

Questions, questions – getting the best answers from applicants

Tell me about yourself. What are your strengths? How about your weaknesses?

Maybe those questions sound familiar. Maybe you hear the same phrases come out of your own mouth every time you conduct a job interview. And maybe you're missing something.

Traditional vs. behavioral techniques

If you're frustrated by the lack of helpful and reliable information you get from applicants when you ask the most traditional – and expected – interview questions, you might want to hone your behavioral interviewing techniques. Behavioral interviewing has been growing in popularity for decades now, and many swear by its effectiveness. It's based on the premise that past behavior is likely to show how someone will behave in new situations.

If you start a conversation with a job applicant by describing the job and your expectations and then following with a question like “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” you've clued the applicant in on what you want to hear. Anyone halfway paying attention will know to in some way parrot back what you've said. But if you prepare a little more and devise questions that get at the heart of the kind of information you really need to know to fill the position with the best candidate, you're likely to see superior results. “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” becomes “Tell me about a time when you had to anticipate a problem and take preventive action” or “Give me an example of a time when you had to motivate others.”

Getting to those insightful questions requires thinking about what information you need. Speaker Mel Kleiman, the founder of recruiting firm Humetrics and an author of books on hiring, says of course you want to hire the best, but do you know what the best looks like? When planning behavioral interview questions, decide what qualities and skills you need for the position and tailor the probing, behavioral questions to find that information.

Beyond interviewing

Hiring goes beyond just interviewing. If your organization attracts top applicants, you'll need to be ready to sell them on the idea of coming to work for you. Kleiman advises taking time to come up with a written list of at least 10 reasons a star player should sign on with your organization. Know what you want from your employee – what knowledge, skills, and qualities are necessary for the job – and plan questions to get you that information.

Also, you need to remember that applicants may be more prepared than you are. Advances in technology have made it easier for job seekers to research companies, find open positions, and submit applications. With the number of websites offering job postings and advice for applicants growing, you should be seeing increasingly better prepared candidates.

The people you interview are likely to be well schooled in behavioral as well as other types of interview questions. For example, the Web site *about.com* offers advice on how applicants should handle behavioral interview questions. Examples of questions to expect include:

- What do you do when your schedule is interrupted? Give an example of how you handle it.
- Have you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker? How?
- Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it.

Applicants are also warned that follow-up questions will be detailed. The site advises job seekers to be prepared with stories that show how they have successfully solved problems in the past. They're also advised to review the job description to understand what skills and behavioral characteristics the employer is seeking.

The Quintessential Careers website (*quintcareers.com*) advises applicants to frame their answers in a three-step process called S-A-R, P-A-R, or S-T-A-R: (1) situation (or task, problem), (2) action, (3) result/outcome. Following the process means the applicant would first describe the situation, task or problem, then tell what action he/she took to deal with the problem, and then describe the result of the action.

Take-home point

Interviewers always need to keep in mind that hiring smart prevents many workplace problems, such as issues with productivity, morale and employee lawsuits. Carefully planning your interview questions can put you on the right track to hiring the best.

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