

Interviewing 2.0: Avoiding Ineffective Interview Questions

Ineffective interview questions are questions that give you no useful information about the candidate's qualifications, potential, or suitability for the job. They come in two categories: questions that don't focus on what the job requires, and questions that are of little value because they are over-used, leading, or trivial.

Questions That Don't Focus on Job Requirements

Any questions that don't focus on the requirements (skills, knowledge, training, or attitudes) of the job are irrelevant questions because they don't tell you about the candidate's likelihood of success on the job. Solution? Go back, first, to the job description: what's required? What will the person in this job actually *do*? Will this person be an individual contributor, or will he or she have to work cooperatively with others? If the latter, with what others? In what capacity (that is, as a manager, or as a team member?) Will the person that you hire for this job be expected to take on additional responsibilities in the future, perhaps as a result of a promotion?

For example, if the position for which you are interviewing requires the ability to listen well to others, then ask specifically about the candidate's ability to do the same. You might ask something like, "How do you deal with a subordinate who brings you a problem to which the solution is obvious?"

Second, think about current employees who are doing the same or similar kind of work. What are they doing that makes them successful? For example, are they successful because they bring certain skills, knowledge, or experience to the job? Do they all seem to have certain attitudes that contribute to their success? If you find general similarities that your successful employees share, then use that information to plan some interview questions that explore those aptitudes or attitudes that the candidate brings to the job.

Questions That Have Little Actual Value

Let me first be clear that I am not talking here about questions or comments that you may make at the beginning or end of an interview to establish rapport with the candidate. Instead, I am talking about questions used during the interview that add little to your knowledge about the attitudes and aptitudes that the candidate brings to the job. Let's look a few examples:

Over Used Questions - These are questions that are so obvious that most candidates are prepared for them. They have been used so often and so widely

that the responses that you get to them will seldom help you look beyond the “interview face” that the candidate is carefully presenting to you. Some samples:

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What are your strengths?”

“What are your weaknesses?”

Leading Questions

There are two kinds of leading questions that lead the applicant to do a little bragging: behavioral questions and hypothetical questions.

Behavioral Questions

These questions usually start out with something like, “Tell me about a time you (dealt with some specified situation) and how you handled it.”

The problem with behavioral questions is the: “...and how you handled it” part. This leads the candidate to focus on glowing tales of his or her successes, whether or not he or she has ever actually faced such a situation.

To avoid this problem, ask the first part of the question and simply leave off the “...and how you handled it” part. Now you are asking the candidate about a problem situation, rather than inviting him or her to talk about successes, real or imagined. You’ll end up learning more about how the candidate faces and thinks through such situations.

Hypothetical Questions

Closely related to behavioral questions are hypothetical ones. Hypothetical questions usually begin with, “What would you do if...?” This type of question allows the candidate to explain his or her idealized response – that is, what he or she likes to think he or she would do. We all like to think we would disarm the mugger, lift the wrecked car off the person pinned underneath, etc. But there can be large gaps between the way we like to think we would act, and the way we actually do. The problem is that the candidate’s response to this type of question usually will have more to do with what he or she believes the interviewer *wants to hear* than with what the person would actually do.

Irrelevant Questions – Irrelevant questions may *seem* to be cleverly getting the candidate to reveal something about him- or herself, but they almost always have nothing to do with the person’s knowledge, skills or abilities, or with the job’s requirements. Here are some of my favorite examples of irrelevant questions:

“If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?”
“What’s your favorite color?”
“Which do you like better, apples or blueberries?”

These are amusing party game questions, but they have little relevance to the candidate’s qualifications for a job.

Planning Relevant Interview Questions

Start with the job description: what will this person have to know and have to do? Look at all the information you already have about the candidate: what questions do you have about his or her knowledge, skills, ability, experience? What *more* would you like to know about the candidate that is relevant to the job?

Next, think about what the candidate will have to do that isn’t on the job description. Will he or she have to work with an impatient or demanding boss, or handle a team that is struggling?

Finally, think about your employees who have the same or similar jobs. What three qualities do the employees who excel have that contribute to their success? Then, think of the ones who struggle; what qualities seem to get in the way of their being successful?

Form your interview questions from the answers to these questions and you will have the foundation for a job-relevant exploration of a candidate’s suitability for the job.