



## Interviewing Tips for Employers

The word “interview” comes from the French *entrevue* or *intrevoir* meaning to see one another, to meet. However, Webster’s definition is a “formal consultation.” Ah, ha. Maybe we have a clue here. Maybe we are trying to make a simple meeting between two people into a stiff-collared formal confrontation. It looks like a lot has been lost in the translation.

Poor interview skills, the bane of management, cause more than just a simple breakdown in communications, as though that were not enough to snarl progress. Consider these factors: an inept executive makes a hiring error costing his company \$100,000 or more. A clumsy manager promotes the wrong employee and half the department resigns. A careless supervisor errors by terminating an innocent salesperson and the company’s attorneys run up a \$50,000 tab while losing the suit. In each case, good interviewing techniques and skills could have prevented the ensuing disaster. Research demonstrates that most managers have a tendency to form an early bias in the interview and then attempt to support that bias by gathering data which favors it and closing off information which negates it. But skilled preparation for the interview can prevent that and ensure objectivity in hiring.

Our purpose is to help you develop your own interviewing style. Due to time and space constraints, we will not attempt to cover the multitude of specific interviewing techniques recommended for each of the various situations. However, these are some generally accepted principles which apply to most interview encounters.

**Be prepared** is the first law of good interviewing. All interview situations involve either active or passive lines of questions. The interviewer generally is the active participant and he is the one that should be the better prepared of the two. He should enter the interview situation in mental preparedness knowing where he is going with the meeting. Trying to “wing-it” or flying by the seat of his pants can result in the tables being turned. He can, and probably will, lose control and the other party (who is supposed to be the interviewee) becomes the active party. I have witnessed employment interviews where the prospective employee left disillusioned and disinterested following a poorly planned meeting. Even in the case of a non-directive interview where the candidate is encouraged to talk about what he or she wishes, the interviewer should have a basic game plan to follow. Build your interview questions on the 10 most critical skills and qualities needed for the position. Make sure your questions are specific enough to be able to find out if they can do it, relevant to the position at hand and measurable in ascertaining their level of competency. Once you are comfortable with your questions, remember to use the same ones on each applicant and take good notes so that you can accurately assess which candidate fits the position best.

**Know where you are going.** Before entering an interview, follow the example of the successful salesperson who will not call on a prospect until first deciding on the objective of the call. It’s all a part of the planning required for good interviewing. Even a non-directive interview must have an objective and a desired end result. While interviewing, constantly remind yourself of the objective of the session. It helps keep you on track.



**The one/two rule of interviewing.** God gave us one mouth and two ears for a very simple reason. So we can be better interviewers. We should listen twice as much as we talk – the one/two rule. We don't gather information when we talk – only when listening. A fault of over-talk is that we tend to telegraph information to the other party through the inept use of leading questions. It's dangerous to let the other party know what you hope for the reply to be, and you haven't learned a thing except maybe that the other party is smart enough to say what he knows you want to hear. An example of a leading question would be: "What do you think about working late if it's necessary to get the job done?" The wording of the query indicates the attitude and feeling of the interviewer and reveals to the other party what type of response is expected. There are better ways to find out if the prospective employee believes in working until the job is complete.

**Open-end questions.** Use questions that call for an explanation – not a simple yes or no. One word answers don't reveal much information. Open-end questions like "tell me about yourself" will draw out needed information. When you ask, "Why do you feel that way?" or "Tell me more about that," you get meaningful and informative dialogue. Small queries like "Why?" can draw huge responses. A talented interviewer can keep the other party talking for as long as he wants by simply saying, "Tell me more," each time the interviewee starts to run down.

**Silence is golden.** Inexperienced interviewers show their nervousness by overtalking. They violate the one/two rule. A good way to overcome this fault is to inject a liberal amount of silence into the interview. This is much easier said than done. It's a common problem with new salespeople. How many times does the novice insurance salesperson end up buying the policy back by continuing to talk? All interview situations call for silence at strategic moments. The use of it calls for training and experience. When mastered, the use of silence can result in a flow of crucial information that might otherwise not be volunteered. Most people can't stand silence. They feel a compulsion to fill the void with words. Just be sure it's not you who fills those gaps. In selling, there is a saying – whoever speaks first loses.

**Objective vs. subjective questions.** In digging out information about background and experience, questions may be tailored to call for objective responses. For attitudes, value and feelings, the line of questions should call for subjectivity. Both have their places in the interview process. A danger, however, is when the careless interviewer is not aware of whether his questions call for subjective or objective data. The interviewer may be asking a sequence of subjective questions, and just as the other party is getting into his or her personal convictions, the unwitting interviewer breaks the line of subjective questions and starts asking objective ones. The interviewer loses. He fails to gather facts about attitudes, values and feelings. These are especially important in employment and evaluation interviews.

**Seek specifics; avoid generalities.** Someone says, "I am always having problems with John." This sort of general statement calls for specifics before it can be evaluated and acted upon. Ask for examples (the open-ended questions) and listen carefully (the one/two rule). Don't settle for general statements. As a rule they are of no value. Follow each with something like



**“That’s interesting, tell me more about that.”** Like a skilled courtroom lawyer, you will soon draw out the facts.

**Seek clarification.** Be alert to inconsistencies. “You say your reviews and appraisals were favorable at the last company, but you were passed over for promotion. Why was that?” Asking this type of question (open-end) should provide you with a better insight into the situation or at least into the person. If it doesn’t work, then try the next suggestion.

**Store information and loop back.** Someone tells you he likes doing a certain thing, but you sense a psychological barrier exists. Continue the line of conversation and later loop back to the point in question. If you have reason to doubt whether he really likes doing that certain thing, you could appear to be questioning or even doubting his statement by digging into it at that time. Better to store it and later come back to the subject from a different angle. This looping back gets you over the psychological hurdle and enables you to uncover the facts. Carefully placed open-end questions will usually bring out the needed information to confirm or deny the earlier statement. Be careful that you do not telegraph your feeling and opinions in the process. This interview technique requires skill and practice – but it works.

**Test through repetition.** During the interview ask the same question in different ways. Are you getting the same answers? You may want to take this tack: “I realize I asked this before, however, I would like to hear once again why you ...” Odds are you will gain additional insight and clarity by repetition. Caution: don’t overdo it.

**Reflection.** In most interviews, statements are made where you want more information. Someone says, “I seem to have a great deal of trouble with figures.” Reflect the statement with, “You say you have problems with numbers?” Inevitably the person will begin to talk more and will go into more detail about the problem. Use reflection sparingly or the other party will wonder about your ability to comprehend.

**Interpretation.** This is another one to be used with care and should not be overused in the interview process. However, it is a helpful tool. In using it, you are making an interpretation of something the other party may have suggested or merely implied but not stated explicitly.

For example, an interpretation could be something like: “Is it true that you feel it would be better to cancel the project?” Closely observe the response. You may be guilty of misinterpretation, which is one more form of break-down in communications. Remember the rule about listening when using interpretation.

**Assumptions.** Instead of assuming, ask. If you think the other party meant to say something, find out. Through the use of one or more of the above techniques, you may test your assumption. When in doubt, ask “Am I correct in assuming you prefer to work only by appointment?” Then listen. Your assumption may be correct – or it may not. Interviews should be communicative. They can be when a party in doubt asks.



**Avoid arguments.** Leave that sort of thing to the attorneys. They are paid to argue. In most interview situations – even an unpleasant termination interview – you will want to use your skills for gathering information and facts on which to take action. You don't learn anything by disagreeing – except possibly how disagreeable you or the other party really can be. The use of the open-end question can be more effective. When a statement is made that you can't accept, respond with a question like, "I hear what you are saying, but I am not sure I understand. Would you tell me more about that?" Or, you may prefer to be more direct by asking "What makes you feel that is true?" Prudent questioning can be a high form of argument. It's a way to disagree without being disagreeable.

**Avoid hearsay.** If you or the other party doesn't have first-hand information, avoid using or accepting it. At least properly identify it: "Bill, I have no way of knowing for sure if it's true, but I am told by others there is a problem in your territory. Do you have any first-hand knowledge about it?" You have acknowledged your information is hearsay and you request first-hand facts.

**Here is a Checklist for lines of inquiry for a hiring interview. It is not complete but can give you a logically progressive approach to your time with each candidate:**

- **Job qualification questions:** This should comprise the questions you formulated on page 1 of this article under "Be Prepared" based on the 10 most critical elements of the position under consideration. The advantage of handling these questions first is that you will be obtaining the most accurate answers to your questions before the interviewee has gathered enough information about the position to simply tell you what you want to hear.
- **Job history questions:** Tell me about your work history. What was the best position you ever had – why did you leave it? What has been the biggest challenge of your career and how did you handle it? What do you like most about your current position? Tell me about some of your accomplishments in your current position? If you could make any changes in your current position, what would they be? Why do you want to leave your current position? What about your past positions – why did you make the changes you did?
- **Personal:** Tell me about your goals in the next 5 years? What would you like to be doing? What are your strengths? Weaknesses? What interests you most about this position? Why do you think I should hire you over anyone else wanting this position? What qualities do you have that you see fitting in well with this company?
- **Pet Questions:** This is the place to put any pet questions you may have that give you specific insight or have proven effective for you in the past. An example: If I were to call your current manager and ask him to tell me about you, what would he say?



- ***The position:*** Here is where you finally elaborate on the position in detail. You have learned what you need to know about the candidate and now you can share more clearly what you're looking for in an employee. In some cases, candidates at this stage even realize themselves how far they fall in skills from the ideal fit and eliminate themselves. They fully understand why someone else is ultimately hired for the position. If, however, the candidate is a potentially good fit for the position, it gives the hiring authority the opportunity to sell the interviewee on the company and elaborate on benefits and any other accessory issues. And lastly, the interviewer should ask the candidate what questions he has about the position, the expectations, etc.
- ***In closing the interview:*** I have enjoyed the visit. Do you have any additional information you think I should have? Is there anything you feel we should further discuss? Provide the candidate an estimated time frame in which a decision will be made about the position and provide any materials you would like the candidate to take with him.