

Want to identify potential star performers and avoid possible problem employees?

DO Ask These Three Questions

These three simple questions can be asked of any applicant.

- **Why did you apply for this position?**
Applicants will reveal their level of knowledge about the position and the organization, as well as their diligence in conducting background research. Applicants who come prepared and take the initiative to learn about the organization are more likely to do the same if hired.
- **Do you have any questions for me?**
Applicants should be prepared for this question, and it is a red flag if the applicant is not. Although stock questions may be the norm, creative applicants will distinguish themselves.
- **What do you like to do in your spare time?**
A seemingly innocuous question perhaps perceived as a time filler, applicants often reveal their true personality characteristics in response. Hiring for a recruiter? An applicant who prefers solitary activities to social ones may not be the best fit. Need a self-motivator? A runner may be an ideal candidate. Applicants with hobbies related to their field of work (e.g., a graphic designer who is an amateur photographer) may enjoy their jobs more.

DO Know What the Position Requires

Identify the traits of star employees already working in a similar position, and target questions to those traits. If employees often work independently, ask for an example of a time the applicant identified a goal for himself and accomplished it. If teamwork is critical, ask applicants to describe a prior experience where they disliked a co-worker but successfully worked with them on a project. Deadline pressures the norm? Ask applicants their best tips for juggling competing tasks.

Interviewers who know the day-to-day duties of the job are best-positioned to assess applicants. If special technical skills are required, it is also helpful to have one interviewer familiar with technical jargon and the standard training in the field.

DON'T Ask These Questions

Many questions that are perfectly acceptable under normal social circumstances become off-limits when interviewing job applicants. Examples of the questions not to ask include:

- What does your spouse do for a living? / Is this your maiden name?
- Do you have/plan to have children? / What type of childcare do you use?
- Where were you born? / Are you a citizen? / Where did you get your accent?
- When did you graduate from high school? / How long do you plan to work before you retire?
- Who did you vote for in the election? / What is your political affiliation?
- Do you belong to any clubs?
- Does your religion prevent you from working weekends or holidays? / What church do you attend? (except in limited circumstances for religious employers)
- How many sick days did you take last year? / Do you have a medical condition that will prevent you from doing this job?
- What is your race?
- Have you ever been arrested?
- Where did you serve in the military? / Were you honorably discharged from the military? / Are you a member of the National Guard or Reserves?
- Why did you get your GED instead of a high school diploma?

To avoid asking the “Don’t” questions, remember that good questions focus on performance, not the person. For example, you may ask all applicants if they are available for required weekend work or travel, but not if family obligations or religious beliefs would interfere with work hours. If physical requirements such as heavy lifting are an essential function of the job, you may ask all applicants if they can fulfill those physical requirements. Rather than a general inquiry about membership in clubs, you may ask if applicants belong to a specific trade-related organization.

DON'T Make Promises

Set reasonable expectations for applicants. A high rate of employee turnover often results from new hires with unrealistic goals for their positions. Do not offer an applicant a job, indicate that the interview is a mere formality, or negotiate salary without express prior authorization.

DON'T Ignore Red Flags

Applicants who speak with hostility about a former employer may be difficult to manage and disrespect authority. Those who change their answers based on what they think the interviewer wants to hear are not being candid. An applicant who speaks the entire time may not have the listening skills needed for effective communications with customers. Demeanor and tone are two intangibles that can only be accessed through a face-to-face meeting.

Interviews provide you with a front-row opportunity to assess applicants. Take full advantage of this opportunity because selecting the right applicant may help avoid performance and conduct issues later.