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## The 10 Best Questions to Ask a Job Candidate (Plus a Postscript About “Phone Screens”)

IT’S THE “MAIN EVENT” – the face-to-face interview – at which new careers will be launched or left at the dock. The employer is deciding whether to extend a job offer, while the candidate is deciding whether to accept one if offered.

What next? All too often, the interview proceeds as follows:

*Interviewer* – I see you graduated from Yale.

*Candidate* – Yes, great school.

*Interviewer* -- And your pharmaceutical experience includes eight years with Eli Lilly?

*Candidate* – Nine, actually. Then on to Pfizer.

*Interviewer* – Well, we’re not yet as large as those two firms, so everyone has to wear lots of hats. Do you mind long hours?

*Candidate* – Not at all. I always do whatever it takes...

This is clearly an interview that’s going nowhere, totally unexciting and stuck in an endless loop of resume verification and leading questions. Indeed, no effort is required to conduct it. By contrast, great interviews require a clear understanding of what information the interviewer hopes to obtain – and what kinds of questions will produce the intended results.

Here are ten that do an especially good job of revealing what makes a candidate tick:

1. **Tell me a little about yourself.** Few people anticipate this disarming request, which causes them to think on their feet, decide what information they want to convey and organize a concise response. Non-threatening and open-ended, it makes a good first question.
2. **In your current job, who is the person you report to – and what are his or her responsibilities?** By asking candidates to define the boss’s duties, you have made it more difficult for them to exaggerate their own scope of responsibility.
3. **I’ve read the various accomplishments you’ve cited on your resume. But if you had to pick the single greatest contribution you have made to**

**an employer, what would that be?** Many books on resume writing encourage laundry lists of achievements – *e.g.*, increased production by 23 percent, reduced scrap by 15 percent, etc. This question is designed to elicit how the candidate views his or her true impact on organizational performance.

4. **All of us have a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Can you tell me a shortcoming that affected your work performance and what you did to address it?** It’s one thing to know that one is too demanding of others (or whatever the shortcoming is). More important, faced with that insight, was the candidate able to modify personal behavior in a way that ameliorated the problem?
5. **If I were to ask your fellow workers to describe you, what would they say?** This question, along with number 4, is based on a relatively new concept known as “Emotional Intelligence” – which measures self-awareness, particularly in dealing with other people. If you ask it, get beyond the glib response and dig a little, *i.e.*, “What else would they say?”
6. **Like people, companies are a mix of strengths and weaknesses. What are some of the things your present company could do to be more successful?** Strong managers have to deal with organizational effectiveness in all of its complexities. This question is a good predictor of how the candidate would function in your organization. Look for responses that address a wide range of issues – people, products, processes and markets.
7. **Tell me about some of the people you’ve hired in recent years, how they’ve worked out and what you did with any poor performers.** In addition to a candidate with good self-awareness, you want a candidate with sound insights into others. How does the interviewee go about hiring people, evaluating them and taking corrective action?

8. ***What risks have you taken in your current job, and what were the results?*** There's an old adage, "If you haven't crashed and burned a few times, you haven't flown high enough." Well, maybe. There are three categories of risk-takers: those who take foolish risks, those who take prudent risks and those who are risk-averse. Most likely, you are seeking the individual who is not afraid to take prudent risks – particularly of high magnitude. Give extra points to the candidate who mentions a failure as well as a success.
9. ***When you have the kind of "drop-everything" crisis at work, what techniques do you use to enlist the help of others?*** Various people have various management styles, ranging from dictatorial ("Call your wife and tell her you'll be working all night") to beseeching ("Do you think it would be possible to stay a bit late and help out?") Look for the style that will best fit your corporate culture. By the way, the shrewdest answer to this question is probably, "We have such a close-knit team that has worked on such a wide range of challenges, I don't even have to ask. Everyone knows instinctively when it's time for the tough to get going."
10. ***Setting aside compensation and perks (which we'd all like to have more of), what changes or improvements in your current work situation would make the job so attractive that you wouldn't want to leave?*** This very good last question accomplishes three distinct goals. *First*, it identifies those work-related values – title, responsibility, opportunity to manage others, professional growth, advancement, recognition, geographic location, community resources, family time, flexible hours, etc. – that the candidate holds to be important but finds lacking in the current job. *Second*, if you decide to offer that person the position, you know which attributes of the new job that you and your search consultant should emphasize – and which to steer away from. And, *third*, if the successful candidate receives a counter-offer upon resignation, you can remind the individual – in his or her own words – of the current situation's shortcomings, most or all of which will still exist.

One small word of warning: These and similar questions need to be asked but once during the day; more often is counter-productive. Therefore, take the time to convene the interviewing panel in advance and decide who will ask which questions.

***P.S. Do "Phone Screens" Serve a Purpose?***

Clients sometimes ask Sanford Rose Associates what we think of their screening potential candidates by telephone before extending an invitation for a face-to-face interview.

If a search consultant is performing his or her job and presenting only those highly qualified candidates who merit an on-site visit, the phone screen is unnecessary. Nonetheless, some companies insist upon phone screens as part of the interview process, for financial and other reasons.

If you need to do a phone screen, remember that you can only make a first impression once. Accordingly, turn it into a sales call as well as mini-interview: "Hi, this is John Doe from Acme Widgets. I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself ... tell you a few things about Acme and the position opening we have ... and learn a little about your background and needs."

Unless the conversation goes poorly (for example, the candidate is interested only in the salary you pay), make the process one of "including in" – not "excluding out." Explore why the candidate has shown preliminary interest in the position and explain some of the career benefits it offers. Work toward scheduling the full-blown interview. There will be time later to determine if the individual is a perfect fit.

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