle offsets the straight lines of a city.
- Because it's easier to roll the cover some distance than carry it.
- Because it won't fall into the hole—but, the same is true for an equilateral triangle.
- Because it is easier to pour hot metal into a circular mold than one with sharp corners.

Step 5 - Maintain Consistency Across the Process

GOAL: Create a system for quantifying and analyzing the information you collect.

Philosophies about hiring come and go: experience versus raw talent, leaders versus team-players, personality tests and problem-solving scenarios versus traditional resumes and interviews. As with a stock portfolio, your best bet is to diversify. But once you've arrived at a set of questions to ask and qualities to look for, stick to your game plan. Using the same list of questions for all candidates helps create a structure for managing all the information provided in their responses. Just like on an episode of Iron Chef or Dance Fever, members of the interview team can then score candidates on each answer. Of course the job doesn't automatically have to be awarded to the highest scorer, but being able to compare parallel responses is a revealing measurement tool.

Technically Speaking

To Tape or Not To Tape?

Consider recording the interview. Using a video camera may intimidate the candidate or make your company seem a little too much like Big Brother. But many companies, including Xerox and Verizon, are now conducting initial interviews by telephone, and this is a natural time to record the proceedings. The recorded audio provides a chance to revisit any answers you might have missed the first time. Or, for decision makers with a scheduling conflict, interviews can be conducted by someone else at the company and listened to later. Either way, give full disclosure by making sure the candidate is aware the interview is being recorded.