

Preparing for and Conducting an Interview

To help ensure the validity and effectiveness of employment interviews, the interviewer must prepare in advance. Before implementing the interview process for a given position, the HR professional who will be asking the questions should complete the following preparations:

- Determine the critical success factors of the job.
- Rank—according to the job specifications—the most important qualities, experiences, education and characteristics that a successful candidate would possess.
- Make a list of qualities, skills and types of experience to use to screen resumes and job interview candidates.
- Select specific questions to determine whether an applicant possesses the critical success factors.
- Decide the type of interview process that will be used.
- Review beforehand the job description and the resume of each candidate to be interviewed.
- Schedule a planning meeting with the appropriate attendees, such as co-workers, an indirect but interested manager or internal customers of the position.
- Determine who will interview the candidates.
- Plan the interview and the follow-up process.
- Decide on the applicant screening questions for the telephone screens.
- Identify the appropriate questions for the post-interview assessment of candidates by each interviewer.

The most recent thinking on how to conduct job interviews recommends that **employers ask applicants about specific incidents in the workplace**. Therefore, questions should be designed **to show how the candidate has displayed the required skills in specific situations during his or her career**. Responses to such questions can provide enhanced glimpses into applicants' actual experiences.

Questioning should elicit information that will shed light on a candidate's ability to perform the job effectively. Many experts say it is best to ask open-ended questions ("Tell me about your relationship with your previous manager; how could it have been improved?") rather than closed-ended questions requiring only brief specific responses ("How many people reported to you?").

Open-ended questions encourage candidates to provide longer answers and to expand on their knowledge, strengths and job experiences. For interviewers, such questions can provide greater insight into a candidate's personality. They can also help employers gauge an applicant's ability to articulate his or her work experience, level of motivation, communication skills, ability to solve problems and degree of interest in the job.

Open-ended questions can provide a sense of an applicant's potential and whether the person would be a cultural fit. Following are some examples of open-ended questions:

- Tell me about your past work experience.
- What are you looking to gain from your next position?
- Why do you want to work for our company?
- Why did you leave your last job?
- Tell me about your relationship with your previous manager: How was it productive? How could it have been improved?
- Why was math your most difficult subject in school?
- Please describe your management style.

Closed-ended job interview questions can enable the employer to receive direct responses and specific information from the candidate, and they can help the interviewer control the direction of the interview. But such questions can have drawbacks:

- They do not encourage candidates to elaborate on their feelings or preferences toward particular topics.
- They limit candidates' ability to discuss their competencies.
- They can leave situations unanswered or unclear.
- They can be frustrating for candidates who may want to explain or state relevant information.

Following are some examples of closed-ended questions:

- How many years of experience do you have as a team leader?
- Have you ever worked from home?
- When did you leave your last job?
- Did you have a productive relationship with your previous manager?
- What was your best subject in school?
- What was your most difficult subject?
- What was your GPA?

Conducting the Interview:

A successful and effective interview is one in which both the interviewer and the interviewee receive accurate information and can make informed decisions about the applicant's suitability for the job.

The interview process can be stressful for both the interviewer and the interviewee. It is normal for an applicant to be nervous, so interviewers should try to put the person at ease from the moment he or she enters the room. By helping the interviewee feel relaxed and comfortable, the interviewer stands a better chance of obtaining a clear idea of the applicant's abilities and personality.

Before commencing with prepared questions, the interviewer could ease tensions by encouraging the applicant to talk about a particular interest—perhaps something on the person's resume. At this point the interviewer might also want to recap the position and what it entails. This can help the applicant answer questions more knowledgeably and consider again whether he or she is genuinely interested in the job.

Encouraging communication

To gain as much information as possible from an applicant, the interviewer should create an atmosphere that promotes communication. Following are suggestions for building rapport and fostering discussion:

- Set aside a quiet place for the interview.
- Schedule enough time so that the interview will not be rushed.
- Inform the candidate well in advance about the location and time of the interview.
- Greet the candidate with a pleasant smile and a firm handshake. Introduce yourself and anyone else who will be involved in the interview.
- Ask for permission to record the interview or take notes.
- Begin in a manner that provides a comfortable atmosphere for the candidate.
- Outline the interview objectives and structure.
- Try to ask questions that will facilitate discussion. Avoid questions requiring only a yes or no answer. Keep the questions open-ended so that the applicant has the opportunity to speak freely.
- Ask only job-related questions. Steer clear of personal, private and discriminatory questions.
- Start with easier questions and gradually build to more difficult or searching questions.
- Ask only one question at a time.
- If necessary, repeat the question, but try not to rephrase it.
- Do not lead, prompt, interrupt or help the candidate find an answer.
- Avoid facial expressions that could lead to an answer.
- Listen carefully to the candidate's answers.
- Probe for the applicant's ability to manage and work in teams.
- Assess whether the candidate would fit with the organization's culture.

Follow-up questions

Asking follow-up questions—also called probing—can be necessary when the interviewer does not fully understand a response, when answers are vague or ambiguous, or when the interviewer require more specific information from the applicant.

Probing questions inviting more detail often begin with "what" or "how." Questions inviting personal reflection often begin with "do you" or "are you." Questions beginning with "why" may put the respondent on the defensive or result in little useful information and require additional probing. It is helpful to be familiar with some techniques of probing.

Here are a few examples:

- Could you please tell me more about . . . ?
- I'm not quite sure I understood. Could you tell me more about that?
- I'm not certain what you mean by . . . Could you give me some examples?
- Could you tell me more about your thinking on that?

- You mentioned . . . Could you tell me more about that? What stands out in your mind about that?
- This is what I thought I heard . . . Did I understand you correctly?
- What I hear you saying is . . .
- Can you give me an example of . . . ?
- What makes you feel that way?
- You just told me about . . . I'd also like to know about . . .

Reflection questions

Reflection questions are designed to help the interviewer achieve a deeper understanding of the applicant's responses. Such questions rarely evoke defensiveness; applicants want the interviewer to understand their responses. Reflection questions might begin with phrases such as:

- Let me say back to you what I thought I heard you say . . .
- That made you think (or feel) . . . ?
- You mean that . . . ?

The potential pluses of reflection questions are varied. They can:

- Demonstrate to the applicant that his or her responses are understood.
- Rephrase the applicant's response in clearer or more articulate language.
- Let the applicant know the interviewer is paying attention.
- Provide the applicant with an additional opportunity to elaborate on his or her responses.

Closing the interview

A popular method of closing the interview is to say the interview is ending and to offer the candidate the opportunity to ask questions. This will enable the candidate to gain clarification on aspects of the position and on employment conditions such as hours, salary and benefits. The interviewer should answer the candidate's questions as frankly as possible. If it is not an appropriate time to discuss compensation—perhaps others are present—the interviewer can suggest a follow-up discussion. Interviewers should be prepared to provide documents describing the company and its benefits.

In closing an interview, the interviewer may want to:

- Ask if the candidate is interested in the job based on the information provided during the interview.
- Ask about availability.
- Ask for a list of people who can be contacted for references.
- Explain the time frame for the rest of the interviews, the subsequent steps in the process and when a decision is likely to be made.
- Explain how to get in touch with the interviewer and when to expect to hear from him or her.
- Walk the candidate to the door and thank the person for the interview.

Such steps can ensure the applicant is left with a positive impression of the interviewer and the organization. After interviews, the interviewer should update the assessment grids for all active candidates.

Follow-up interviews

Organizations often bring certain applicants back for second or even third interviews for a number of reasons. Sometimes the employer may want to confirm that an applicant is the ideal candidate for the position, or the employer may be trying to decide between two or more qualified applicants.

An interviewer conducts first interviews to screen applicants based on their general qualifications. Once the interviewer narrows the selection to specific candidates, he or she then needs to apply additional screening methods at a follow-up interview level to further ascertain a candidate's specific qualities and potential cultural fit. A follow-up interview is also an opportunity for candidates to do further research on whether the company is an organization they want to work for.

During the follow-up interview phase, the interviewer should have specific goals in mind and may want to invite other staff members to take part in the interview.

The follow-up interview is usually the final step before extending an offer of employment to a candidate. If the candidate passes muster, the employer will then extend an offer orally and in writing.