

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK – WORK HISTORY

What is the longest tenure you've had with any one employer?

A straightforward answer is optimal, and the length of tenure may make a difference if you are looking for someone who has not “job-hopped” during his or her career.

If you are interviewing a “job-hopper,” the applicant who answers this question honestly, but then offers a reasonable explanation of why he or she changed jobs so frequently may also be worth pursuing. A “reasonable explanation” might include the fact that the applicant’s spouse is a member of the military and the applicant was forced to find work in each new location to which they were transferred.

Tell me about the biggest frustration or failure you have had in your career.

The answer the applicant gives to this question can give you clues as to whether that person will be able to handle the responsibilities of the position for which you are interviewing them. Listen closely to how they respond related to the day-to-day functions of the current position.

What you are looking for is a person who can articulate taking a challenging situation and turning it into a positive. Conversely, you will want to steer clear of the person who seems to “whine” or complain about certain personality types with which they have worked, or someone who seems to have an overblown sense of entitlement related to their job.

Why did you leave your previous job?

You may get an answer that indicates the person couldn’t help losing the job, such as being laid off as the result of downsizing. If so, then you can follow up with questions related to the scope of the reduction in force that affected that applicant. (If only one person was laid off – the one you are interviewing -- you may want to consider some follow-up questions as to why they think that happened.)

If the applicant indicates that they left, or are leaving, because they cannot grow in their current position, this will warrant some follow-up questioning as well. How long were they in that position? What positions did they aspire to being promoted into? Why do they believe they cannot grow with the current company? The answers to these questions can lead to some revealing information as to unrealistic expectations that the applicant may hold – in other words, they believe they should be promoted, but their superiors, for whatever reasons, do not agree. This is what you will want to try to uncover.

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What did you like best (and least) about your previous position?

This answer will provide you with some insight as to how the applicant views his or her career overall. The applicant should be able to easily provide you with at least one reason why he or she liked their previous position. Be wary of those who have nothing nice to say about where they worked before. Consider also what motivates an applicant to say only that they liked the people with whom they worked before – was there nothing about the actual job functions that turned them on? If not, perhaps this person doesn't really like to work, and if that is the case, he or she will most likely not enjoy any position.

If an applicant responds to this question with an answer akin to, "I liked the autonomy of the position," you will need to consider how much supervision is inherent in the current position – will they feel there is too much direct supervision? Conversely, if they respond with something that indicates that they really liked the level of support they received in their last job; follow up with some questions that will allow you to determine if this person needs more supervision than they will receive in the position for which you are interviewing them.

What the applicant liked least about the previous position will also yield many clues about the type of employee this person is likely to be. Listen closely for answers that indicate a belief that they were not provided with enough support, particularly if the current position does not offer any type of clerical or administrative assistance. Also pay close attention to answers that seem to say the employee has a difficult time with certain structures, especially issues such as working hours or required overtime.

What were your starting and ending salary levels?

With this question, you will want to make sure that the applicant's answers match what he or she indicated on their application or salary history. Be prepared to follow up with the previous company to ensure that the information provided is truthful and accurate. Be on the lookout for applicants who seem to side-step this question, or those who don't seem to remember how much money they were making. Everyone should know what their salary level was, and there could be a problem if the applicant doesn't appear to know his or hers.

If the applicant indicates that they took a cut in salary, explore this issue in more detail – why was a reduction necessary? Was it due to the company falling on hard times, or was it the result of a demotion? Be careful also of answers that indicate the applicant advanced rapidly in their previous position – if your company will not be able to provide such rapid advancement, you could end up with an employee who is unhappy with a system of promotion that does not work as quickly as what they have been accustomed to.

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QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK – WORK ETHIC

What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?

As this is one of the most common interview questions, the applicant should be expecting it and be prepared to answer it. If they aren't, this is your first clue about that person's ability to anticipate what lies ahead of them.

The applicant should be able to articulate something that they believe makes them a good employee, such as, "My greatest strength is being able to understand the requirements of a job easily and to meet those requirements consistently." Another good response would be, "I'm a very organized person and that helps me to manage my work load and always know where I am with a project."

Applicants who are clueless enough to answer the weaknesses question with a remark about not being able to get up on time, or not being a morning person could be sending you a signal about whether they will report for duty as expected. The applicant who gives provides you with a weakness that can also be one of their strengths is probably a good choice. An example of this is the person who says their greatest strength is being organized, but then tells you that their weakness may be that they're *too* organized. This is a person who can turn problems into solutions.

What makes you angry?

Naturally, you will want to avoid applicants who indicate that minor issues or setbacks cause them to lose control, but with this question you are also looking for an answer that gives you an idea of how that person handles their anger. A good response is one where the applicant tells you that while they may get angry on occasion, they deal with that anger by stepping away from the situation for a brief period of time in order to allow themselves to regain control. You want an applicant who knows how to deal with their anger or to channel it into something productive.

Be wary of the applicant who says they never get angry – we all have our boiling point, and such an answer cannot possibly be truthful. Be careful, too, of the applicant who indicates that they bottle their anger and never address it in a constructive way – these could be the employees who eventually lose control at work, suffering inappropriate outbursts that do not seem warranted by the current situation.

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How many hours do you normally work in a typical week?

The answer to this question can give you an idea of whether the applicant can manage his or her workload properly – if they are working too many hours, it could mean that they don't work "smart" during business hours, and are, therefore, frequently requesting overtime. Of course, you will also want to listen carefully to the answer in order to avoid hiring a "clock-watcher" who puts in the minimum number of hours whether the work is done or not. The best answer you can get to this question is one that indicates that the applicant is willing to work however many hours are necessary to get the job done.

Do you work best on your own, or as part of a team?

The best answer to this question will depend a great deal on your company structure, and whether you want an independent worker or one who can function optimally as part of a team. If you are looking for a team player and the applicant indicates that he or she fits that bill, follow up with questions related to types and sizes of teams on which they have participated previously. Ask questions about how that person feels not only as a member of such a team or committee, but how they view others who run those work groups – do you sense a respect for leadership in their answer, or do you get the sense that they will constantly challenge the team leader?

If you are looking for someone who needs to work more independently, particularly in our current age of telecommuting and flexible schedules, you will want to ferret out whether the person has the necessary self-motivation skills to meet critical deadlines. Follow up questions related to how often that person has missed a deadline in the last year, and how often their projects are completed ahead of schedule can give you a better idea if that person works well autonomously.

What stresses you out?

We all have stress triggers, so avoid the applicant who says they never get stressed out – that cannot possibly be true. Listen carefully to the answers you are given in order to weed out those people who seem to react negatively to changing priorities, deadlines being pushed-back, or members of management with whom they will need to work and who are known to frequently change their mind about what they want in a work product.

Additionally, what you want the applicant to provide you with is a clear idea of how they handle stress. Maybe they work out every morning before work, or have a ritual for listening to music on the way to work in order to show up relaxed and ready for the day. The applicant who can inject some humor into his or her answer may also be someone who has a positive outlook on life in general, which can make them a better employee in stressful work environments.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK – INTEREST IN COMPANY

Why are you interested in this job/our company?

The answer you get to this question should provide you with an indication that the applicant understands the requirements of the job as they were posted, and that they are able to tie their experience and skills to those requirements. The applicant who has obviously researched the company ahead of time should be given preference, because this shows a willingness to do some work on their own in order to be more knowledgeable about the organization.

Avoid applicants who tell you that they are interested because the job is close to home, or because the hours will allow them to make it to their other job or to pick up their children on time. While these are valid concerns, they should not be the sole basis for seeking employment with your company.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

While this may seem to be a “cookie-cutter” interview question, there is a reason that it is fairly standard fare. The answer to this question can tell you a great deal about your applicant. If they respond with an answer about their own personal goals (“I want to return to school,” or “I plan to get married and have children”), then their focus is obviously not career-oriented, but rather they probably see the job as a means to achieving their own individual ambitions. These folks are looking for stepping stones to what they want, and may not assign a high enough priority to the goals of the organization.

The best answers to this question will incorporate the company – “I would like to see the system you are hiring a person to develop fully functional and running smoothly,” or “In five years, I see myself as being the subject matter expert in the area of this position.”

You will need to be able to intuit whether or not the applicant is looking for unwarranted advancement by their responses, as well. Those who respond with, “I hope to have a promotion to ___ position by that time,” could be tipping you off to an unreasonable expectation of promotion based only on the length of time with the company, rather than by their hard work. After all, in terms of a career, five years is really not that long and these days, promotions based solely on tenure are practically unheard of.

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Do you have questions about our company?

The answer to this question will alert you as to how much the applicant already knows about the company, and whether or not they did any research ahead of time. The applicant's answers can also be an indicator of what they consider to be important about their job – if they ask questions about how long their lunch hour will be, or how much overtime is expected, they may not be willing to put in longer hours when it is necessary to do so.

On the other hand, if they ask questions about the company's earnings, how long the executive management team has been in place, if there have been any recent reductions in force, then you can be assured that this person is looking for a job that they can keep for awhile. A person who is looking for a "home" in a job, somewhere they can stay for many years, will want to interview you as much as you want to interview them, in order to find a good match for both the company and the applicant.

What makes you the best candidate for this position?

Here, again, the applicant should be able to tie his or her experience, skills and accomplishments back to the functions of the position for which you are interviewing. Generic responses such, "I always come to work on time," or "I am a hard worker," may indicate that the applicant really doesn't have a clear understanding of the job requirements.

Look for those applicants who give you responses along the lines of, "I know you are looking for a person who can design and develop a process for doing ____, and I did that for my previous employer, on time and under budget."

Why do you believe you're a good fit for our company's culture?

Because you want an employee who fits in with your company's environment, you will want the applicant to tie his or her work ethic into what they perceive that to be. This will give you an idea of whether they truly have a sense of your culture and if they can offer concrete reasons for why they would be a good match. Finding the right candidate is not always a matter of matching skills and experience, but oftentimes requires a certain personality type. A good candidate will pick up on what you are looking for and will be able to offer clear reasons for why his or her personality is the perfect fit.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK – PERSONAL GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

How will this job fit into your overall career plan?

The answer the applicant provides to this question can give you an indication of how important a career is over all to that person. Be aware of responses that may indicate that the applicant wants to retire early or is merely looking for a job to bring in a paycheck while they pursue something else.

Tune in also to responses that indicate that the applicant considers this position only as a stepping-stone to something else that they would much rather do. While they *should* see the position as a stepping stone of sorts, they must also be willing to contribute a reasonable amount of time and effort to achieving future goals. Listen carefully to get a sense of whether this job is truly in line with that they ultimately hope to achieve. Avoid applicants who tell you things such as they hope to write the “Great American Novel,” but need to earn money to do so – unless your position is one that involves writing or journalism, the applicant’s goals could be at odds with the company’s goals.

What other positions are you considering?

If the applicant is all over the board in his or her job search, you will have a clear indicator that they are simply looking for a paycheck and not a home. If the applicant’s other pursuits are focused on the same types of positions in the same or similar industry as yours, then you will know that they are truly looking for a job where they can exercise their knowledge and expertise in a specific career field.

What contributions do you believe you could make in the first year of this position?

Look for unrealistic answers to this question – it takes time to build new processes or to completely overhaul a system. If the applicant wants to change the world overnight, then they have given you a clue as to potential unrealistic expectations.

On the other hand, you want the applicant to be able to articulate goals for the position that line up with the company’s goals, and that seem reasonably achievable in your environment. The applicant should refer back to the posted job requirements when answering this question, building on those requirements to give you a sense that he or she understands what you are looking for both in the immediate future and long-term.

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What do you believe promotions should be based on?

Obviously, hard work and dependability should be part of the applicant's answer to this question, but you will also want the applicant to go beyond the obvious responses and to let you know that they understand that promotions don't just happen overnight. You should look for the applicant who understands that sometimes even though promotions may be warranted, the company may not always be able to promote an employee on merit alone, and must sometimes take earnings and overall company performance into consideration. This is the employee who will be more likely to understand that the overall health of the company has a greater importance than the individual needs of the employees.

What are your short-term and long-term salary goals?

With his or her answer to this question, the applicant should give you a sense that they know what they're worth, and also that they completely understand the requirements of the position before talking about money. A smart applicant may actually tell you that they are unable to answer the question without knowing more about the job.

Savvy applicants will also have researched salary ranges in the industry, the specific job field, and the geographic region ahead of time, and the answer you receive will give you an indication as to whether they have done so. Applicants who provide you with a well-researched and well-considered response to this question are those who are most likely to be worth what they believe they should make.

Be wary of those applicants who believe their salary should drastically increase in a relatively short period of time, as these tend to end up being the employees who have unrealistic expectations for promotions and increases.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD NEVER ASK

Based on federal law, you may never ask an applicant questions related to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, birthplace, age, disability, marital, or family status.

Samples of Illegal Questions:

1. Where were you born?
2. Are you a United States citizen?
3. What is your native language?
4. How long have you lived in the United States?
5. Do you have children, or plan to have children?
6. Who watches your children when you travel?
7. How long have you been married?
8. Do you drink alcohol or smoke?
9. Are you a member of a military reserve unit or the National Guard?
10. Who do you live with?
11. How tall are you?
12. How much do you weigh?
13. Have you had any illnesses or recent surgeries?
14. Have you ever been arrested?
15. What religion do you practice?
16. How often do you go to church?
17. Do you belong to any clubs or social organizations?
18. How long do you plan to work before you retire?
19. Is this your maiden name?
20. What do your parents (or spouse) do for a living?