

If You Could Only Ask One Interview Question – What Would It Be?

I was working with a client in Australia last month. We were going through our list of interview questions to build an employee application form for use in our online recruitment system.

Apart from a standard list of questions, our system also enables clients to upload customised questions. The client suggested a brilliant question that I'd like to share with you, but before I do that, some brief thoughts on interviewing.

Many hiring managers go into an interview completely unprepared. Questions and probes are asked on the "fly". Most of these questions seek an opinion from the candidate. Opinions are very easy for people to give. The essence of a good interview question is behaviourally based.

What we are trying to do in an interview is to seek concrete evidence of past behaviour, because past behaviour reflects future behaviour. All too often hiring managers will ask the same old general interview questions. Rather than asking questions that seek examples of how the candidate performed a relevant job tasks, managers concentrate on extraneous ones like *"Where do you see yourself in five years?"*, *"What's your strength and weakness?"*, or *"Tell me about yourself"*.

A better question might be, *"Can you please give us an example of how you plan your day to ensure you deliver on your promised daily tasks?"* Too many hiring managers waste valuable interview time asking questions that have already been answered in the application form or CV.

A proper job interview will usually consist of six to eight pre-planned, behaviourally based questions. Each question seeks explicit examples of what a

person did in relation to a core job competency. The example I gave above would be a good question in relation to the competency of *planning and organizing*.

Apart from behaviourally based questions centred on the job's core competencies, it's important that every candidate is asked the same questions. This way, we're measuring "apples with apples". Asking each candidate a different set of questions is akin to measuring "apples to pears" – great if you want to make fruit salad!

An employment interview should be conducted by two or more people. This helps evaluation and nullifies our obvious biases. Usually it is good practice to have one person ask the interview questions and the other person taking notes. As soon as the interview is completed the interviewers should discuss and rate the candidate's answers in relation to each competency. This helps if you are interviewing several candidates over a few days.

I like to start the interview with some "humanising" This settles and relaxes the candidate, ensuring better outcomes for both parties. I then outline the interview format. For example – *"We are going to ask you some questions; we are looking for concrete examples, not general opinions. We will be taking notes; this doesn't imply you have said something wrong; it helps us recall your answers. And finally, after we have asked you our questions, we would like to give you the opportunity to ask us any questions you may have about this job, our organisation and our people."*

The job interview is the most used tool in the selection process. Quite ironic really, because the way it is usually conducted (free-form - unstructured) makes it the least valid tool you can use. On top of this, it is also the most expensive. At best, a job interview may help you validate the candidate's aptitude - *can they do the job*; it will certainly not help you unearth his or her true attitude – *how they will*

do the job. The only way to measure this is through the use of a validated psychometric test.

So let's get back to the best interview question. Although it is not specifically competency-based it will unearth behaviours that will help understand competence in a range of areas. Here's the question:

"If I was to call your former employer, what two or three things would he/she say that you should keep on doing? And, what two or three things should you stop doing?"

You'll be amazed at the amount of information this voluntarily brings forward.

To get the right interview questions, download our recruitment kit at <http://www.helpmehireright.com> This kit comes with a simple job analysis survey that helps you identify the core competencies for your specific job role: Matched to behaviourally based interview questions.

We also provide our kit when you use our online application system. To see a demo go to <http://www.helpmehireright.com/application>.

Source: I'd like to thank Marietta Lampe at Visit Merchants Australia for sharing her "best interview question" with me. If you have one you'd like to share, I'd love to hear it.

Rob McKay, Business Psychologist
AssessSystems Aust/NZ Ltd
rob@assess.co.nz www.assess.co.nz
+64 9 414 6030