

DEVELOPING A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO MANAGING

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A Guide to Interview Questions

The following interview questions are matched with various skill areas. Since the interview is usually 15 minutes long, it's important that the interview questions are efficient. Efficiency is defined as a question that will elicit the information you need to make an assessment in an area 80% of the time. Remember, this list is a guide, and is developed on my experience and observation. However, each of you needs to continually re-evaluate this list based on your experience.

1. **EXPERIENCE** – The applicant has experience directly related on the position he/she is applying for.
 - Q. 1. Relate something about your past work experience. This is a general question that will get information on past work experience. If you want information about a specific work experience that relates to your area, try this question.
 - Q. 2. Could you tell me about your job at _____? And use these follow-up questions:
 - Q. 3. What were you responsible for?
 - Q. 4. What skills did you practice there?
If the person has limited or no work experience, asking questions about their volunteer experiences can give you the same type of information.
 - Q. 5. Relate an experience you have had that directly relates to (position).
 - Q. 6. What experience have you had with _____? (Programming a cash register, setting up tournaments, designing, etc.)

In addition to the direct answer you receive, there are additional ways to assess the skill level of the individual in this area. For example:

- Do they know the language or jargon of the area?
- Does their body language reflect self-confidence in this area?
- Do they understand the technical questions asked?
- Are their answers vague or do they reflect knowledge and understanding of the field?

2. **UNDERSTANDING JOB REQUIREMENTS** – The applicant understands the purpose of the service area and understands the scope of the job he/she is applying for.
 - Q. 1. What do you know about _____? (The purpose of services area, the union, the job, etc.)
 - Q. 2. What do you about the services of _____? (The service area, the union, the job, etc.)
 - Q. 3. Describe your perception of the job. (Check answer for accuracy.)
 - Q. 4. What do you know about the _____ position?
 - Q. 5. What do you feel are your strongest abilities, and how would they relate to this position? This is the toughest question of those listed because it requires the candidate to integrate their knowledge about the position and themselves. If they answer poorly, your job is to find out if it's their lack of knowledge about the position or their inability to identify and sell their strengths that caused the problem.
 - Q. 6. What do you think your personal responsibilities are to the organization? This question goes beyond understanding the basic job requirements (i.e., the job description) and checks to see if they have any idea about the expectations we have of an employee, like being on time, enforcing policies, handling cash carefully, etc.
 - Q. 7. Are you willing to work weekends and nights? Check to see if they are familiar with the hours of operation of the service area.

3. **COMMUNICATION** – Hearing and understanding what is being said by others, and being able to speak with clarity so that others can understand the intent of his/her message. Exceptional talent to both perceive others and express himself/herself.

Assessment of this skill area is not usually done through a specific question(s). The interviewer gathers information on this skill all through the interview. The following are some of the behaviors and abilities that would indicate a high level of skill in communication:

- Speaks clearly and articulately.
- Is verbally fluent.
- Converses well.
- Write without difficulty (Check application form. NOTE: This is not checking for neat writing but their ability to express themselves in writing.).
- Displays a good vocabulary.
- Displays alertness – listens accurately and intently.
- Would verbally check for accuracy and understanding.
- Accurately present for others their concepts and ideas (ability to present themselves effectively, to persuade and influence).
- To think and verbally respond quickly under pressure.
- To sense how others are feeling by their actions.
- To avoid interrupting while others are talking.

4. **ADAPTABILITY** – The ability to change his/her behavior in order to cope with working situations. The ability to learn to feel comfortable with different options to accomplish an objective.

Flexibility is a key word in this skill. It basically involves an individual's decision to be flexible in their approach to people and life situations. In order to assess this skill, the interviewer needs to know some more about it and how to recognize it. Adaptability is one of those skill areas that are affected by stress. As stress builds up in a person, their adaptability usually decreases. A person who is under a lot of stress doesn't have the extra energy reserves it takes to be flexible in situations. So, at best, the interviewer will measure the present state of the candidate and their attitude toward being adaptable. If a person is adaptable, they would display the following characteristics:

- Able to shift behavior according to the situation confronting them (and the behavior shift would increase their effectiveness).
- Able to get along with people who have different work styles, beliefs, or values.
- Generally seen as tolerant and respectful of others.
- Usually seen as a versatile person.

If a person is not accomplished at this skill, they would be seen as rigid and inflexible in situations and in their relationship with others.

- Q. 1. Would you describe a few situations in which your work was criticized? (Check here for their reaction to the criticism and what they did with the information. It will indicate their tolerance to change.)
- Q. 2. Could you relate a difficult situation where your patience was tried to the limit?
- Q. 3. Could you describe a situation where you stood up for what you believed in even though everyone else believed differently? How did you handle this? (Check to see if their behavior seemed appropriate to the situation.)
- Q. 4. Have you ever worked with a person who had a completely different style than yours? How did you handle that? (Check to see if they shifted their normal operating style in order to maintain an effective working relationship.)
- Q. 5. What was the most uncomfortable thing about your past job? (Check to see if the "uncomfortable" thing could have been made less so if they were adaptable.)

5. **PROBLEM SOLVING** – The ability to think through a situation and arrive at solutions. Accurately perceives problems ahead of time, sees several possible solutions that would work.

Problem solving is made up of a series of other skills including situational analysis, and decision-making. Therefore, in order to assess skills in problem solving, the interviewer needs to ask questions that relate to analysis and decision-making. If the definition above included actually solving the problem, questions measuring the skills of planning, implementing, following through and initiating would also have to be asked.

- Q. 1. What do you think are your strengths and weaknesses? This is a tricky question. On the surface, you would think this would assess an individual's ability to analyze themselves. However, some people have been told never to mention individual weaknesses in an interview. This means that an individual wouldn't demonstrate an ability to evaluate themselves critically. If you use this question, you might need to ask another question as a cross-check.
- Q. 2. How would you evaluate your present area/department/volunteer organization you work in? Look for an even balance of strengths and weaknesses. Types of strengths and weaknesses indicate the level of analysis that has taken place.
- Q. 3. Pick one weakness; how would you solve this weakness? Or
- Q. 4. Did you attempt to do anything about the weaknesses you saw? If so, what?If not, why not? This is a good follow up to Q. 2 above because it checks out the decision-making, initiating, planning and implementing side of problem solving.
- Q. 5. In your present position, what problems have you identified that had previously been overlooked?
- Q. 6. Have you ever had to make a decision at work because your boss wasn't there to handle it? Could you give an example? How did you arrive at the decision? This checks their problem solving ability in an actual past work experience. (NOTE: Past behavior is one of the best predictors of future behavior.)

6. **STRESS TOLERANCE** – The ability to respond maturely in crisis or unexpected situations. Remains calm in crisis situations and tends to remain confident. Although this definition implies that the individual never panics, it is important to note that there are appropriate times to panic. If a vicious bear was roaming the union halls and an individual calmly walks into the main office and announced this fact in a calm voice.....they would not be acting appropriately for the situation. On the other hand, even though they might be excited, the person who has high stress tolerance can still be effective, make good decisions, etc.
- Q. 1. How do you act when a deadline of yours is approaching?
- Q. 2. What were the biggest pressures on your past job? How do you handle the pressures when they are at their peak?
- Q. 3. Describe how you decide what you need to do (or set priorities) when you are faced with apparently more things to do than there is time to do them? This helps measure decision-making skills in a stressful situation.

In addition to these questions, check how they behave in the interview situation. Although we try to make the candidate feel at ease, it still will be a stressful situation to them. Do they still have the ability to communicate, think logically, etc.? If they don't, it's possible that they'll have a similar reaction in a stressful situation at work.

7. **CREATIVITY** – Looking from different perspectives and offering ideas to bring about improvement. Continually seeks new and better ways to improve – innovative.

Often, this skill is defined specifically as an artistic creativity. However, in our work context, it is more broadly applied and includes looking at things differently and being innovative. One of the skills that contribute to creativity is a tolerance for risk. Usually, a creative person has had to take risks in their life to

become creative. Creative individuals usually look at things from a different angle, which sets them apart from others.

This setting apart process forces them to risk every time they open their mouths and share an idea (because 9 times out of 10 it will be different from the rest of the crowd!) Therefore, checking out the person's tolerance for risk helps assess their creativity. The other quality that contributes to creativity is which hemisphere of the brain a person primarily works from. The right half of the brain is seen as the intuitive part and the left half the linear part. Usually creativity is considered a right hemisphere function.

Q. 1. Have you ever made a mistake? Can you give an example? Check for the number and kind of mistakes and how they integrate their mistakes. Generally, a person who has a high tolerance for risk feels freer to make mistakes. They also learn from their mistakes because they view mistakes as positive, not negative. People who have a lower tolerance for risk have a negative attitude toward mistakes.

Q. 2. What do you think is a more valuable asset – intuition or logic?

8. **PERSISTENCE** – The ability to follow through with jobs.

Q. 1. Could you identify a situation where you failed at something? Expand on the failure and find out what the circumstances were. What did they do about the situation before then gave up? A person who is persistent will hang on way past the normal giving up time.

Q. 2. Identify something in your life that took a long time for you to accomplish. Check the length of time it took and how actively they continued to work towards it. What types of problems did they have to overcome? How did they do it?

Other indicators would be if and how they followed up on the application process. Was the application completed on time? Did they follow up on the offer to see the job description? Etc.....

9. **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING** – The ability to be sensitive to other people's needs and desires. Can easily initiate, build and maintain relationships with other people.

This skill includes a wide range of abilities. It's an important skill to have because most of our employees have direct contact with our clients. In order to assess this skill better, an understanding of the abilities that make up relationship building is needed. These abilities include:

- The ability to initiate contact with others (instead of always waiting for the other to initiate).
- The ability to initiate relationships with different individuals (not stereotyping or prejudging people).
- The ability to identify and establish "common ground" with other people – to sense mutual interests, concerns, etc.
- The ability to make people feel more at ease/comfortable.
- The ability to be sensitive to others' feelings and demonstrate support and empathy.
- The ability to work through conflicts between themselves and others.

In addition to these abilities, an individual who is good at building relationships would be able to make commitments to others, be tolerant of others, be seen as trustworthy, work toward relationships that are interdependent (not dependent or independent) and be willing to share their ideas and feelings with others.

Your ability to build a team within your staff will be directly related to their skills in relationship building. So check the consequences to you, your clients, and your staff if you consider hiring a person who is weak in this skill.

Q. 1. What bothers you most about other people? When you are in a situation where you need to work with a person like you described above, how do you handle it? Answers from people who can't identify anything that bothers them about others are usually unrealistic. Either they haven't had much experience with people who are different from themselves or for some reason they don't want to consciously recognize things that bother them about others. Recognition of problems is a key

ingredient in this skill. You can't work to correct problems in a relationship unless you can first recognize them.

- Q. 2. What about your behavior do you think may bother others? This is a companion to the question above. An individual who is skilled in relationship building realizes that their behavior can bother others as easily as other people's behavior bothering them. In other words, it's a two-way street! Being able to recognize what about their behavior may bother others is the first step to learning how to adjust their behavior to work more effectively with others.
- Q. 3. What do you do when you get mad at another person? This gives you information on how they may behave when they are angry. Usually when a person feels angry, they move to a self-protective position which is called being defensive. This question will give you information on what their behavior may be when they are defensive.
- Q. 4. Would you rather work alone or in a group? Look for attitude towards working in a group. Usually people who are very social and have positive past experience with people would rather work in a group. You need to check to see if they are social and still task oriented.

10. **COMMITMENT** – The degree of dedication to the organization and the desire to be interested in it. Desires to learn more about the organization. Has a good attitude about working for the Student Union.

- Q. 1. Why do you want to work in _____? Usually answers to this question fall into three categories: survival (I need a job), belonging (good place to meet people, get involved), and personal growth (I'd like to learn more about). Commitment is increased by the initial motives for getting the job. Belonging and personal growth will generally set up a higher commitment than survival needs (unless, of course, the person is positively desperate!).
- Q. 2. What did you do to prepare for this interview? Individuals who want the job usually bring a higher commitment to the job initially. Preparing for the interview is one indication of the candidate's interest in the position.
- Q. 3. How do you feel about being asked to spend extra time at work?
- Q. 4. What do you look for in a job? Check to see if their answer matches the kind of experiences they will receive on the job.

11. **SELF-IMPROVEMENT/PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT** – Ability to see areas which need improvement and strives toward improvement. Self-directed both professionally and personally. Continually strives for improvement, never satisfied with results, continually setting new goals once one is achieved.

- Q. 1. What new skills or capabilities have you learned this year?
- Q. 2. What new goals or objectives have you established recently? Check to see if they are improvement related.
- Q. 3. What do you expect to be doing five years from now? This question generally measures long-range planning. However, if the answer is a professional development goal and the experience in the union will help them achieve it, then you have an active example of them improving themselves in order to accomplish a goal.
- Q. 4. What were some of your weaknesses two years ago that you've improved on? How did you go about this?
- Q. 5. What do you hope to learn from this experience? Check to see if they see the job as a learning experience.

12. **INITIATIVE** – Ability to see an uncompleted task and do the job without being told. Initiates new ideas, projects, etc.

- Q. 1. Could you give an example in which you took the initiative to do something without being specifically asked?
- Q. 2. Do you consider yourself a self-starter? If yesCould you give some examples that would support this?

In addition to the twelve skill areas already identified, there are other areas that information needs to be gathered on. They are:

13. **SUPERVISION INFORMATION** – This is information that will tell the interviewer what kind of supervision this person would work best under. This information should be checked against your primary supervision style. It will tell you how much of a shift you will have to make when or if they become part of your staff.
- Q. 1. What kind of supervision would you like from your boss?
 - Q. 2. If you make a mistake, how would you like to be told?
 - Q. 3. What kinds of characteristics do you think make an effective leader different from an ineffective one?
 - Q. 4. How have past leaders or supervisors helped or hindered you in your ability to perform your job?
 - Q. 5. What kind of direction do you prefer from your boss?
 - Q. 6. If you were to fail at something, what would make you fail?
14. **WORKING STYLE** – What is their working style in an organization? Do they work as a team member or more independently? If it's important for you that your staff work together, these questions will help you predict this.
- Q. 1. What kind of climate do you like to work best in?
 - Q. 2. How have you helped or hindered others in performing their jobs effectively?
 - Q. 3. What expectations do you have of other staff members you'd be working with?
15. **MOTIVATION** – Learning what motivates them. Herzberg identifies four basic motivators for people. They are: achievements (solving work problems, seeing the results of your efforts, completing a difficult task, creating a “whole” tangible product, having meaningful responsibilities), recognition (respect from peers, acknowledgement from the supervisor(s), receiving feedback on your performance, knowing you have accomplished a meaningful task), participation (in the planning and scheduling of your work, being allowed to make important decisions, being part of organizational decision-making and problem solving teams which are related to your area of responsibilities), and growth (being able to increase your skills and competencies, applying new learning to job tasks, becoming more competent).
- Questions that will help you identify motivators are below. Generally speaking, the more motivators a person has, the easier it is for the supervisor to provide experience which will motivate the employee. Continued motivation on the job increases commitment.
- Q. 1. What 3 accomplishments are you most proud of in your life? Why? Check to see if the accomplishments reflect Herzberg's motivators and how many different ones are mentioned.
 - Q. 2. What aspects of your present job do you enjoy most and why?
 - Q. 3. What kinds of things influence your job performance?
16. **GENERAL** – There are some questions that help add depth to the candidate. While they don't zero in on any one skill area, they may give the interviewer information on many areas.
- Q. 1. If you asked a friend to describe you, what adjectives do you think he/she may use?
17. **PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION** –
- Q. 1. Do you consider yourself organized? Could you give an example?
 - Q. 2. Describe how you plan your day.
18. **CLOSING QUESTION** –
- Q. 1. What do you need to know in order to determine whether or not you could handle this job? Could you handle it?