

Interviewing Techniques



Whether you are an experienced interviewer or preparing to meet your very first candidate, knowing a few fundamentals of employment interviewing will help you conduct efficient and effective interviews.

TOP TIPS

Here are some simple steps to avoid common interview mistakes

- Prepare thoroughly, with a good understanding of the job
- Get your administration in order – have all the paperwork and the meeting logistics organised
- Explain the format, style and timeframe of the interview up front
- Focus your questions on job-related evidence
- Don't ask too many closed or leading questions
- Make sure to move beyond the information on the CV or application form
- Probe the candidate's claims, especially skill assertions
- Establish and check all important facts, and summarise
- Make sure all your questions are relevant, comprehensible and lawful

Question Styles

Closed questions tend to close a candidate down. If used well, they establish useful facts:

- "What class was your degree?"
"Did you complete it?"
- "How many new customers did you win last week?"

However, closed questions are often used badly, e.g. "Did you enjoy your last job?", "Did that lead to promotion?", "Would you describe yourself as computer literate?"

Open questions are designed to encourage the candidate to talk, and to broaden out areas of information. They encourage frank disclosure in candidates, and should seek evidence of actual experience. Open questions may start with WHY, WHAT, WHERE, HOW – but a good opener is always "Tell me about..."

Probing questions are generally more complex and can be used when a candidate is more relaxed, e.g. "Tell me more about the problems you faced", or "Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult team member", leading to very high order questions such as "What would you say was your greatest achievement?"

Question Styles to Avoid

Inappropriate Closed - Usually a succession of questions beginning "Did you...?" or "Have you...?"

Leading – Questions which encourage the candidate down a predictable path, e.g. "This role requires great attention to detail. How would you fit in?"

Multiple – Asking several questions at once, or questions with multiple alternatives.

Fantasy – Questions which have nothing to do with the job, e.g. "If you could be an animal in the jungle, what animal would you be?"

"The goal of an interview isn't to catch candidates doing something wrong, it's to learn as much about them as possible. Focus on putting them at ease and listening respectfully. The more relaxed they are the more open and forthcoming they will be."

Clare Normanton
HR Director, EuroStar

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Question Styles

According to Richard Boyatzis (1982) a competency is defined as *"an underlying characteristic of an individual which is causally related to effective or superior performance."* Once you have defined the competencies you need for a role, you can use simple question structures to probe them.

The Lead Question – a question which sets the scene and seeks evidence of actual workplace behaviours, e.g. *"Tell me about a time when you led a team?"*

Probing then works far better than having scripted question, since it is rare that a candidate will give you all the required information from your lead question. The questions should be short, simple, and in past tense. *"Can you give me an example?"* or *"What did you do?"* or *"What was the outcome?"*

Once the evidence has been collected, it may be useful to explore what a candidate would do in a **new context**: *"How would you do it differently if you did it again?"*

In a competency based interview, you are looking for:

- Descriptions of specific past situations – not a mention of what the candidate *"would"* do or *"usually"* does.
- The role of the candidate in the situation described to be crystal clear.
- A detailed picture to be formed of what the candidate thought, said, did or felt as the situation unfolded.
- The people involved in the situation, and its history to be fully described, providing the necessary context.

Dealing with 'difficult' interviews

Reticent, quiet candidates require plenty of ice-breakers. Talk about non-threatening areas of the candidate's experience. Get the candidate talking as quickly as possible, and accept the candidate's initial answers without excessive probing.

Suspicious candidates require a clear explanation of format and purpose of the interview. Flag up areas of questioning in advance.

Overly talkative candidates use over-disclosure as a strategy. Close the candidate down by using prompts like *"tell me briefly about..."*, and also use summaries and closed questions to maintain control.

The **assertive know-it-all** will score points over you during the interview. Re-assert control where necessary by introducing new question topics, probing, and summarising. Raise the level of questions in order to get the candidate thinking more about the subject matter than the progress of the interview.

Vague candidates need probing to check knowledge and skills. Do not accept candidates' own assertions of their skill levels – seek evidence of what they have actually done.

Where a candidate has **poor listening skills**, repeat questions to maintain focus, or reframe them to make them simpler.

Look for specific examples not vague statements!



John Lees FREC is the author of the best-selling *How To Get A Job You'll Love* (McGraw-Hill), now available in its 2007/08 edition, as well as *Job Interviews – Top Answers To Tough Questions*. See www.johnleescareers.com