

# How to Interview Job Candidates

The personal interview is the most important step in the screening process. Conducting it successfully requires objectivity, good judgment, and careful planning.

During the interview you have to accomplish four important goals.

1. Determine if the person has the ability and skills necessary to do the job.
2. Find out if the person has the motivation and initiative to do the job well.
3. Learn enough about the candidate to judge whether the individual, the job, and the company will be compatible with one another.
4. Convince desirable candidates to risk leaving their present job to come to work for you.

To achieve these goals, you have to ask the right questions in the right way; listen to and interpret the candidate's replies; keep track of his or her strengths and weaknesses; answer questions and provide information about the job and the company. Finally, you have to have an objective way of comparing one candidate to another. .

## Plan the Interview

Decide whether you want to talk to several applicants in one day or spread the interviews out over a longer period of time. In either case, choose a quiet location and keep staff members and other visitors away. Interruptions distract the applicant and undermine your concentration. Schedule enough time before each interview to go over your notes on the individual candidate, and allow enough time after each interview to evaluate the candidate's responses.

Learn as much as possible about candidates before the interview by familiarizing yourself with their resumes and cover letters. Note what areas of their background and experience you want to explore in detail, and decide what testing, if any, will be necessary.

Decide, too, what you will tell applicants about the job. Be sure to include information about responsibilities, problem areas, opportunities for advancement, incentives, working hours, job location, and any other pertinent information.

During the interviews you will have to question candidates to draw out information about their experience, motivation, drive, dependability, attention to detail, and ability to get along with other people. Some of your questions will be directed at all applicants; others will have to be tailored to the individual candidate. The interview will be more productive if you plan these questions in advance.

To get candidates to “open up,” put them at ease at the beginning of the interview. Introduce yourself, offer to take their coat (if your secretary hasn’t already done so), and ask them to be seated. Start your conversation by asking a neutral question, such as “Did you have any difficulty finding us?” or by mentioning some mutual interest or experience you’ve learned about from the person’s resume.

Then, move on to the heart of the interview. Ask open-ended questions that will require the candidate to give more than a “yes” or “no” answer. For the best results, start with general questions and questions that are easy to answer. Proceed gradually to more specific questions, and reserve questions that might be particularly difficult to answer for last.

The attached Interview Questions Checklist beginning on page 20 will help you decide what to ask and how to phrase your questions. Choose the questions that are most appropriate for the circumstances. You may use them as is, or adapt them to your own conversational or interview style.

Develop an interview worksheet to keep track of what questions you want to ask each candidate.

## How to Listen During Interview

Unfortunately, the human ear and the human mind don’t always function together. While the candidate is answering one question, you may be trying to think of what to ask next, or how you’re going to tell your spouse that her brother Ron just isn’t the man for the job.

To make an accurate evaluation of the individual’s responses you must give him or her your full attention. Train yourself to listen not only to what the person says, but how it is said. Note facial expressions and gestures; these can help you determine the person’s feelings about what he is saying. Be careful, too, that you don’t anticipate the person’s answers to your questions or ask a second question before the applicant has had time to answer the first.

Silence during the interview can be beneficial. Often, the candidate will start talking just to fill the void and give information that he would not otherwise have revealed.

If you disagree with or don’t understand a statement a candidate has made, ask for an explanation. Sometimes, if the person comes from a distant locality, he or she may attach a different meaning than you do to a particular word or figure of speech. Always clarify such inconsistencies before you assume the candidate is wrong. And, don’t argue with or correct the person.

# How to Evaluate Candidates

During the interview, you will begin to form impressions about the applicant's strengths and weaknesses, depth of knowledge, goals, motivations, sociability, and character. If you don't think you will remember your reasons for these impressions later on, make notes, but make them very brief. A word or two jotted down after the appropriate question on the interview worksheet will be sufficient to jog your memory when you write up a thorough evaluation at the conclusion of the interview.

Your complete evaluation of the candidate should be made as soon as the interview is over. If you postpone this task, you're likely to forget important details about the person's abilities, character traits, etc; or you may confuse one applicant with another.

Your evaluations of candidates should be standardized and include a system for rating applicants for comparison. One consideration is to go through the resumes and grade each one A, B, C, D, based on experience and technical skills required for the job position as summarized in the ad. If you have ten or more A's consider further screening via a telephone interview before asking your top six to ten in for a formal interview. It has been recommended that to find the most suitable candidate one needs to interview eight candidates to make sure they will get the job done and fit into the Companies culture.

Some hiring experts recommend sorting resumes into three piles, one the nos, two the maybes and three the must interview. Good chance that the last stack will yield plenty of potential candidates. If not, you can always sift through the maybe list one more time.

Make a conscientious attempt to weed *all* prejudice out of your evaluation. Discrimination because of race, religion, age, or sex is illegal. It is also counterproductive. A person's skin color, ethnic background, or sex has absolutely nothing to do with the ability to do a job well.

Don't let your personal opinion about a person's weight, height, alma mater, regional accent, etc., influence your decision, either. When you size up a candidate the only thing that matters is whether or not the applicant can do the job and is willing to do the job to the best of his or her ability.

## Second Interviews

If the job opening is at a professional or executive level, you may want to call two or three candidates back for a second interview before making your final choice. At this time, the applicant may be shown your operations, introduced to a key executive or potential subordinates, or asked for suggestions about the way he or she would deal with specific problems or challenges that may arise on the job. In most cases, this second interview will be final opportunity for people in our company to get to know the candidate.

If the person who will be conducting the second interview is meeting the candidate for the first time, he or she may want to ask questions similar to those asked during the first interview. If the same person who conducted the first interview will be leading the second interview, he or she should use the time to clear up second thoughts about the candidate and to question the applicant more closely about experience, motivation, or other factors that are critical to job performance.

At the conclusion of the interview, whoever has conducted it should fill out a new worksheet evaluation of the individual. Results of the candidate's two interviews should be compared, and each contender should be compared with one another before making the final choice.

## Reference Checking

Before making your final decision, make a point of checking references thoroughly it is the only way you can find out if a candidate has falsified or misrepresented information, or if a former employer has had a problem with the candidate. Be sure to get candidate's permission before conducting the reference check.

The best way to check references is on the telephone. Phone calls let you get some feeling for the enthusiasm or hesitation the person puts into his or her remarks. Moreover, people are reluctant to take the time to respond to letters, and are even more reluctant to put negative remarks about an individual in writing.

When you call former employers, try to get through to the person who supervised the applicant. Personnel departments often will give out only information about the dates of employment. If the job warrants the investment of time and effort, ask all of the people you contact for references if they know of anyone else who is familiar with the candidate's work.

Contacting the references is the easiest part of the check. Getting useful information from the people you contact is more difficult. You will have the most success if you use a combination of factual questions, open-ended questions, and questions that indicate you have some hesitation about hiring the candidate and would like to know if others have had the same reservations about the candidate

"When in doubt, don't hire  
.....keep looking"

-Jim Collins,  
Author of Good to Great

"As an acid test of hiring, ask yourself  
how would you feel having the candidate  
working for your competition instead  
of you"

-Harvey B. Mackay  
Author of Swim with the Sharks  
Without Being Eaten Alive