7 Develop Interview Questions and Techniques

> Stanley: "Hey, Joe—you interviewing the performance tools candidate today?"
>
> Joe: "Yeah."
>
> Stanley: "What are you going to talk to this guy about?"
>
> Joe: "Oh, I don't know. Whatever I feel like, I guess. How the heck should I know what to ask a performance tools guy?"

If you were ever concerned that you didn't know what to ask in an interview, or didn't feel as if you were successful in selecting questions to ask in an interview, this chapter will help you determine what techniques to use for interviewing and what questions to ask, and how.

Whether you're phone-screening a candidate or conducting an in-person interview, choose your interview questions carefully to make the most of your time with your candidate. The interview can help you learn specifics about the candidate if you ask questions that answer the following:

- What functional skills, product-domain expertise, tool and technology skills, and industry expertise does this candidate have?

- What personal qualities, preferences, and technical and nontechnical skills does the candidate have?
- Do the candidate's personal qualities, preferences, and skills match the job's requirements for technical work and the organization's culture?

As you listen to the candidate's responses, you will gather a general impression that can help answer one additional question: Can you trust the candidate's answers? If you vary your question types, and using hypothetical questions judiciously, you *will* be able to trust the candidate's answers.

Design your interview questions and activities to learn the answers to these questions. In Create and Use Phone-Screens, I'll provide guidance for narrowing the questions for your phone-screens. And in Plan and Conduct the In-Person Interview, I'll suggest how you broaden the questions for the in-person interview.

7.1 Choose which kinds of questions to ask

When you ask great interview questions, you not only learn what you need to know about the candidate, but you help sell the candidate on your company and yourself. Don't worry about selling the company. If you ask great questions, your interviews will do that for you. Interviews are too short to waste time asking questions that don't elicit information about how the candidate will work in your organization.

You have multiples types of interview questions from which to choose: closed, open-ended, hypothetical, audition, and meta-questions. With a little planning and thought, you'll be able to choose your interview questions to assess the candidate's overall suitability for your job and your organization.

The most effective interview consists of a series of closed questions to establish the basic facts, used in combination with behavior-description questions, followed by auditions. However, there are additional question types you may find useful, such as general open-ended questions, hypothetical questions or meta-questions—questions about the question.

Closed questions

A closed question helps you verify facts. The candidate answers a closed question with a brief, factual response. Use closed questions such as the following to establish the facts: Where are you working now? What is your salary? How many years of C experience do you have?

Close-ended questions create boundaries around the open-ended questions you'll be asking. I use closed questions to establish how long a person has worked with a specific technology or in a particular industry. You may think the candidate's résumé answers these questions, but candidates sometimes stretch the truth or use phrasing on a résumé that may be misleading. I once interviewed a candidate who had included the following phrase on his résumé: "Eight years experience in C++ and UNIX." During the interview, I asked, "How many years of C++ experience do you have?" His response, "Three." I then asked, "And how many years of UNIX experience do you have?" "Five,"

came the response. "Ah! So, on your résumé where you listed eight years, that was because you added the years together?" "Yes."

Candidates will answer specific closed questions accurately during a phone-screen or in an in-person interview.

Establish the facts early in the interview, whether the interview is a phone-screen or an in-person interview. That way, you can move quickly to open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions help you probe for more information than just the facts. They require more than a yes or no answer. One generic, open-ended question I like to ask is, "Tell me about your current job."

Open-ended questions help you learn more about the candidate, but they don't focus on specifics. Use behavior-description questions to focus on a particular area or experience.

Behavior-description questions

Behavior-description questions, a form of open-ended question, help you discover how a candidate has worked in the past. If you know about behavior-description interviewing, you have probably read that "the best predictor of future behavior/performance is past behavior/performance *in similar circumstances.*" JAN86 Two corollaries are helpful in evaluating behavior consistency:

1. The more recent the past behavior, the greater its predictive power.
2. The more long-standing the behavior, the greater its predictive power. JAN86

Although people do learn new technical skills as well as how to apply those skills, they rarely change behavior. When managers give me reasons for why they have fired someone, they typically say things such as the following:

- Sam didn't have enough drive.
- Sally wasn't adaptable enough.
- Steve didn't come to work on time.

Each person's behavior was a key factor in why he or she was fired. When a manager says, "Sam didn't have enough drive," the manager is speaking about initiative. A candidate will indirectly tell you about his or her initiative in answering an open-ended, behavior-description question. You can ask, "Did you ever notice problems at your company that you would have liked to see fixed?" If the candidate answers "Not really," then probe further to see whether things really did run smoothly, or whether the candidate is too polite to answer the question with a yes. If the candidate answers "Yes," then continue the dialogue: "Tell me about what you would like to have seen changed." Follow up that discussion with, "Were you able to effect any changes, and if so, what were they?"

You can detect initiative, adaptability, punctuality, or any of the candidate's personal preferences, qualities, and skills if you ask behavior-description questions and compare the circumstances

of the behavior to your environment. By weighing the candidate's behavior along with his or her technical expertise, you can fairly confidently predict his or her probability of success in your organization.

I generally start an interview by asking the candidate to tell me what he or she is currently working on, or, if the candidate is unemployed, I ask for a description of the most recent project. I tailor my question to elicit information relevant to the functional area for which I'm interviewing. For example, for a developer, I'll say, "Tell me what you're developing now." For a tester, I'll say, "Tell me about your test choices and activities now."

If that's too open-ended an approach for you or the candidate, other questions, which can be tailored to the type of candidate you're interviewing, are given below, in Start here with questions to ask or tailor. When you ask a series of questions, or ask questions that have multiple parts, pause and wait for the answer between each question or part. If you're asking questions on the phone, you will want to take notes, and your silence as you take notes may prompt some people to add detail to their answers to you—a very positive benefit.

If you find it difficult to draw out a candidate enough to learn anything of substance, you are not asking the questions correctly. Practice interviewing in groups of three people: interviewer, candidate, and observer. Have the observer watch and listen and take notes. We have no idea what kinds of questions we use until we hear ourselves.