

Effective Interviewing: Are You Asking the Right Questions?

Once upon a time, the city of Mosquito Heights was looking for an administrative assistant. The city searched high and low with no luck. One day, in walks Jade Prentice. Jade has a fantastic resume with all the skills the city is looking for and is called for an interview. The interviewers agree that Jade is intelligent, articulate, warm and has great experience. Jade will be a great addition to the team –they are hired!

After two months on the job, Jade is not happy. Jade tells their manager that they thought the position would have more responsibility, and they would like to be promoted to assistant city manager. Unfortunately, the city didn't need an assistant city manager and Jade quit.

Has this ever happened to you? What went wrong? In order to be successful in a position, a candidate must have the right skills AND be well suited for the position and the organization. Both are equally important. Following are some tips to ensure you gather information from your interviews to evaluate qualifications as well as provide ample information to the candidate to help them assess if the position will meet their expectations. It can be helpful to accurately describe what a "day in the life" would be like so the interviewee leaves the interview with enough information to make a decision about whether or not the organization is a good fit for them.

In order to comply with the law and effectively compare candidates, interview questions must be both job-related and consistently asked of all candidates. Using a combination of different types of questions can help you to gather the information you need to effectively evaluate the candidate. Following are descriptions of various types of questions you can use to gather information.

Rapport-building questions or statements are intended to put the candidate at ease and make them feel welcome. Rapport building questions are important because it is difficult to get a true sense of a candidate who is very nervous or uncomfortable. An example of a rapport-building question would be "Hi Jade, I see you drove from Duluth today, how was the drive?"

Factual questions can help you to assess knowledge or skills related to technical aspects of the position. However, they are not likely to help you determine suitability for the position. Think of these questions as test-type questions. For example, the manager could have asked Jade "Under data practices law, what personnel information is classified as public?"

Attitudinal questions focus on how the candidate feels about different aspects of the job. These questions can help you to evaluate suitability for the position, but not necessarily skills. The manager could have asked Jade the following questions:

- This position requires a lot of customer service, how do you feel about fielding numerous customer phone calls each day?

- This position is administrative in nature. Does that fit your expectations for daily work?

Behavioral questions focus on how the candidate has handled different situations in the past. Information from behavioral questions can help you to evaluate both skills and suitability for the position. Because past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, it makes sense to have most of the interview focused on behavioral questions. Following are some examples the manager could have asked Jade to determine both skill and suitability with the team and city.

- Tell us about a time that you had to juggle multiple projects at once.
- Tell us about a time that you had a disagreement with a co-worker.
- Tell us about a time that you had to use a software program you were not familiar with.

Hypothetical questions ask a candidate to discuss how they would handle a situation. For example, “How would you handle a complaint from a citizen?” Hypothetical questions can be problematic because the candidate will typically describe what they think they *should do* in the situation. This may or may not be what the candidate would *actually do* in that situation. You will get better information by turning a hypothetical question in to a behavioral question such as, “Tell me about a time when a customer had a complaint. What was the situation? How did you handle it?”

Probing questions are asked to clarify or obtain more information regarding a candidate’s response. While, it is important to ask all candidates the same basic set of questions, it is equally important to ask follow-up questions based on the candidate’s responses. Probing statements such as, “tell me more about that” can be useful to get the candidate to share more information.

An easy way to develop probing questions for behavioral questions is to think of the STAR technique. When responding to behavioral questions, you want to ensure the candidate describes the **S**ituation, **T**actics, **A**ction, and **R**esult. Here are some examples of probing questions using the STAR approach:

- **SITUATION:** What was the situation? Why did you get involved?
- **TACTICS:** Why did you decide on that approach? What other strategies did you consider?
- **ACTION:** What steps did you take? Specifically, what did you DO or SAY?
- **RESULT:** What was the outcome? What did you learn from it? Is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

Career path questions could be asked to assess whether the organization will be able to meet the candidate’s expectations for career advancement. Questions about their career motivations and drivers as well as their timeline for advancement are relevant. A common career path question asks, how does this position relate to your career goals? You may also ask questions about the type of environment they work best in, what goals they have

over the next year to 18 months and what they would need to reach their goals to help assess long term fit.

Finally, it is important to **encourage the candidate to ask questions** to determine whether the position is a good match for the candidate's needs. The questions the candidate asks can also help the interviewer to obtain some insight into what is important to the candidate and what expectations they have for their career. It is important to note that less experienced candidates may ask questions about their career trajectory the interviewer may find unfitting from their own generational perspective and should not necessarily disqualify them in the selection process. This is just one of the ways a candidate assesses whether the organization would be a good fit for them over the long term.

So, what happened to our friends at Mosquito Heights? The manager redesigned the interview questions, followed up with ample probing questions, and eventually hired a fabulous new administrative assistant –JossTime.