Questions To Ask In an Interview
Questions To Ask In an Interview

An Exclusive White Paper From The

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Winning Publication: Navigating a Reduction in Force Without Getting Sued, a California Employer Advisor Special Report

Awarded by: Communications Concepts, Inc.

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More about the award | More about California Employer Advisor Online

2007

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More about the award

2006

Winning Publication: California Employer Advisor Online

Awarded by: Communications Concepts, Inc.

Award: APEX Award for Publication Excellence in the category of New Web & Intranet Sites

More about the award | More about California Employer Advisor Online

2008

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Winning Article: Three-part blogging series (California Employer Advisor)

Awarded by: Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Foundation

Award: Second Place in the Best Instructional Reporting Category

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2005

Winning Publication: Cal/OSHA Compliance Advisor

Awarded by: Communications Concepts, Inc.

Award: APEX Award for Publication Excellence in the category of New Newsletters

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2000

Winning Article: Three-part Series on cutting workers’ compensation costs (California Employer Advisor)

Awarded by: Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Foundation

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1996

Winning Article: Two-part series on employee interview questions (California Employer Advisor)

Awarded by: Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Foundation

Award: First Place in the Best Instructional Reporting Category

More about the award | More about California Employer Advisor Online

Winning Publication: Employer Response to Crisis and Emergency, a California Employer Advisor Special Report

Awarded by: Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Foundation
This session is about interviewing skills. Why is it important to be a skilled interviewer? Because after you’ve screened résumés and applications, conducting face-to-face interviews is the next essential step to help you determine which of the qualified candidates is actually the best person for the job.

Furthermore, when you make good hiring decisions, you, your department, and the organization benefit. When you make poor choices, everyone suffers.

That makes interviewing an important part of your job. You need to know how to plan and conduct effective interviews in order to learn all you possibly can about job candidates so that you can make the best hiring decisions.
The objective of this training session is to help you conduct more effective interviews. At the end of the training session you will be able to:

- Recognize legal and policy issues related to interviewing;
- Identify styles and types of interviews;
- Plan an effective interview strategy;
- Develop good interview questions;
- Conduct successful interviews; and
- Take precautions to prevent discrimination.
Why Interviews Are Important

Interviews give you the opportunity to:

• Meet job candidates in person
• Assess strengths and weaknesses
• Make the best hiring decisions

Slide Show Notes

Why are interviews important? Because you need to take advantage of this in-person time to learn all you can about job candidates so that you can choose the one who is the best fit for your job opening and your organization. In specific terms:

• Interviews give you an opportunity to meet job candidates face to face.
• They help you assess candidates’ strengths, weaknesses, and suitability for the job.
• They provide you with the information you need for making the best hiring decisions.

Think about the job interviews you’ve conducted that changed your mind about candidates. In fact, how many times has your initial opinion, based only on a candidate’s résumé and references, been changed by the interview process?

Ask trainees to talk about situations in which interviews made all the difference in their hiring decision. For example, perhaps an applicant looked really good on paper but was a disappointment in the interview. Or perhaps an application and résumé weren’t too inspiring, but the candidate’s real strengths and qualifications came shining through during the interview.
Make sure you conduct interviews in compliance with the law and company policy as follows:

- California and federal fair employment laws prohibit discrimination in hiring based on any protected characteristic, including race, color, national origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, or disability. The laws apply to all job interviews.

- This organization is fully committed to equal employment opportunity, or EEO. Our EEO policy prohibits discrimination in the hiring process, including in job interviews.

- Applicants who feel that they have been discriminated against during an interview can file a complaint with the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) or the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

- If the DFEH or EEOC believes an applicant has been discriminated against during an interview, they will help the applicant file a lawsuit against your organization. When that happens, there is the potential for liability and costly damages. Win or lose, there will be costly legal fees.

Make sure you know your organization’s EEO policy, especially the provisions that apply to interviewing.

*Review your organization’s EEO policy, highlighting provisions that apply specifically to interviewing.*
The two main interviewing styles are:

• The traditional interview, which uses broad-based questions, such as “Why are you interested in coming to work for our company?” or “Tell me about the strengths that you will bring to the job.” This type of interview tends to focus on learning whether the candidate possesses the skills needed to perform the job, the enthusiasm to do the job, and the ability to work with others in this particular setting.

• The behavioral interview, which is used to find out what past behaviors the candidate has exhibited that will benefit your company. This type of interview demands a lot of “show me” answers from the candidate when they are asked, “Tell me about an experience you had where you were able to demonstrate how organized you are.” Or “When you were employed by XYZ Corporation, did you ever have to find a way to deal with conflict between members of your department?” The belief is that past behaviors are an excellent way to predict the candidate’s future behavior.

Ask trainees to comment on these two styles. Under what circumstances and for which types of jobs do they use each style? In their experience, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?
You may also use different types of interviews depending on your objectives for the meeting. The interview types we will be talking about are:

- Screening interviews
- Targeted interviews
- Situational interviews, and
- Group interviews.

We will go into these interview types in more detail in the following slides.
Screening Interview

• A quick check
• Usually over the phone
• Can be conducted via computer

Slide Show Notes

• Screening interviews are usually conducted either in person or over the phone. These interviews are a quick check to see if the candidate has the basic qualifications you are looking for.

• The telephone interview is the most common way to perform a screening interview. It can help to save time and money by determining for both the candidate and the employer if there is enough of a match to schedule a face-to-face interview.

• A screening interview may also be done via the computer and usually involves accessing a website to answer a series of multiple-choice questions. Candidates can be screened depending on their answers to these questions.
Targeted Interview

• Most common type
• Questions targeted to the position
• Candidates can “interview” the employer
• Both know if the job is a good fit

Slide Show Notes

• The targeted interview is the most common type of job interview. It is what we know as the traditional type of interview where a candidate meets face to face with an interviewer in an office setting.

• During this type of interview, questions are targeted directly to the position being offered, so interviewers can get a good sense if the candidate is a good match for the job.

• Not only is this interview good for interviewers, but it is also a chance for the candidate to “interview” the employer to make sure the position will suit the candidate well.

• Upon completion of this interview, both the candidate and the employer should have a good idea if the job will be a good fit.
In situational interviews, candidates are given scenarios of situations they may face when they work for our organization. Their responses are compared with standard responses that have previously been set.

The candidate may be asked to "role play" certain scenarios to assess specific skills.

This type of interview is beneficial when filling the position of customer service representative or a similar role.
Slide Show Notes

• Finally, group interviews allow for a group of candidates to be interviewed together at the same time.

• This type of interview shows a candidate’s potential for leadership. The interviewers can observe how each candidate reacts when in a group setting.

• The interviewer may ask a candidate to interact with other candidates by discussing an issue with the other candidates, solving a problem collectively, or discussing qualifications in front of other candidates.
Now let’s look at effective planning strategies for successful interviews.

- First, determine key criteria essential for performing the job well, including specific skills, required experience, education and/or other training, personal characteristics, and so on. To do this, you will need to consult the job description.

- Also, prepare a positive description of the job and the workplace. Be sure to explain the essential functions of the job and your expectations for successful job performance.

- Next, create an outline. By following the same general outline for each interview, you can ensure that you treat each applicant equally. Also, develop a list of interview questions. We’ll cover interview questions in a few minutes.

- Finally, arrange for a quiet, private place to conduct interviews, such as a conference room or interview room. If you use your office, make sure it’s in presentable condition.
Other ways to plan your interviews include:

- Being sure to set aside enough time for each interview. In most cases, that means at least 30 minutes. Remember to allow time for the applicant to ask questions. And if the interview will include a short tour of your facility or work area, be sure to allow time for that, too.

- Anticipating interruptions. Make sure co-workers know you will be temporarily unavailable and designate an experienced employee or fellow supervisor to cover for you while you are interviewing. Also arrange to have your calls held. If you use a cell phone, turn it off during the interview and forward your calls to a designated employee who can take messages and alert you in case of an emergency.

- Making sure you have the supplies you’ll need. You’ll want to take notes during interviews or make notes right after each interview, so you’ll need paper and a working pen at hand. You might also want a pitcher of water and some glasses.

- Finally, allowing sufficient time between interviews for making additional notes. Doing so will help you distinguish one candidate from another later.

*Ask trainees to talk about anything else they do to plan for an interview.*
Develop Interview Questions

- Review applications and resumés
- Prepare questions
- Use open-ended questions
- Plan for easy follow-up

Slide Show Notes

Good interview questions are the key to a successful discussion. Here’s how to develop effective interview questions:

- Review applications and resumés so that you can ask specific questions about previous jobs, duties performed, specialized skills and training, and related matters.

- Prepare a list of questions. Write them down so that you won’t forget to ask all of them during the interview. Make sure your questions relate to job qualifications and abilities. For example, come up with a scenario specific to the job you need to fill and ask candidates to tell you how they handled this specific scenario in their last job. Or you can ask “What do you think is the most important responsibility of a person in this job?”

- Create open-ended questions in order to get useful information. Phrase questions that encourage explanation, not just “Yes” or “No” answers. For example, ask “What parts of your performance in your current or last job are you most proud of?” rather than “Were you satisfied with your performance in your current or last job?”

- Finally, develop questions that are easy to follow up in order to get more details. For example, “I’m not sure what you mean by ‘challenging’. Could you explain?”
Slide Show Notes

Here are several key questions to ask during an interview:

- What specific duties do you perform in your current job?
- How do you spend a typical workday?
- Tell me about a major accomplishment or project of which you are proud.
- Can you describe an instance when you worked as a member of a team?
- What skills from your current job do you think you’d be able to use in this job?
- Why are you leaving your current job?

Think about a specific job you supervise. What are some good interview questions for that job?

Ask trainees to choose a specific job they supervise and spend 5 minutes writing interview questions for that job.
Now it’s time to see if you remember the types of interviews we reviewed earlier. See if you can match the interview type at the left with its characteristic at the right. Here are the correct answers—did you get them all correct?

- **Group**—shows leadership potential
- **Situational**—good for customer service positions
- **Targeted**—most common type
- **Screening**—a quick check
Slide Show Notes

At this point, make sure you understand:

• The different interview styles,

• The employment laws and company policies regarding interviews,

• How to plan for successful interviews and how to develop good interview questions.
Now let’s look at how to conduct an effective interview.

- Begin the interview by greeting applicants with a smile and handshake. Tell them you are glad to see them, and thank them for expressing interest in the company.
- Introduce yourself by name and title, and make sure you are correctly pronouncing the applicant’s name.
- Open the interview with very brief small talk—for example, asking whether the applicant found his or her way easily, making a comment on the weather, or some other appropriate icebreaker.
- Finally, talk a little about the organization, including products and services, how your department and the job fit into the big picture, and a little about the corporate culture.
Slide Show Notes

As you move past the introductory material and into the main part of the interview, follow these steps:

• Give an overview of the job. You can get into the specifics later in the interview.

• Show interest in the applicant. Make eye contact and pay full attention.

• Listen actively and encourage the candidate to talk as much as possible. Listen specifically for:
  – What the person is enthusiastic about;
  – Topics the person avoids or shows discomfort about; *and*
  – How the person communicates. For example, is he or she clear and organized or vague and uncertain?

• Also, observe the candidate’s behavior and body language. These unspoken messages are often very revealing.

*Divide your training group into pairs. Have each pair role-play a job interview, with one trainee playing the supervisor and the other, the job candidate. Have them act out only the first few minutes of the interview during which they cover the first five points. Then have them switch roles. When they are finished, ask each trainee to evaluate his or her partner’s performance.*
Slide Show Notes

Follow these additional tips as you continue your interview:

• Focus the discussion on the candidate’s ability to do the job. Be specific about job duties, qualifications, and so forth.

• Avoid stereotyping. Interview the individual, not a member of a group.

• Allow silence. Silence can be beneficial, because it allows both you and the candidate time to formulate thoughtful responses, and because it allows you to choose your next question.

• Take unobtrusive notes during the interview. After the interview you can flesh out your notes, but be sure to get key information down during the interview. Your notes will not only help you choose the best candidate but will also provide helpful documentation should any questions arise about the fairness of the interview.
Slide Show Notes

Once you’ve finished the main part of the interview, bring the session to a smooth close with these steps:

- Ask candidates if they have any additional questions about the job or the organization.
- Explain how and when the organization will notify candidates to let them know whether they got the job.
- Give the expected start date for the job to help candidates anticipate any scheduling conflicts.
- Tell candidates about possible next steps such as reference checks, preemployment testing, or interviews with other company representatives such as your boss or other supervisors.
- Thank candidates for their time and effort. No matter how well or poorly someone did in an interview, he or she at least deserves your thanks.
- Finally, escort candidates back to the main reception area. This is a simple step, but it shows the courtesy, respect, and care that supervisors in our organization demonstrate toward the people they work with.
At the end of each interview, take a few moments to review your interview notes with the following ideas in mind:

- Your notes should be factual. In other words, document your questions and the key elements of the applicant’s responses.

- Avoid any opinions or personal biases in your note-taking. If your notes are ever subpoenaed in a lawsuit, this kind of information could be cast in a bad light and put forth as evidence of discriminatory intentions on your part.

- Make sure that you note only job-related information. For example, there is no need to note information about the way the applicant is dressed or groomed unless these matters are directly related to the job, such as in the case of a customer service employee or someone who is being hired to work in reception and will be the face of the organization to the public.

- Finally, keep your interview notes for all applicants on file for at least 1 year. If discrimination charges are brought, your notes will help you defend your hiring decision.
Slide Show Notes

In addition to reviewing your notes after each interview, you might wish to evaluate each candidate in some useful, standard ways, such as these:

- Use your list of interview questions to rate each applicant against each question on a 5-point scale where 5 = excellent, 4 = superior, 3 = good, 2 = average, and 1 = poor.
- Alternatively, create a list of job qualifications and evaluate candidates on those job-related criteria using the same five-point rating scale.
- Another alternative is to use a rating sheet that shows traits that the applicant “must” have as well as those that you “would like” to see. Each “would like” criterion should be weighted to show relative importance. This will help make the hiring process more objective and can help you choose—particularly when you have several good candidates.
- Be sure all evaluations and remarks are strictly job related. Do not include any references to an applicant’s race, color, national origin, age, sex, disability, sexual orientation, marital status, or any other topics that could lead to discrimination charges.
- Finally, whichever method you choose, use the same evaluation format for all applicants for a particular job.

Of course, if your organization already has an interview evaluation form, use that one.

*If your organization uses an interview evaluation form, distribute samples to trainees and discuss the form.*
Slide Show Notes

Remember these important interviewing “don’ts”:

- Don’t ask discriminatory questions. Any questions about protected groups (including race, religion, age, ethnic group, national origin or ancestry, political beliefs or affiliations, sexual orientation, or disability) may be discriminatory. Also, be careful not to ask any questions that could be construed as implying such discrimination. For example, questioning an applicant about the origin of an unusual surname could be misconstrued. We’ll look at more questions not to ask shortly.

- Don’t ask personal questions. Be especially wary of this during the first few moments of the interview when you and the applicant are establishing rapport.

- Don’t allow superficial impressions to influence your decision. Neat grooming is not an assurance of an efficient job performance, although it might be an issue for an employee who meets the public. Also keep in mind that age is not necessarily related to maturity in attitude or ability. Likewise, a firm handshake does not guarantee strong character. Having hiring standards that are not job related will make your interview invalid. Furthermore, if these standards automatically screen out applicants whose speech, dress, hair length, social status, or personal lifestyle differ from yours or those of your co-workers, you could be risking a bias suit.
Slide Show Notes

Follow these interviewing “do’s”:

- Beware of tendencies toward stereotyped thinking. Misconceptions concerning the physical, emotional, or mental capabilities of women, older workers, minorities, or disabled persons abound. Judge applicants on the basis of individual ability, not on the basis of any characteristics generally attributed to the group.

- Keep the conversation on job-related items. Appropriate areas of conversation during the interview include the job itself, its duties, and responsibilities. You can also talk about the organization, its missions, programs, and achievements. It is especially appropriate to talk about career possibilities and opportunities for growth, development, and advancement that the job offers. Other topics, such as where the job is located, required travel, mobility, equipment, and available facilities, are also pertinent.

- Finally, the individual’s qualifications, abilities, experience, education, and interests are all suitable topics. Ask only for the information you intend to use in making a hiring decision. Know how you will use the information to make that decision. Always keep in mind when you ask a question that it will be difficult to defend the practice of seeking information that is not related to the applicant’s career.
Slide Show Notes

Focus on these “don’ts” during interviews:

• Don’t ask an applicant’s age or date of birth. Don’t even ask questions that hint at age, such as what year an applicant graduated from high school or college.

• Don’t ask about citizenship or country of birth. You should tell all applicants, however, that they will be asked to verify eligibility to work in this country upon being hired.

• Don’t ask about disabilities or illness. If a disability is obvious, or if an applicant brings the issue up during the interview, you can explain essential functions of the job and ask the applicant if he or she can perform those functions, with or without accommodation.

• And, don’t ask about marital status, children, or childcare arrangements.

*Ask for two volunteers to role-play a brief interview between a supervisor and an applicant in a wheelchair. Have the rest of the group comment on the supervisor’s performance.*
Questions to Avoid (cont.)

Slide Show Notes

More areas to avoid asking about during interviews include:

• Don’t ask about an applicant’s religion. That includes not asking if an applicant can work certain days of the week or certain holidays. You can, however, inform an applicant of the work schedule and ask if the applicant has any problem with the schedule. If the applicant does have a problem for religious reasons, you cannot automatically eliminate this candidate. You would be required to make a reasonable accommodation should you hire the individual.

• Don’t ask about affiliations—clubs, social organizations, and other groups that could indicate membership in a legally protected minority group.

• Don’t ask any questions about an applicant’s personal life, including personal finances, sexual orientation, intention to marry and/or to have children, and so forth.

• Finally, don’t ask about arrest records. You may, however, ask about criminal convictions, but only insofar as they are job related. For example, if a job involves handling money, you can ask about convictions for theft.

Ask for two volunteers to role-play a brief interview between a supervisor and an applicant who appears from her attire to be a Muslim. Have the rest of the group comment on the supervisor’s performance.
Slide Show Notes

Let’s try an exercise to test your understanding of the types of questions you are allowed to ask during an interview. On the screen, you’ll see a list of questions that are illegal to ask during an interview. Can you think of ways to ask similar questions that are legal?

- You can’t ask, “Do you own or rent your home?” . . . But you can ask, “How long have you lived at this address?”
- You can’t ask, “How did you learn to speak Spanish?” . . . But you can ask, “Do you know any foreign languages?”
- You can’t ask, “Where were you born?” . . . But you can ask, “Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?”
- You can’t ask, “Will child care affect your schedule?” . . . But you can ask, “Will you be able to work 5 days a week?”
- You can’t ask, “Can I see your military records?” . . . But you can ask, “Have you ever been in the U.S. armed forces?”
The key points you should remember from this training session on interviewing skills are:

- Interviews are an essential part of the hiring process.
- You need to be a skilled interviewer.
- You must be able to plan, conduct, and evaluate interviews with job candidates.
- Finally, avoid potentially discriminatory questions and judgments. If you are unsure whether something is discriminatory, ask your HR representative.

This concludes this training session.
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