



September 2007

EMPLOYEE INTERVIEWING AND SELECTION

II-B

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Preparation is the key to effective interviewing. In order to plan an interview that will elicit usable information, it is necessary to first determine the information to be obtained from the interview.

CONDUCTING A JOB ASSESSMENT

The first step is to learn as much as possible about the job for which you will be interviewing and the selection procedures which have already taken place. Read a copy of the job announcement and, if available, the class specification.

Next, conduct a job assessment. Start by making a list of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics which are likely to lead to success on the job. Ask yourself questions such as:

- "What makes the people who are good employees successful on this job?"
- "What does it take to do this job well?"
- "Why are some people unsuccessful or poor workers?"

The list you compile will include:

1. Specific knowledge, skills, abilities and aptitudes required to perform the essential functions of the job and that distinguish the superior workers.
2. Related desirable work experience which would prepare one to do the job.
3. Personal characteristics that are required for this particular type of work, such as "patience working with angry and difficult people."

Don't include general traits such as "honest" or "good judgment." These are too difficult to define. Words such as honesty and good judgment mean different things to different people. Instead, ask yourself what you mean by "honesty." Perhaps you mean "the ability to keep careful accounting of petty cash fund." Avoid educational requirements; instead list the characteristics you would expect the education to develop or the knowledge you would expect one to learn, such as "knowledge of accounts receivable methods." Don't include items that an applicant would be expected to learn on the job.

Figure 1 is an example of what we are suggesting. For this example we have used the job of receptionist. You can see how some items on the list have been deleted or improved.

FIGURE 1

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| 1. | High school diploma Educational Requirement
Good memory Too general
Ability to learn and remember names, telephone numbers, and office locations. (Better) |
| 2. | Ability to file alphabetically and numerically. |
| 3. | Ability to do basic typing. |
| 4. | Good attitude. (Difficult to define or evaluate.) Willingness to go to lunch at a different time from the rest of the staff. (More specific.) |
| 5. | Good looking. (Not a job requirement.) Pleasant voice and demeanor. |
| 6. | Unmarried and/or no small children at home. (Any question about this would be illegal.)
Good attendance record. |
| 7. | Ability to remain calm in stressful situation. |
| 8. | Knows schools in district, their locations, and telephone numbers. (Can be learned on the job or by using a directory.) |
| 9. | Ability to answer the telephone. (Does not distinguish a superior worker.) |

After each item remaining on your list, (see Figure 2) indicate if it has previously been evaluated in the application screening process, can be learned about from reference checks, and/or should be covered in the interviews. You can see that some of the items will be assessed in the interview even though they were included in the application screening or will be covered in the reference check.

FIGURE 2

Job Components	Application Screening	Reference Checks	Interview
1. Ability to learn names, telephone numbers and office locations.	X	X	X
2. Ability to file alphabetically and numerically.	X	X	X
3. Ability to do basic filing.	X	X	X
4. Willingness to go to lunch at a different time from rest of staff.			X
5. Pleasant voice and demeanor.			X
6. Good attendance record.		X	
7. Ability to remain calm in stressful situations.		X	X

In this very brief and abbreviated example, we have defined seven job components upon which to base an employment interview. Usually, a list of this kind will be much longer and, in that case, it would be a good idea to combine the components which have common ideas.

INTERVIEW FORMATS

Now that you have determined which aspects of the job will be covered in the interview, you are ready to decide upon the format of the interview. Several are possible.

One-on-one Interview. Although this format is not generally the type of interview the district uses for most jobs, there are some instances when it is appropriate. When hiring temporary or substitute employees, or when considering one or two people for a position, it may be best to schedule the candidate for a series of brief interviews with the appropriate people.

Panel Interview. Panel interviews can be intimidating experiences for candidates and must be carefully coordinated to produce the intended results. The interview team should include those people who will be affected by the hiring decision and who have the job knowledge to meaningfully rate applicant responses. The size of the panel should not be so large as to intimidate candidates, and should reflect the level of the position being filled, e.g., applicants for administrative positions will less likely be intimidated by a large number of interviewers than applicants for support positions. The best rule to follow is to limit the size to the number actually necessary.

One member should assume the role of coordinator, bring the applicant in, introduce him or her to the board, and generally make the applicant as comfortable as possible. Depending on the position being filled, this role may be filled by a representative from Human Resources. The questions should be rotated among the interviewers, and each candidate should be rated independently immediately following the interview using pre-established criteria. After the interviews are completed, the interviewers should discuss the applicants and reach a consensus on each.

A Warning. Some job areas, such as a good attendance record, are almost impossible to rate in a panel interview. That is because an acceptable level of attendance for one rater is unacceptable for another. In a panel interview it is particularly important to ask questions which have definable correct answers and pre-established rating criteria. Also, while a probing question such as "Why did you leave your last position?" may be useful in some instances for a supervisor to use to determine an applicant's personal suitability, they are impossible for a panel to rate using objective criteria.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Use your questions effectively and gather meaningful information by phrasing them carefully. Make your questions understandable and try to keep the wording appropriate for the level of the job. When phrasing questions, it helps to first determine the answer you are seeking; then, design the question which will elicit the correct answer. Let's take a look at various types of questions and how you may use them to get the information you want.

Yes/No Questions. Since you want the applicant to do most of the talking, questions which can be answered with a "yes" or "no" should be used sparingly. They are useful, however, to verify information at the beginning or end of an interview.

Example: "Would you be willing to work at Lynnwood High School one day each month?"

Direct Questions. These are questions that deal with what, where, when, how, and why. They are easy to understand and can be answered concisely. You should use this type of question to gain specific

information. As in yes/no questions, however, overuse of this type could lead to your doing more talking than the applicant.

Examples: "How much of your time was spent typing letters on that job?"
"When did you first act as a supervisor?"

Open-ended Questions. These are questions which allow applicants to answer freely and select the type of information to be included in their answer. Open-ended questions are useful in finding out how well the candidates organize their thoughts and sometimes reveal attitudes and feelings crucial to effective job performance. Problems arise when the answers become rambling, trivial, and bogged down in too much detail. You must be ready to control the amount of time spent on each question.

Examples: "How would this job fit into your long-range career goals?"
"What would you say are the most important factors of this type of work?"

Situational Questions. These are the questions that ask, "What do you think you would do if...?" You describe a situation and then ask how the applicant believes it should be resolved. These questions are useful for getting information about the applicant's attitudes and abilities that is not readily available from the regular screening process. On the other hand, some candidates may answer the way they feel it should be answered rather than reveal their true feelings or possible future actions. Make sure that your questions don't require prior knowledge of specific operating procedures and forms that the applicant will not be familiar with. Or, you could advise the applicants they are not expected to answer in accordance with present department policies or procedures.

Examples: "If you were a supervisor in an office, and your best worker started coming in late, what would you do?"
"If you were working as a cashier in a cafeteria and a student accused you of shortchanging him/her, what would you do?"

Verifying the Application Information. You may use the interview to verify the information they have already supplied in their application materials. For instance, in our example receptionist applicants had been asked to list the jobs on which they had to learn and remember telephone numbers and locations of offices. The interviewer might ask, "You indicated in your letter of application that as a receptionist with XYZ Corporation you had to learn and remember telephone numbers and office locations. Tell me some more about that." The following are more follow-up, probing questions: "How large was the staff you were answering the telephone for? How large is XYZ Corporation? How many lines were you answering? Did you have walk-in customers also? Did you also run errands to other offices?"

A Hint: If an applicant has provided inaccurate or untruthful information in the questionnaire and is not qualified for the position, he or she may be disqualified from competition. The information should be documented and sent to Human Resources.

Mistakes to Avoid. Here are some interviewer mistakes that should be avoided:

1. Using run-of-the-mill questions for which an applicant will probably have developed a pat answer:
"Do you like to type?" to a clerical applicant or "Why do you want this job?"

2. Leading questions which suggest the "proper response":
"Supervising can be pretty rough, can't it?"
"You like working with figures, don't you?"
3. Questions or comments which reveal the interviewer's attitudes:
"That's a good reason to change jobs."
"What has been your experience in dealing with those weird personnel types."
4. Antagonistic questions:
"That wasn't the best thing in the world to do, was it?"
"That's no excuse for not going back to school, is it?"
5. Run-on questions:
"What sort of work were you doing in 1981? No, let me rephrase, what experience did you have in purchasing in 1981-82? No, make it '81 through '83."

"What was your first recreation position, did you enjoy it, and how long did you work in that job?"

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is important to review legal and illegal types of questions and how to conduct an interview that is legal. The information presented here is to be considered throughout the entire interview process.

The questions that you want to ask in an interview are those that reveal how well a potential employee might perform the job that you need done. Often, this is very straightforward —"Can you do this type of work? Have you done this type of work before?" Sometimes, however, there are gray areas in the questioning. This is why the topics of your questions should always be carefully examined. While specific questions may or may not be discriminatory in and of themselves, you should be aware that certain areas of questioning are quite commonly involved in charges of discrimination and are thoroughly incorporated into the laws of the land.

In practice, the most common areas of questioning to avoid are:

- race, color, creed, gender, sexual orientation
- age
- arrest or conviction records
- credit or garnishment records
- family matters, such as number and ages of children, child care, etc.
- marital status, maiden name
- handicap and health history
- political or religious affiliations
- citizenship or national origin (*NOTE: Although these issues are still a basis for discrimination, certain limited inquiries are necessary under the Immigration Reform and Control Act.*)

Let's take a closer look at these areas and at some sample questions that could cause problems.

RACE, COLOR, CREED, GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Unacceptable Questions: All inquiries.
 Acceptable Questions: None.

An employer may lawfully inquire about an applicant's race, gender, or disabilities only to carry out an affirmative action or corrective employment program and/or to collect data for reporting purposes. This information is obtained on the employment application.

AGE

Employment applications may request the applicant to provide their date of birth; however, your only consideration can be if an applicant is of legal age to work if required in the position.

Unacceptable Questions: Asking for proof of age (where not legally required).
 Questions which tend to identify applicants over 40.
 Date last attended high school.
 "This is a relatively young staff. Because of your age, do you think you will be able to relate to young people?"

Acceptable Questions: Asking for proof of age only if there is a minimum age requirement for a particular occupation.

ARREST OR CONVICTION RECORDS

Remember that an arrest is not a conviction.

Unacceptable Questions: Any inquiry relating to arrests. (Law enforcement agencies are exempt from this rule.)

Acceptable Questions: The standard District application requires applicants to answer a question about prior convictions, and a criminal history check is performed on every person hired. It is unlikely that there would be a reason to ask questions in an interview about criminal convictions.

CITIZENSHIP OR NATIONAL ORIGIN

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which was signed into law on November 6, 1986, makes it illegal for an employer to:

1. Hire anyone after November 6, 1986 without documenting that person's identity and eligibility to be employed in the United States. The law requires all employers to attest to having seen documents which verify and prove the individual's identity and work authorization. Employers are further required to retain a record of such attestation.
2. Hire an unauthorized alien.
3. Continue to employ an unauthorized alien if the alien was hired after November 6, 1986.
4. Discriminate against any person, except an unauthorized alien, with respect to hiring or discharge on the basis of the individual's national origin or citizenship.

Inquiries regarding an applicant's employment eligibility must not be part of the selection interview. Verification is to be done by Human Resources after the applicant is offered and accepts employment. It is

appropriate, however, to forewarn applicants that if selected they will need to provide proper documentation of their eligibility on their first day of employment.

If language fluency is required by the position, carefully determine if the applicant is fluent in the necessary language. Do not use questions about citizenship and national origin as a substitute.

Unacceptable Questions: "Are you a U.S. citizen?"
"Your accent is unique. Did you come from Transylvania?"
"How did you learn Spanish?"

Acceptable Questions: "On your application you indicated you have the legal right to accept employment. If you are offered this position, can you provide documents which prove your identity and eligibility to work in the U.S.?"
"How well do you speak Spanish?" (*ONLY when required by the job.*)

CREDIT OR GARNISHMENT RECORDS

Some people prefer employees with "roots" or financial stability, but these kinds of questions have been ruled as discriminatory, since they really don't relate to how well a person could do the job.

Unacceptable Questions: "What's your credit rating?"
"Do you own your own home?"
"Have you ever had your wages garnisheed?"

Acceptable Questions: None.

FAMILY MATTERS AND MARITAL STATUS

Questions on these topics have often been found to be discriminatory to women. All you need to know is if the applicant can meet the work schedule.

Unacceptable Questions: "What arrangements have you made for the care of your children?"
"Are you married?"
"Do you and your spouse plan to have children?"
"What was your maiden name?"

Acceptable Questions: "Do you foresee any trouble in meeting this work schedule?"
"Have you ever worked anywhere under a different name?" (*ONLY when needed for reference checking.*)

DISABILITY AND HEALTH HISTORY

Questions about an applicant's health record, including pregnancy, have often been found to be discriminatory to the disabled. The only consideration is whether or not the applicant can perform the necessary work. Your interview should focus on abilities not disabilities. The same inquiries should be made to males and females alike, visibly disabled and non-disabled alike. (*Questions regarding sick leave usage, etc., may be examined through reference checks.*) If during the course of an interview, the

applicant advises you of a limitation, you may ask if the limitation can be resolved through accommodation and the nature of the accommodation which the applicant considers necessary.

Unacceptable Questions: "Do you have any physical disabilities?"
"Do you have any handicaps?"
"Are you pregnant?"
"Do you plan on having any children?"
"How's your health?"
"Have you ever received Worker's Compensation?"

Acceptable Questions: "Do you have any physical or mental condition which may limit your ability to perform this job?"

POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS

Once again, all you want to know is if the applicant can meet the work schedule. You may also address the issue of overtime, if required.

Unacceptable Questions: "Are you a Republican?"
"What's the name of your pastor?"
"Can you work weekends? (When not required by the job.)

Acceptable Questions: "These are the regular days, hours, and shifts to be worked. Would you have any problems in meeting this schedule?"

PHOTOGRAPHS

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) requires that the employer review identification containing a photograph or other identifying information prior to the new employee starting work.

Unacceptable Questions: An applicant may not be asked to submit a photograph with an application.

Acceptable Questions: A photograph may be requested as the final step of the hiring process.

Information which is volunteered by the applicant during the interview, but which is considered an unacceptable area of inquiry should not be considered when making a hiring decision.

You should obtain, read, and refer to "Pre-employment Inquiries and Screenings" published by the Washington State Human Rights Commission. It is free and can be obtained by calling the Human Rights Commission offices in Seattle. (*NOTE: This booklet was published before IRCA and is outdated regarding citizenship and photograph inquiries.*) And finally, if you still feel unsure about any inquiring you may wish to make, contact a Human Resources Director.

DEVELOPING THE INTERVIEW

A legally defensible interview is one that has pre-established questions which are tied to the critical components of the job and have pre-established criteria for the correct and incorrect answers. This type of

interview is also the most effective in helping to make the best employee selection. The written interview plan will be your documentation and professional "trail" should the need ever arise.

THE INTERVIEW PLAN

The interview plan should include the following:

1. Your opening statement: welcome, introduction, make candidate comfortable, etc.
2. Any information the candidate may need about the job, your department or division in order to respond to the questions to be asked. It may be helpful to provide the applicant with written materials, such as a job description and an organization chart, to review prior to the interview. This is also the appropriate point at which to include a brief agenda of the interview which will help put the candidate at ease.
3. The job component each question is expected to cover and evaluate.
4. Each question that will be asked, written out in full.
5. The answer criteria which should include the correct answer or the answer you expect from a fully qualified candidate. These criteria may also include unacceptable and barely acceptable responses.
6. Information about the position, the organization, and anything else an applicant might wish to know before accepting the position.
7. Near the end of each interview, a statement similar to: "Do you have anything more you would like to add at this time or do you have any questions?"
8. Information about when the candidates might expect to be notified about the job selection and how they will be notified. This should complete the interview.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

PRETESTING THE INTERVIEW

Sometimes the best-laid plans don't produce the desired results. That's why a thorough review of the interview is essential.

Don't turn the first applicant into a "guinea pig." Have the other interview team members review the interview questions and criteria, or if there is time, ask a suitable employee to assume the role of applicant. Run through the interview as planned staying close to the format. Keep notes of any problems you perceive as you conduct the interview, and at the conclusion, ask your "guinea pig" for feedback. You will probably find it necessary to rewrite some questions to improve clarity and to tighten up others. This pre-test will also help you determine the length of time to allow when scheduling the interviews.

SCHEDULING THE INTERVIEW

Very little should need to be said on this subject — only a few reminders. Applicants really appreciate being given adequate notice of an interview. Remember, also, to avoid the appearance of unequal treatment, all applicants should be given the same amount of notification time. It's helpful to put yourself in the applicant's position and realize that you might like enough time to get your best clothes out of the cleaners and prepare yourself mentally for the interview. Occasionally supervisors forget this, particularly when preparing to interview current employees for a promotion. Avoid asking an employee to "please drop by this afternoon for an interview."

PROVIDING A COMFORTABLE ATMOSPHERE

The interview should be conducted in a comfortable, quiet location, free from interruption. It is important to be friendly and pleasant. Take time to build rapport. Only in a relationship of trust and comfort — a relationship largely free of anxiety — will an applicant talk freely, fully, and honestly, so that you can reach an objective decision.

Here are some tips for making the interview an enjoyable experience.

Acting as a gracious host or hostess, extend a warm and cordial greeting and usher the candidate into the interview area. Find out his or her preferred name and use it often. Make the person comfortable so that the responses are spontaneous, open, and informative. Display a friendly face; be attentive and animated.

Once the greeting and introductions have been completed, it may be appropriate to initiate small talk about a noncontroversial subject. A few minutes invested in casual conversation may accelerate the entire interview process, by creating a more relaxed atmosphere where there is a greater willingness to talk about more meaningful areas, even those that are somewhat sensitive.

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

To be a good interviewer, one must be a good listener. Unfortunately, there are few people who are naturally good listeners. For the most part, listening is a skill that must be acquired. It is an active process and must be carefully cultivated.

Silence is a simple but effective technique, but it must be used in a climate of comfort and expectancy. Silence can be used as an implied question or encouragement to talk further.

Another important approach is restatement, which requires one to repeat the gist of the answer given without making a value judgment. An example might be: "It takes me a while to learn something new in a technical area, but once I do, I never forget it." The restatement could be: "Once you learn something, it stays with you."

PROBING QUESTIONS

Some interviewers believe that exactly the same questions must be asked of each applicant in order to conduct a legally defensible and fair interview. This is not always true. If you are asking a question based upon a hypothetical situation or problem, of course you must present the problem or situation in exactly the same way for each candidate and be extremely careful not to elaborate on the question more for one applicant than another, thus giving an unfair advantage to one candidate. However, if you are asking a "direct" question based upon the job analysis and the applicant's background and experience, you will want to give each applicant the opportunity to present his/her qualifications and related experience fully by asking those important follow-up, probing questions. This will assure that the candidate understands fully and completely what you want to know. In this case, it is helpful to refer to the rating criteria and make sure all points have been considered by the applicant. You will then be able to base your hiring decision on all available information.

WHAT ABOUT NOTES?

Making notes during an interview is a matter of personal style. Some interviewers make copious notes; others rely solely on cryptic code words. Conversely, applicants seem to have varying responses to note taking. Some become more nervous when the interviewer takes extensive notes; others feel as though his or her responses were not heard or understood unless the interviewer jots down at least a few words. Our only recommendation is to avoid checking off or circling a score on a rating sheet in such a manner that

the applicant can see his/her score. Remember, this is a job interview, and while it may seem like a test, it shouldn't be made to feel like one. Also remember to keep notes professional in nature. All notes are part of the permanent job file for several years, and if a public records request is received, will be disclosed.

DOCUMENTATION

Because of legal considerations and for your own record keeping, it is a good idea to document all of your interview process. A written record is always useful if questions arise in the future. At minimum, proper documentation should include:

- Job title
- Interviewers' names
- Names of those interviewed
- Date, time, and location of interview
- Standard questions (those asked of each applicant)
- Major topics covered
- Applicant rating forms and rating criteria
- Disposition - hired? not hired? and reasons why

Human Resources provides an interview form for documenting most of these items. Interview sheets, questions, ratings and notes should be returned to Human Resources after the hiring decision as been reached. This documentation will be retained for three years after the completion of the hiring process, according to State law.

EVALUATING THE APPLICANTS

In every group of applicants, some of the people are going to do better in the interview. When you are trying to rate the applicant, it is hard to decide which one is the best for the job. There are a few common errors which pop up at this stage; however, focusing on the job analysis and rating criteria will help keep you on the right course.

1. **Leniency Error.** "Well, everybody looks real good to me." Your truly best applicants become lost in the crowd. Still, there are always differences in a crowd of people. Review your job analysis and your rating criteria again.
2. **Central Tendency Error.** "Well, this is just an average group. Nothing special here." Again, there are always differences. They may be small, but the rating criteria will help you find them.
3. **Severity Error.** "There is nobody good in this group. They are all really poor." Look for those differences again. It is very rare that in a group of applicants, nobody could perform a satisfactory job.
4. **Halo Error.** "This applicant knows concrete well. She'll make a good supervisor." You look for several different things in applicants. Don't let your reaction to one thing about an applicant (good or bad) reflect on other things about the applicant. They may not be related at all.

Any time you conduct an interview, you usually end up with a few good people, a number of average people, and a few poor applicants. As long as the factors you are looking for in the interview are job-related, you should be able to differentiate fairly well among the applicants.

FOLLOWING UP

The supervisor should promptly notify all applicants of the results of the interview. Some applicants may set up expectations just because they have been interviewed. They may even make possible career decisions because of these expectations.

Regarding possible future openings, don't tell an applicant that there will be upcoming vacancies unless there is a good chance of it (given turnover or new positions). Don't make promises or strongly hint about what you might do should an opening come up in the future.