

Key questions for interview candidates



You want to ask questions that, in increasing order of importance, tell you

- Whether the person has the skills to do the job,
- How they function under pressure, and
- How well they will fit into the team.

1. Can they do the job?

These are perhaps the easiest questions. You have seen the person's resume so you know they claim to have the necessary skills. Ask a few questions to verify what they claim.

- "I see you managed the payroll for three subsidiaries. What was the most difficult part of integrating all of them?"
- "When you were the Marketing Manager for ABC company what were the steps you took when planning the annual marketing budget?"
- "I see you program in (whatever language). How would you link an indexed field variable to display on mouseover?"

Notice these questions ask how or what. They cannot be answered yes or no. Listen to the answer to see how quickly they answer, how complete/correct their answer is and whether they actually answer what you asked or go on to something with which they are more familiar

2. How well do they function under pressure?

This may be the area where most managers have trouble asking good questions, but they are more important than the job competency questions above. We are reluctant to be the "bad guy", to put someone under pressure. However, there are very few jobs, and certainly none that report to you, that don't place the employee under stress from time to time. Anybody can do well in calm times. You want people who can function well when things get confusing or difficult. To identify which candidate will perform best under pressure, ask tough, stressful questions.

- "What makes you think you are better for this job than all the other candidates?"

- "Tell me about a stressful situation that occurred repeatedly on your last job and how you handled it."
- "Which co-worker at your last job did you get along with least well? What did you do about it?"

Again, the important thing here is how quickly, directly and completely they answer your questions. If a candidate says he has never been under stress, avoid that person. Either he is lying or he is out of touch with reality. If a candidate says she gets along with all her co-workers and never has a conflict with anyone, press for more information. She is either a saint or a doormat.

One question I like to ask here is "What did you think of our website?" It tells me whether the person has taken the time to visit our website to learn about the company, but it also tells me how they will respond to the pressure of being put on the spot.

3. How well will they fit in?

Among equally qualified candidates, this is the most important attribute. You need someone who will fit with the team and be a productive member, someone who will add to the team and not be a distraction. Be careful, though. You aren't looking for the "nicest" person. You are looking for the best fit. In addition to personality, you need to evaluate work habits, a complementary skill set and where the team needs help.

In a very low key office, a loud, boisterous new hire would probably decrease the team's production because the team would be so busy staring at the new comer and quietly discussing among themselves why the person is so loud. On the other hand, someone moderately outspoken could be just what the team needs to get them fired up and producing again at top levels.

If everyone in the group comes in between 8:30 and 9:00 but works until 6:00 or later, it will be difficult for a new hire to fit in if they always come in at 6:30 or 7:00 so they can leave at 3:00

In Summary

When you interview candidates for a job opening, you need to ask questions to be sure they can do the job, but it is even more important to ask questions that ensure they can handle stress and that they will fit in with the team.

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