

## Interviewing Techniques: Some Tips for Employers (Part II)

By Virginia O'Brien Record

*This is the second of a two-part series concerning interviewing techniques. The first article focused on interview logistics and general interviewing tips. Part II focuses on specific questions you can ask to elicit candidate suitability for your executive position. It also includes some interviewing no-nos.*

### Introduction

We've all been in situations where some pretty standard interview questions were being asked, and the interviewee was so prepared with the answers that (s)he came across as being almost robotic. In today's environment, where there are far more qualified candidates than there are positions available, interviewers need to ask more probing, behaviorally-based questions than ever before.

This article presents some examples of behavioral questions, all of which are perfectly legal and appropriate. We are not recommending that you include all of these questions and categories. (If you did, your interview would last days rather than hours!) We suggest that you pick and choose from among those that pertain to your organization's specific needs.

### How well does the candidate communicate?

To determine if the candidate is able to present information clearly and cogently, to influence or persuade others through oral presentation in positive or negative circumstances, and to listen well, consider the following questions:

- What has been your experience in giving explanations or instructions to another person or group of people?

- Tell us about a time when you had to communicate under difficult circumstances.
- Tell us about an experience of yours that illustrates your ability to influence another person verbally. Feel free to use an example.
- Careful listening and effective communication go hand in hand. Tell us about a time when your ability to listen helped you to communicate better.
- This job will require you to spend a fair amount of time talking with others. When have you had to work in this kind of situation and how did it affect you?

### Will the candidate be able to motivate colleagues and co-workers?

To determine if the candidate is able to create positive energy in both individuals and groups, pose the following:

- Give us an example of a time when your positive attitude and energy caused others to be motivated or energized.
- Give us an example of something you did that helped to build enthusiasm in others.
- Tell us about a time you were able to use competition, recognition, and reward to encourage others and create positive motivation.

### How well will the candidate interact with colleagues and co-workers?

To determine if the candidate will be an effective communicator and work well with others, probe the following:

- Describe a time when you were able to be personally supportive and reassuring to a person who needed a friend.
- The word *communication* means different things to different people at different times. Tell me what this word means to you by giving me an example of a time when you had to be warm and amiable as a communicator.
- Being skillful in dealing with other people in the job is an important factor in being productive. Describe a time when you were successful in dealing with another person because you built a trusting relationship.
- Tell me about a time when you made a special effort to treat another person in a way that showed your respect for the other's feelings.

### Is the candidate decisive?

To determine if a candidate is decisive, can make good decisions quickly, and take action, consider the following:

- Many situations at our organization require quick thinking and speed in decision-making. Give us an example of a situation in which you were especially skillful in making a decision quickly.
- Describe a time when you were under pressure to make an immediate decision. Did you take action immediately or were you more deliberate? If you were more deliberate, was it because you were concerned about your judgment or the way the decision might be viewed, or are you just a more deliberate person?

- Tell us about a situation when you had to stand up for a decision you made even though it made you unpopular.
- Many times it is important to be hard-headed about a decision you are making, particularly when others don't like it. Give us an example of a time when you stuck by a decision even though it was under attack by others.

### Can the candidate solve problems?

To determine if the candidate is able to use a systematic approach to solving problems through analysis and evaluation of alternate solutions, consider asking one or more of the following:

- Tell me about a time when you were systematic in identifying potential problems at work. Feel free to showcase your analytical skills.
- What was your greatest success in using principles of logic to solve a problem at work?
- Give me an example of a time when you actively defined several solutions to a single problem. Did you use tools such as research, math, brainstorming?
- Enumerate the analytical tools with which you feel competent, then give me an example in your work history that shows your ability to use analytical techniques to define problems or design solutions.

### How does the candidate handle setting goals?

People have different ways of setting goals for themselves and their colleagues. To determine if the candidate is able to define realistic, specific goals and objectives and to prioritize them, consider the following questions:

- How important has goal-setting been to the success of your work experience?
- What have been your experiences in defining and setting long-term goals? Short-term goals? Give us an example of

a long-term goal and a short-term goal that you set and how you were successful in achieving them.

- Tell us what you do in order to ensure that you have enough time set aside for goal setting.
- In certain work environments, it is sometimes necessary to prioritize goals to be sure that effort is allocated appropriately. Tell me when you prioritized your goals successfully.
- Goal statements are often made to meet the expectations of others. Tell me about a time when you took the initiative to set goals and objectives, even if you weren't prompted or directed to do so.

#### What level of commitment to task does the candidate exhibit?

To determine if the candidate is able to start and persist with specific courses of action, you will want to cover the following:

- Give an example of any specific time in which you found it necessary to give long hours to a job.
- Tell us about a time when you were able to provide your own motivation to produce even though you were working alone. How did you motivate yourself?
- Tell us about a time when you were a driving, highly motivated worker.
- Some individuals have a strong sense of urgency about getting short term result; others are more laid back and less driven in their approach to work. Give me an example when you were either more laid back or more urgent.
- We both recognize that being successful takes more than luck. Tell me about a time when you had to work very hard to reach your goals, and be specific about what you achieved.

#### Can the candidate adapt to changing routines?

Policy and Procedures: To determine if the candidate is able to relate to routine operations in a manner that is consistent with existing solutions to problems and conform to established policies and procedures, discuss the following:

- We all recognize that regulations may vary in terms of being meaningful. Select a strict and meaningful regulation you had to conform to in a previous position. Tell me about the regulation and how you were able to work with it.
- Tell me about your experiences in documenting your work activities in a written form. Be specific.
- Select a job you have had and describe the paperwork you were required to complete. What specific things did you do to insure your accuracy?
- Give me an example of a time when you found a systematic method for solving work problems to be a good routine to follow.

#### Will the candidate be able to cope in our environment?

Some work environments are more stressful than others. To determine if the candidate can maintain a mature, problem solving attitude while dealing with interpersonal conflict, rejection, hostility, or time demands, explore the following:

- Tell us about a time when you had to cope with strict deadlines or time demands. Give me an example of how you handled the situation.
- Give us an example of a time at work when you had to deal with unreasonable expectations of you from others.
- When have you had to cope with the anger or hostility of another person? Give us an example.
- Sooner or later we all deal with interpersonal conflict or personal rejection

at work. Give me an example of a time when you had to cope with these problems.

- Tell me about a high stress situation when it was desirable for you to keep a positive attitude. What happened?

#### How tolerant is the candidate?

If your organization is prone to frequent deadlines, a frenetic environment, or other stressful situations, you will want to know how candidates can tolerate high anxiety situations. To determine if a candidate is able to withhold actions or speech in the absence of important information, deal with unresolved situations, frequent changes, delays or unexpected events, consider the following questions:

- When have you been most proud of your ability to wait for important information before taking action in solving a problem? How did the wait affect you?
- People differ in their preference for jobs, which have well laid out tasks and responsibilities or ones in which work changes frequently, tell me about a time when you were successful in dealing with an unstructured work environment.
- What has been your experience in working with conflicting, delayed, or ambiguous information? What did you do to make the most of the situation?

#### Additional questions to consider:

- Time management has become a necessary factor in personal productivity. Give us an example of any time management skill you have learned and applied at work.
- Just about anybody can give a routine, standard answer to common problems; however, the payoff is often in the development of the unique solutions to common problems. Give me an example of one of your unique and novel problem solutions.

- Creative persons seem to offer fresh insights frequently. Give me an example when one of your insights was well-received by others.
- Sooner or later, we all have to deal with arrogant, dogmatic people. Tell me about a time when you were able to be flexible with this type of person.
- We cannot do everything ourselves. Give me an example of a time when you dealt with this reality by creating a special team effort at work.
- Good problem solving often includes a careful review of the facts and weighing of options before making a decision. Give me an example of how you reached an organized review of the facts and weighing the options.
- In many problem situations, it is often tempting to jump to a conclusion to build a solution quickly. Tell me about a time when you resisted this temptation and thoroughly obtained all the facts associated with the problem before coming to a decision.

#### Questions you must avoid at all costs

Believe it or not, some employers are still unaware that certain questions may not be asked of candidates under any circumstances. Questions concerning age, religion, marital status, children, and politics are forbidden.

An interviewer may not ask about a person's religion, church, synagogue or parish, nor may they ask about the religious holidays they observe, or political beliefs.

An interviewer may not ask "Does your religion allow you to work on Saturdays?" On the other hand, an interviewer may state that the job requires work on Saturday (or Sunday) and then ask if that would be a problem.

Interviewers may not ask about native language, the language they speak at home, or how they acquired the ability to read, write, or speak a foreign language. On the other hand, an interviewer may ask if the candidate is proficient in a foreign language if, in fact, the position requires such proficiency.

Ancestry, national origin, parentage, or place of birth are on the list of prohibited questions, but an interviewer may ask if the candidate is a US citizen or resident alien with the right to work in the US. While an interviewer may not ask about a candidate's age, date of birth, or age of children, you may ask if they are over 18 years old, if the position requires it.

Don't forget to leave some time for the interviewee to ask questions of you. After all, you have to

“sell” your organization and the position to your candidates as well.

In a nutshell, if there is even a hint of concern that a question may be construed as discriminatory, don't ask it.

And the closing question: Why should we hire you?

### Conclusion

These are examples of behaviorally-based questions. Your primary objective is to draw the candidate out and have a discussion about these and, perhaps, other situations your organization may be facing. A more relaxed discussion will put both you and your candidates more at ease, and we guarantee that the results will be more fruitful.

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