



INNOVATIVE INTERVIEWING

A Guide to Understanding the Questions

by Jennifer Scott

CEO, Chief People Officer, HireEffect, LLC



Introduction

The interview is a type of conversation aimed at matching the right people to the right jobs. As an employer, it is an essential part of your candidate selection process. Since the cost of a mis-hire can be as high as 20 times an employee's base salary, it's important to understand how to conduct an effective interview, and how to keep those interviews as objective as possible.

As with any business decision, before you begin, it is critical to prepare. In order to remove subjectivity when evaluating your interviews, here are some things you can do.





Interview Question Types

There are many different types of interview questions: general, straightforward questions; behavioral and situational questions; actual case questions; even brainteasers. As past performance is the most reliable indicator of future results, especially when it is tied to the specific competencies for a position, we encourage you to combine these types of questions (minus the brainteasers) in your interviews to help you objectively determine the right hire.

In this document, we will provide you with examples of competency-based questions, experience-based questions, and culture fit / values alignment questions that may be relevant to accounting and finance roles for your growing business. We will also provide you one example of a case question, as these depend largely on your individual business objectives.

Competency-based Questions

Sometimes called behavioral interview questions, competency-based interview questions are intended to provide you with specific examples of times in which your interviewee demonstrated particular skills or attitudes. You may ask questions about a variety of competencies depending on the success factors required for the specific job. Here are a few examples of competencies required for many professional services firms, and some questions to determine behavior.

Adaptability

1. Which change of job in your career so far have you found the most difficult to make? What steps did you take to become effective in that role?
2. Tell me about a time when you were asked to do something you had never done before. How did you react? What did you learn from that experience?
3. What kinds of organizational changes have you found the easiest and most difficult to accept?

Capacity to Learn

4. Describe a complex situation in which you had to learn a lot, quickly. How did you go about learning, and how successful were the outcomes?
5. Describe a past mistake. What did you learn from the experience and how have you applied what you have learned?



6. Tell me about a time when your manager was unavailable when a problem arose. How did you handle the situation? With whom did you consult?

Analysis Skills

7. Do people generally regard you as one who diligently pursues every detail, or do you tend to be more general? Why? Can you give me an example?
8. Describe a situation in which you chose to dig more deeply for facts than what was asked of you. What prompted you to do so? What was the outcome?
9. Describe an instance where you had to make a decision without all of the necessary information. What was the outcome?

Collaboration

10. Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with. How did you handle interactions with that person?
11. If a coworker consistently did something that hindered your quality of work, how would you resolve it?
12. Describe a situation where you were able to influence others on an important issue. What approaches or strategies did you use?

Prioritization

13. Tell me about a time when you had to juggle several projects simultaneously. How did you organize your time? What was the result?
14. Are you better at juggling a number of priorities or projects at once, or attacking a few projects, one at a time? Please elaborate.
15. Everyone procrastinates sometimes. On what type of work projects do you tend to procrastinate?

Integrity

16. When have you confronted unethical behavior, or chosen to not say anything, in order to not cause trouble?



17. Tell me about a time when you couldn't meet a commitment to a business partner or coworker. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome? What might you have done differently knowing what you know now?
18. Describe a situation when it was difficult for you to take responsibility for a decision or an action. How did you handle it?

Self-Awareness

19. If I were to ask someone who doesn't like you, why they don't like you, what would they say? Why would they say that about you?
20. How much feedback do you like to get from the people to whom you report? In what form do you prefer to receive that feedback (face-to-face, written?)
21. Have you ever had a job where you felt untrusted? How did this effect your work?

Experience-based Questions

Sometimes called situational interview questions, experience-based interview questions are intended to provide you with how your interviewee views their past work experience. You can start with actual work history, and move into questions specifically related to the success factors you identified.

1. (Review work history and ask the following for each relevant role.) What were some of your big wins or successes in this role? What mistakes or failures did you experience? What did you do to rectify them? What would your supervisor say about you? Why did you leave? (Or, why are you leaving?)
2. On a scale of 1-10, 10 being the best, how would you rate your organizational skills? Why did you choose that number, and not one below? (strengths) Why did you not choose the one above? (weaknesses)

Ex. I choose an 8. I am not a 7 because I usually know where everything is, I have a solid filing system and I meet my deadlines. I am not a 9 or 10 because my desk often looks like a hurricane blew through and I constantly change my mind about the type of day-planner or notebook I want to use.

You can use this question for any skill that is important to the role including QuickBooks, Excel, A/P, Payroll, etc.



3. What specific skills did you gain from your last job? Describe an important project you worked on using those skills.
4. What sort of obstacles have you faced in your present/most recent job, and how did you handle them?
5. What steps do you take to ensure accuracy in your work?
6. What role do you play in meetings? Are you more likely to speak more, less or the same as others?
7. Looking back through your career, what are some common themes? What are you known for?
8. What are your favorite productivity tools and how do you use them? (This question provides a view into a candidate's efficiency, as well as how tech-savvy they may be.)
9. What actions would you take in the first few weeks should you join our company?
10. Why should I hire you?

Bonus: We also suggest asking what questions the candidate has for you. This will give you an opportunity to see what's on their mind, and how well they prepared for the interview.

Culture Fit / Values Alignment Questions (and why you want to know)

Having the right people on your team may be just as much about culture and values as it is about skill; in fact, our experience tells us the fit is even more crucial as skills can be taught. To help you determine if a candidate's core values are consistent with those of your business, here are some questions to consider, and why you should ask them.

1. In thinking about this role, what attracts you to the position? Why are you interested in this job?

Why? This is about the relevancy of work. A factor of employee engagement and retention is impact. Employees want to see positive results and effective outcomes from their work. If the job they think they are walking into is not the same as the actual job, retention will be a challenge.



2. Based on the research that you have done, what do you think you will like most about working with our company?

Why? This is about the possible connection with the company, aside from the work. Another factor of employee engagement and retention is connection. Employees, in fact all people, require some sense of belonging and significance to feel good about their performance. And, since they are the people most likely speaking with your customers, you need them to feel good about their performance.

3. Tell me about the very first thing you did that you ever got paid for (your very first job.) (Babysitting? A paper route? Walking dogs?) Think back – what did you learn from that experience?

Why? You want to learn about the values they adopted as a result of their experience.

Ex: The very first job I ever had was babysitting when I was 12. I worked one evening a week for a single mom of 2 who taught swimming exercises to a group of mastectomy patients. They needed her for so many reasons. And she needed me. I was never late. I never called out sick. I was reliable and dependable at 12, because that's what I had to be. 30 some-odd years later I am 100% positive that any of my clients will say that I am reliable and dependable, and I always get the job done.

You can ask this question about several early jobs. *NOTE: we do not suggest this question for senior or executive level hires.

4. I'm going to give you a list of five things. While they're all important, tell me the one thing that is most important to you in making your next career move. Is it money, recognition, stability, challenge, or environment?

Why? While any answer may be acceptable in general, you need to know that the answer aligns with your company's culture. If the candidate says "recognition" and your company has a recognition culture, you're off to a great start. If the person says "money" is the most important, and you know your organization traditionally pays at the lower end of the competitive scale, you know you have an issue to address.

Another critical component to consider is how the answer fits in with what you already know about the candidate. If the person has been laid off repeatedly throughout his or her career, perhaps due to company closures or lack of work, it makes perfect sense for "stability" to be the response. If the person says "challenge", but has held the same level of responsibility for the last 10 years, you need to explore that further.



5. In what type of environment do you feel you thrive?

Why? You need to know that the answer aligns with your specific work environment. If you have an open-office environment with no “privacy”, and a candidate has an expectation of his or her own office, you need to explore that further.

6. What are the three things that are most important to you in a job?

Why? You need to know that the answer aligns with your specific opportunity. If a candidate prefers to work independently, and this role is very team-oriented, it will not likely work out. If a candidate is looking for a lot of autonomy, and the supervisor is a micro-manager, again, it is not going to work out.

7. Describe your ideal company culture. What five characteristics does it have?

Why? This is a great way to see if a candidate is a match for your internal culture. Note that to use this question, you first need to know what five words actually describe your internal culture. Then you can determine how closely your candidate’s answers are to your company’s reality.

An Example of a Case Question

Case questions will be specific to your business. They help uncover a candidate’s skills at business, communication, logic, and reasoning by presenting them with specific problems you face in your work. These can either be problems you have already solved or, they can be current problems you are facing. Either way, you want to evaluate the candidate’s thought process and critical thinking skills.

Here is an example of a case question we present to candidates when hiring for our Accounting Technology & Training division.

Ex: We have a small business who has come to us for assistance. They are currently using QuickBooks desktop, a basic CRM, send out paper invoices, and have a bookkeeper who comes in quarterly to do bank reconciliations.

They would like to streamline their expense reimbursement process, improve the collections process, and have better reporting. How would you go about assisting this client?

Given what HireEffect is known for, here are the points we listen for:

- Move them to a cloud accounting system (Xero, QuickBooks Online)



- Get them on a CRM that integrates with the cloud accounting system (Insightly, Capsule)
- Find applications that integrate with the accounting system to streamline and automate processes (Expensify, TSheets, Hubdoc)
- Get real time data leveraging automation (ex. pulling in bank fees), and completing reconciliations at least monthly, if not more often.

What we need to hear are the general steps, and bonus points are given if the candidate actually mentions the tools.

Closing the Interview

To close out your interview ask the candidate if there is anything else they believe is important for you to know that you have not already discussed, and then ask them again if they have any other questions.

Creating a structured interview that blends these different types of questions will significantly decrease the subjectivity inherent in hiring decisions. We prefer interviews that are conversational and friendly, and we recognize balancing that with getting the information you need can be challenging. It's important that you really listen to the responses you get, and create a dialogue with follow up questions. And, our best tip: Don't be afraid of silence as they compose their thoughts. You might be amazed by what people will tell you if you let them.

Not feeling confident in identifying and hiring the right people who really fit your business? Let our Talent Acquisition team help you out!