

5.1: Asking Questions

Learning Objectives

- Discuss how to come up with effective questions for an interview.

For best results—and to avoid litigation—interview questions should be relevant to the position and reflect the realities of both the position and the operating environment. To be specific, questions should focus on the job duties, relevant skills and qualifications, and related success factors. A key point to keep in mind is that questions represent not only the position but the company's values. Understand that an interview is a two-way assessment; that is, a candidate is also evaluating interview questions, assessments, and interactions with company representatives to determine believability and “fit.”

There are two types of interviews: unstructured and structured. In an **unstructured interview**, the interviewer may ask different questions of each different candidate. One candidate might be asked about her career goals and another might be asked about his previous work experience. In an unstructured interview, the questions are often, though not always, unspecified beforehand. In an unstructured interview the responses to questions asked are generally not scored using a standard system. This type of interview can be particularly useful when interviewing for a new (and possibly still nebulously defined) position. As you interview candidates, their expertise and knowledge of the field will help flesh out the new position.



Figure 1. Studies of job interviews show that they are more effective at predicting future job performance when they are structured.

In a **structured interview**, the interviewer asks the same questions of every candidate, the questions are prepared in advance, and the interviewer uses a standardized rating system for each response. With this approach, the interviewer can accurately compare two candidates' interviews. In a meta-analysis of studies examining the effectiveness of various types of job interviews, McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt & Maurer (1994) found that structured interviews were more effective at predicting subsequent job performance of the job candidate.

What You Should Ask

Interview questions will be different for each job; after all, it takes very different skills to create a product than it does to sell the product. The job advertisement can be a good source for interview questions. After all, it contains a good summary of the required skills and knowledge needed for the position.

Often you'll find that you have several equally talented candidates if you simply ask about the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for the job. Once you've established your pool of top contenders, you can start looking at individuals to evaluate their fit in the company.

So how do you come up with these questions? First Round's interview with Koru Co-Founder and CEO Kristen Hamilton provides perspective on getting at the person behind the resume. The opening sentence is an admission: “Hiring the right people is hard.”^[1] In order to improve the odds of success, Hamilton recommends focusing on skill sets and mindsets instead of metrics such as GPA. Based on extensive employer research and reverse engineering exceptional performers, Hamilton identified seven core characteristics that in combination translate into job success or, as she phrases it, “someone killing it at their job”:^[2]

- **Grit.** In today's fast-paced working environment, employees need to be resilient, able to work through difficult or boring projects. You may ask candidates to talk about lengthy projects they've completed, and ask about how they persevered.

- **Rigor.** Employees need to use data they have at hand or gather data to make good decisions. You may ask candidates about a time they made a difficult decision at work, and how they arrived at that conclusion.
- **Impact.** Teams work better when each member is working together to achieve the company's goals. You may ask candidates about efforts they've made in the past that either helped their previous company's mission or that are related to your company's mission.
- **Teamwork.** Speaking of teams working together, this is an essential trait in almost any employee. Even individuals who mostly do solitary work need to at least talk to their managers to report how things are going. Questions for this will vary depending on how much teamwork is needed for the position. You may ask candidates about their work in teams in the past.
- **Ownership.** Employees need to have personal responsibility for their positions. In order for a company to run smoothly, employees need to rely on each other to own their role and make things work. You may ask candidates to talk about a project they either ran or participated in, and how they overcame challenges in the process.
- **Curiosity.** Companies can only flourish if they change and adapt to the market. In order to achieve this adaptation, employees must be curious and creative and willing to push the boundaries to make change. You may ask candidates about the last thing they learned and why they chose to pursue that knowledge. If employees are curious in their personal lives, they'll likely be curious in the workplace as well.
- **Polish.** The way candidates presents themselves can say a lot. As you interview, take note of how candidates dress, how they speak, and how they put together resumes, cover letters, and sample work products. If they don't provide polished work during the interview process, it's likely they won't in their job either.

Read More

First Round's compilation, "[The Best Interview Questions We've Ever Published](#)" is an excellent source of not only interview questions but perspective on candidate evaluation (and, for those who are interviewing, the intent behind questions).

What You Shouldn't Ask

Perhaps the first step in developing effective interview questions—both in forming questions and in coaching inexperienced interviewees—is to know what's off limits. As advised in a SHRM article, you need to be aware of both state and federal laws when considering interview questions and procedures^[3]. For perspective, California Department of Fair Employment & Housing guidelines recommend that "employers limit requests for information during the pre-employment process to those details essential to determining a person's qualifications to do the job (with or without reasonable accommodations)."^[4]

The best policy is to consider questions that relate to protected categories—that is, those that reference a candidate's age, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc.—off limits. Even if they're not illegal per se in a particular state, they may be seen as a discriminatory hiring practice that negatively impacts the employer's brand and recruiting efforts.

1. "[Hire a Top Performer Every Time with These Interview Questions.](#)" *First Round Review*. Web. 10 July 2018. [↩](#)
2. Ibid. [↩](#)
3. Onley, Dawn. "[These Interview Questions Could Get HR in Trouble.](#)" *SHRM*. 19 June 2017. Web. 10 July 2018. [↩](#)
4. The Department of Fair Employment and Housing. "[Employment Inquiries: What Can Employers Ask Applicants and Employees.](#)" Web. 10 July 2018. [↩](#)

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