

Great Interview  
Questions  
for Employers

501+

Five Hundred and One Plus

And the Best  
Answers for  
Prospective Employees

Dianna Podmoroff, MBA, CHRP

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**Dianna Podmoroff**

## **501+ Great Interview Questions for Employers and the Best Answers for Prospective Employees**

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# Introduction

Interviewing potential employees is one of the most difficult and intimidating tasks a manager or business owner will ever face. The task is made even more daunting by the fact that repercussions of a poor hiring decision can haunt the employees, management and the company for a long time to come, and can potentially cost a great deal of money. Discovering how to decrease the risk and maximize the predictive ability of interviews is key to successful hiring.

We're taught that preparedness is the key to dealing with most challenging and stress-inducing situations. When applying for a bank loan or talking to investors or pitching a big sale, we plan and prepare diligently, and the same should be done before interviewing. The problem is that in an interview situation, the interviewee is at least equally as nervous, and usually even more so, than the interviewer. This lethal combination of nervous tension often negates even the most diligent planning and leaves the interviewer with very little information on which to base a solid recommendation.

It is so easy for an interview to become little more than a conversation. I'm not suggesting you want the interview to come off as an interrogation either, but what you need is for the information gained from the dialogue to be useful for, and relevant to, making a hiring decision. This means going beyond deciding what questions to ask and actually giving thought to what kind of answers you are looking for. What response will indicate that the candidate is a good fit for the position and your company? Are there responses that are totally incompatible with your organization's goals, mission and values? How will you deal with and evaluate completely unexpected (outrageous or brilliant) answers?

If you've done a good job of pre-selecting candidates for the interview stage, then all of the interviewees should be capable of doing a good job. Choosing which one will do the best job for you is not easy. The person who gives all the "right" answers often gets the job, but if there is no consideration given to what the right answers for your organization are, then a savvy, well-coached interviewee may be chosen over a less polished but more appropriate one. What this book is designed to do is help you determine the best questions to ask and determine the best answers. Not the best

answers from a candidate's standpoint (their motivation is simply to get the job), but the best answers for you; satisfying your motivation to hire the person with the best fit, period.

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# 1

## Asking the Right Questions

A successful interview is one that provides unique insight into the ability and willingness of a candidate to do a good job for your company. That means that the interview has to go beyond assessing the technical competence to do the job and get to the real core of the issue—does the person as a whole suit our company: our culture, our values, our ethics, our personalities? Will the person fit in and become a valuable addition to the workplace by doing excellent work, while at the same time contributing to a healthy work environment?

To uncover the answers to those questions, what you have to assess are the person's core business and professional competencies. By the time a potential employee gets to the interview stage, he or she better have all the technical skills and abilities necessary, otherwise you are wasting your time. The interview is the place to analyze the so-called “soft” skills that are not easily amenable to testing. The absence or presence of these skills is what leads to the diagnosis of such common job maladies as poor interpersonal skills, an attitude problem, a personality conflict, unable to work in a team, poor communication skills, and problem with authority. Some individuals truly are difficult and hard to get along with, but most, if given the right environment, are very able to adapt and fit into a workplace that is right for them.

*Note: Companies are notorious for hiring based on skill and ability, and firing based on fit.*

### Competency and Fit

Companies are notorious for hiring based on skill and ability, and firing based on fit. Many interviewers make the mistake of equating knowledge, skills and ability (KSA) with competency. In fact, competency is more closely related to an individual's suitability to the workplace than their actual education and experience. If you're hiring for a graphic artist, candidates can be easily eliminated based on their education, experience and portfolio of work. These factors are prerequisites for developing

competency, but none of them (alone or in combination) can ensure that the candidate will indeed perform the job at the level you deem suitable. The final component in determining competency is the fit factor, and the best way to evaluate a candidate's overall competency is to screen for skill and ability and interview for competency and fit.

In practical terms this means limiting interview questions that are technical in nature and focusing more on questions that reveal a candidate's true character. Challenging questions, ones that make the applicant really self-assess, and even a few strategically placed, unexpected questions that throw the candidate off-guard, are the best types of questions for determining overall competency and fit. The interview should not be set up to be an intimidating interrogation, but it needs to be different enough that the even best-coached applicant has to stop and think and give an answer that is not anticipated or rehearsed. Remember, once the hiring decision is made, the interview façade is removed and the new employee with all of his or her innate characteristics, reactions and behaviors is unleashed in your workplace: you owe it to yourself and your current employees to figure out who this person is and what makes him tick before adding him to your team.

## **Key Competencies**

The entire list of competencies for any job will, of course, be different according to the job itself and the level of responsibility. A plumber must have expert plumbing skills whereas a computer programmer does not, but they both need to be able to communicate well and handle stress appropriately. The key competencies presented in this book are a compilation of the most common skills required to be successful on the job. Not every job will need all the competencies but most jobs will require most competencies. The specific areas of competence addressed in this book are:

- Communication
  
- People/Interpersonal skills
  
- Sociability
  
- Conflict resolution
  
- Decision making
  
- Team-building
  
- Organization

- Judgment
- Adaptability
- Motivation
- Initiative
- Compliance
- Stress management
- Leadership
- Analytical ability
- Creativity
- Integrity

It is up to each individual employer to assess the job and decide which competencies related to work habits and personal effectiveness are required for success in the position. Once that list has been established, it is time to turn your attention to developing questions that address each competency. At the same time you must learn how to ask the question and probe for details when required and construct an idea of the answer that is “right” for you, your team and your company. A candidate’s fit can then be fairly and adequately assessed, and you should have a clear idea of who can and will do an excellent job for you.



*Interviewing at its best is a structured conversation.*

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## 2

# Interviewing from the Beginning

Interviewing is intimidating for all parties. The interviewer wants to present a positive image of the company, and the interviewee wants to present their “best self” in hopes of being offered the job. This nervous tension provides the perfect environment for false impressions and social niceties when what you really need in an interview is a real conversation with a real person. That way both parties can assess whether or not there is a good fit and how likely it is that an employment relationship will be successful.

Interviewing at its best is a structured conversation. The interviewer is in control of how the conversation will flow, and the interviewee determines the actual content of the conversation through his or her responses to questions and probes. An ineffective interview is one that deteriorates into an impromptu conversation. While having a good ol’ chat with someone is a way to pass the time, it is not going to reveal anything other than what the interviewee wants to reveal: usually a false impression. Basing hiring decisions on a “gut-feel” approach is the most common source of grievous hiring mistakes, and this approach needs to be avoided at all costs.

From the moment the candidate walks in the door to the moment he or she leaves, the interview needs to follow a set, but somewhat flexible, script. From the introductions to the question-and-answer period to the final good-bye, the interviewer must remain in control, and the best way to ensure that is through planning and preparedness. This is not to imply you should deliver interview questions like a robot or read from your piece of paper with hardly a glance at the person; the intention is to make the interview a smooth and objective process, facilitating a natural conversation within predetermined boundaries. This way the interviewer gains the information he or she needs, and the interviewee’s responses can be compared to other candidates’ responses quite easily.

A well-structured interview follows the same basic format:

- Introductions

- Small talk
- Explanation of the interview process
- Get-to-know-you questions
- Behavioral-based questions—assess competencies
- Interviewee asks questions
- Next steps
- Thank you and good-bye

It is important to begin the interview with some small talk, an explanation of the interview process, and some ice-breaker-type questions. This sets everyone at ease and prepares the candidate for what is to come. Remember, the objective of the interview is not to intimidate the candidate or set up the person for failure; you want to create an environment where the person can demonstrate to you whether or not he or she can do the job. For the interviewee to be able to do this, he or she must be relaxed. Unless you are recruiting for a position that requires nerves of steel, placing a candidate under undue stress and pressure will only elicit pressured responses. If you rely on this type of approach, you run the substantial risk of eliminating the more qualified person simply because of a difference in their ability to tolerate stress.

You're nervous, the candidate's nervous, but you have the ability to break the tension and set the stage for an informative and insightful discussion where the candidate can showcase his or her unique qualifications and you can assess whether or not the profile presented is a good fit for your company.

Organization and planning will get you 90 percent of the way—add some spontaneity and a genuine interest in getting to know the person sitting in front of you, and you have the perfect foundation for a meaningful and effective interview.

## **Start the Interview Off Right**

Your job as the interviewer is to lay the groundwork for an open, honest exchange of information. One of the best techniques for doing this is to start the interview off on a positive note. Set the interviewee at ease and ask questions that they are expecting and for which they will likely have fairly well prepared answers. When a candidate realizes that you are not trying to deliberately fluster them or catch them off-guard,

they are more likely to let their guard down and give you answers that reflect their true person rather than the person they want to project in the interview.

Although your ultimate goal is to uncover the real person behind the interview façade, this is best accomplished by establishing rapport with the candidate. In this way you build trust and confidence, and you are in a much better position for discovering the individual's attitudes, beliefs and past patterns of performance. Ask the candidate to list their best qualities or tell you what factors they think are critical for success. The answers you get won't be particularly unique or insightful; they might not even be very truthful, but they will ensure the overall interview is effective and informative.

Remember, the insight value of opening questions is not intended to be high. The intention of these questions is simple: set the candidate at ease. A candidate who is confident with his or her responses at the beginning of the interview will likely remain confident in giving you honest and candid answers even as the questions become more probative and demanding. The end result is that you get progressively more relevant information as the interview progresses. Interviewing is a skill that requires patience, and as I'm sure you've heard, "good things come to those who wait!"

## **Explanation of the Interview Process**

Before beginning it is a good idea to prepare the candidate for what to expect. Make sure you cover the following:

- Small talk.
- Who is performing the interview.
- Necessary introductions.
- Discuss and explain behavioral questions.
- Talk about the interview process—who will be asking questions, time, next steps.
- Inform the candidate that you will be taking notes.
- Answer the candidate's questions.

At this point you are ready to begin the questions. You, the other interviewers and the candidate are prepared for what is to come. Stay focused, yet friendly, and remember

your ultimate purpose is to get the answers you need to make an employment decision.

## **Get-to-Know-You Questions**

1. Tell me about the hobby or activity you have participated in the longest.
2. What are the first three things you do when you get up in the morning?
3. What activities do you do in your spare time?
4. What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?
5. If you had to describe your major philosophy in life (without referring to any religion in particular), what would it be?

**Analysis:** The answers to these questions will give you a glimpse at what the interviewee values, or at least what he thinks you want him to value. For instance, if the candidate is intent on showcasing his or her education, the answers you get will likely emphasize academic performance or activity. The person might describe himself in terms of the degree or diploma he holds, or his greatest accomplishment may be a scholastic achievement. If the candidate focuses more on practical work experience, then he or she likely has more on a work record than on a school transcript. Still, other people may focus more on interpersonal skills and accomplishments.

The conversation will inevitably shift to the person's comfort zone and to the area of development in which he or she feels most confident. Make a note of the impression the candidate wants to give from the start and then make sure to probe fully into questions that deal with the areas not emphasized. The more well-rounded a person, the higher the chances of being able to deal with the changes and interpersonal skills required in most work environments.

## **Work History**

6. Tell me about the job you have right now.
7. What particular skills and abilities do you bring to your current job?

8. Does your current employer know you are actively seeking other work?
9. Can you give me a brief summary of your work history up to this point?
10. What have you accomplished in the past that makes you particularly qualified for this position?
11. Why are you leaving your current position?

**Analysis:** The main purpose for asking these questions is to get the candidate comfortable talking about their previous positions. You get information that goes beyond the traditional résumé list of responsibilities, giving you insight into the context of prior work. Gaining a better understanding of the person's prior work will help enormously when trying to make sense of the answers given to the behavioral questions ("Tell me about a time when. . .") that come later.

## **Why This Job?**

12. Why did you apply for this job?
13. How did you hear about this job opening?
14. What have you done to prepare for this interview?
15. What motivated you to be interested in this position?
16. This job is very different from your current position. Tell me more about your choice to change the direction of your career.

**Analysis:** The answers to these questions are good to have, especially if you are torn between two or three outstanding candidates. Often the person who wants the position more will put in the extra time and energy necessary to be successful in a new position. If the person is venturing into a career change, knowing his or her motivation will help you judge the answer to specific behavioral questions even if the example is not industry relevant.

## Scholastic Experience

17. What was your favorite subject in school?
18. What was your best subject in school?
19. Why did you choose to major in \_\_\_\_\_?
20. What course gave you the most difficulty?
21. I see you attended college out of state. What was that experience like?
22. What courses have you taken that you feel best prepared you for this position?
23. What traits do you possess that made you a good student?
24. What traits do you possess that cause you to perform at a level below your potential?

**Analysis:** These questions are most suitable for recent graduates looking for their first job. They are also useful to set someone at ease who may not have a great deal of industry- or position-specific work experience. A person applying for his or her first supervisory job will gain confidence sharing course information that is particularly relevant, as will the person branching into a different career or one who upgraded his or her education.

When dealing with a recent graduate that has little previous work experience, the answers to the behavioral questions will come from educational experiences. It is important to understand his or her educational experience and the context in which he or she learned and performed well, and not so well. Although work is different than school, it still requires most of the same competencies: communication, teamwork, motivation, initiative, organization, etc.

## Job Performance

25. What kind of supervision do you think brings out the best in you?

26. Tell me about the supervisor with whom you got along the best.

27. Do you prefer to work alone or as part of a group?

28. What are some job responsibilities you do not like?

29. What aspects of your last job did you really like?

30. What is the most important element you require in a job?

**Analysis:** These questions set the foundation for future behavioral-based questions that deal with how the person performed on the job rather than just what duties they performed. Use these questions as practice for the more inquisitive and precise behavioral questions that assess a specific competency in depth. These questions simply ask the candidate to self-assess or give an opinion, but it gets him or her in the habit of thinking about a job in particular rather than work in general.

Some of these questions will also help you determine overall fit. There are times when a particular culture or style of supervision is obviously not going to work with a particular candidate. Rather than going through the entire interview, you have the option of cutting the process short if it is a clear mismatch from the beginning. Hopefully the pre-interview process has uncovered any glaring fit issues, but sometimes the rapport built during the early stages of the interview is enough to break through even the most heavily armored shell.

## Career Objectives

31. What is your long-term career objective?

32. Why have you decided to leave your past jobs?

33. How does this job fit with your overall career goals?

34. Where do you see this role taking you in the future?

35. What areas do you need to further develop in order to meet your career goals?