

Interview Questions That Hit the Mark

To separate candidates' hype from their genuine potential, focus on past behaviors—not attitudes.

IF YOU'VE ever had a hiring surprise—someone who, in the interview, seemed like the ideal candidate but then never lived up to expectations—you already know what a vast difference there can be between interview performance and job performance. The culprit is usually the too-casual interview. Filled with informal banter and less-than-incisive questions, such conversations practically invite candidates to give canned responses. To avoid this problem you have to question candidates about their experiences in thought-provoking and unexpected ways. After all, says Clinton, Mass.-based coach Jeffrey Mead, the best predictor of future performance is past behavior.

Long before a candidate comes in for an interview, carefully observe employees in your organization who excel in the role you're looking to fill. Identify their key behaviors, and then use those behaviors to craft questions that draw out a candidate's relevant experiences. But concentrate on past behaviors, not attitudes. "The worst thing you can do is ask managers to pretend they're psychologists," behavior-based hiring authority Bill Byham told *Fast Company*. "You want to take the interpretation out of it."

Steve Brawitsch, a senior manager at Hyperion Solutions in Stamford, Conn., uses behavior-based questioning to hire all of his technical support managers. "We try to find out what life will be like working with a candidate on a daily basis," he says. "We spend a lot of time in the office and we have to feel comfortable with our coworkers." Before each interview, Brawitsch and a team of colleagues review each candidate's résumé and drum up a handful of questions. For example, "You've been asked a question by a client on a product that you don't support, and it's after-hours on Friday. Where do you find the answer?" Explains Brawitsch, "We like to hear that they've been creative. Maybe they found the answer somewhere on the Internet. Maybe they called someone at home, if necessary." But if the candidate says he waited until Monday, "that's not what we want to hear."

As you inquire about candidates' experiences, sooner or later you'll get the "I've never done that" response. When that happens, "you've learned something very important about the candidate," Mead declares. "You've learned not that she can't do it, but that if you were to hire her, she'll be doing a lot of her

tasks for the first time." Ask yourself if that's a scenario you can live with, and inquire about the candidate's ability to learn. For example: "Tell me about a time when you were in over your head on a project. How did you handle it?"

But be forewarned: the word about behavior-based interviewing is out. College career centers, MBA placement services,

and dozens of Web sites offer advice on how to answer such questions. Unfortunately, the more some candidates prepare for an interview, the more they are tempted to embellish the truth. *Training* magazine recently reported that of the six MBAs a major consulting firm called for second-round interviews, three tried to demonstrate their initiative by telling the same story about leading a fund-raising project at their business school. "The

firm called the school and learned that none of the three was even on the fund-raising committee," the article stated. So how can you get beneath the surface of an answer that seems a little too soigné or a claim that stretches credulity?

■ **Get more creative with your questions.** "Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge" just won't cut it anymore.

■ **Drill down for details about how the candidate handled a particular situation.** "If someone says they've worked with Windows NT, for example, we'll narrow it down to just Windows NT questions," says Brawitsch. "If they don't know what they're talking about, they'll give us wrong answers. If they're honest and they don't know the answer, they'll say, 'I really haven't explored that area of NT yet.'"

■ **Ask definitional questions that test a candidate's knowledge of a specific topic.** But respect the distinction between inquiry and interrogation.

A common mistake is to pass judgment too quickly. If you hear something you don't like, "use that intuition to craft a better, more delving question," Mead advises. "Be quick to notice and slow to judge." ♦

Behavior-Based Interview Questions—Some Samples

DESCRIBE a time when you made a poor decision on the job. How did you handle it?

TELL me about a time when you took charge as a leader in a work situation without being formally assigned to that role by your boss.

GIVE an example of a time when you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.

TELL me about a time when you broke the rules.

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