

Lesson 3:

HOW TO WRITE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



Paula M. Schultz
June 1995



Overview

Introduction In the last lesson, you learned how to write a job description. In this lesson, you'll learn how to write interview questions based on that job description.

Purpose This lesson explains how to write interview questions which focus on bona fide occupational qualifications.

Importance In today's world of restricted hiring programs, downsizing, early-outs, continual reorganizations, cross-training, and "doing more with less," it is more important now than ever that you hire the right person for the job. A good set of behavior-based, job-relevant, non-discriminatory questions will improve your chances of making the best choice, the first time.

On a more personal level, as an interviewer and selecting official, you will be held accountable for ensuring that the questions you ask meet the guidelines set forth under federal law and Agency regulations.

Lesson Overview This lesson will present guidelines to help you write interview questions which focus on bona fide occupational qualifications. The lesson will cover

- behavior based interviewing
- open-ended questions
- discriminatory questions
- writing interview questions
- evaluating interview questions for possible discriminatory characteristics

Lesson Objectives

- You will identify interview questions which are job-relevant, behavior-based, open-ended, and non-discriminatory.
- You will write a set of job-relevant, behavior based, open-ended, and non-discriminatory interview questions based on a written job description. You will have a list of categories and specific questions to avoid.

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Overview, Continued

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What is Behavior-Based Interviewing?

Introduction Before you can develop a set of interview questions, you need to become familiar with behavior-based interviewing.

Definition A behavior-based interview is an interview in which a candidate is asked to provide specific examples of past job behavior. This type of interviewing is based on the concept that single best predictor of future job performance is past job behavior.

Why focus on past behavior? Research over the past two decades shows that hiring decisions based on actual behavior vice personality traits are more accurate than those based on the interviewer's "sense" or "feeling" about a candidate. Interviews that probe for past job behavior have been found to be more reliable than ones that focus on personality traits such as "I'm dependable," or "I'm hardworking."

Analogy Using examples of a candidate's past job behavior as a predictor of future performance is like using a mutual fund's performance history to predict its future performance.

While there is not guarantee that a mutual fund that has done well in the past will do as well in the future, the fund's past performance is still the best predictor of how well it will do in the future.

Example 1 Here are examples of questions which could be asked in a behavior-based interview for a supervisor's position.

- "Think of a time when you had a miscommunication with a subordinate, co-worker, or supervisor. Tell me how you resolved that situation."
- "Describe a situation where you felt it was necessary to break company policy or alter standard procedure."
- "Think of a time when you had to devise a clever, creative way to motivate an individual. How did you do it?"

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What is Behavior-Based Interviewing?, Continued

Example 2

Here are examples of questions which could be asked in a behavior-based interview for an office manager’s position. Note that these questions could also be posed to individuals entering or re-entering the work force.

- “Think of a day when you’ve had many things to do and describe how you scheduled our time.”
- “Give me an example of a time when communicating with a repairman or salesman was very difficult. Tell me how you handled it.”
- “Tell me about a time when you made a quick decision that you were proud of.”



Don’t Ask

Here are several examples of questions you should not ask in a behavior-based interview.

- “Tell me what you believe your best qualities are.”

This question does not ask for an example of past behavior. The response will not give the interviewer any useful information relative to the candidate’s level of proficiency or future job performance.

- “Do you like working with people?”

As with the previous example, this question does not ask for specific examples of the candidate's past behavior.

- “Can you use a PC?”

Although using a PC may be important on the job, the response to this question won’t give the interviewer any data relative to the candidate’s level of proficiency or future job performance.

Characteristics of Behavior-Based Interviewing

Behavior-based interviewing

- allows you to evaluate the candidate’s ability to do the job
- allows you to focus on person’s behavior, not the person
- can be applied regardless of the skills you’re evaluating
- helps you avoid making decisions based totally on intuition

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What is Behavior-Based Interviewing?, Continued



Practice

Circle the letter preceding behavior-based questions.

- A. What word processing software do you use?
 - B. I see you're a Little league coach. We like to see our people involved in the community. What other community programs are you involved in?
 - C. In your present job, is there a problem person you have to deal with? Tell me how you handle that relationship.
 - D. Have you ever had a crisis on a day when most of the people in your branch were on annual leave? How did you manage that crisis?
-



What are Open-Ended Questions?

Introduction

Now that we've explored behavior-based interviewing, we need to look at open-ended questions.

Definition

Open-ended questions are questions which cannot be answered by a single word or fact. They encourage the candidate to talk and provide the interviewer with valuable data on which to base a hiring decision.



Question Format

Questions do **not** have to

- begin with the words what, where, when, who, why or how
 - end with a question mark
-

Example 1

Here are three examples of open-ended questions.

- “How do you handle a customer’s complaint call?”
 - “How did you handle a recent customer complaint call?”
 - “Describe a recent customer complaint call and how you handled it.”
-



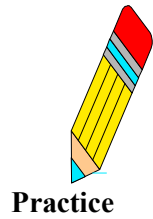
Don't Ask

Here are two questions which are **not** open-ended.

- “Mary, have you ever used a personal computer?”
This is not an open-ended question because Mary can respond with one word: Yes or No.
 - “John, what is your job title?”
This is not an open-ended question because John can respond with a single fact. i.e., systems analyst.
-

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What are Open-Ended Questions?, Continued



For the questions listed below

- write Y (yes) next to the open-ended questions
- write N (no) next to questions that are not open-ended
- explain why the question is or is not open-ended

___ 1. Are you a professional electrical engineer?

Explanation: _____

___ 2. How did you decide to apply for the Cross-Training Program?

Explanation: _____

___ 3. How long have you been a supervisor?

Explanation: _____

___ 4. Describe how you handled a particularly difficult negotiation.

Explanation: _____



What are Discriminatory Questions?

Introduction We've just learned about behavior-based interviewing and open-ended questions. Now, we'll learn how to determine whether or not a question is discriminatory.

Importance As you learned in the first lesson, federal law mandates that all hiring decisions be based on bona fide occupational qualifications. If a person has the necessary skills to be successful in the job, you cannot discriminate based on sex, age, ethnic origin, religious preferences or affiliation, sexual preference, marital status, or disabilities. You have to avoid asking questions that may be construed as intended to gather information that has nothing to do with a person's qualifications.

Definition **Discriminatory questions** are those questions which ask for information relative to the candidate's

- sex
 - age
 - marital status
 - ethnic origin
 - religious preference
 - sexual preference
 - disabilities
-

Examples Following are examples of discriminatory questions.



Don't Ask

- "How old are you?"
- "When were you born?"
- "When did you graduate from high school?"

Although the second and third questions don't directly ask for the candidate's age, they may be construed as such because if you know when a person graduated from high school, you also know, with one or two years, the candidate's age.

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What are Discriminatory Questions?, Continued

Non-examples

Following are examples of non-discriminatory questions.

- “This job involves 30 percent overnight travel. Would this be a problem for you?”

You can't ask if a person is married or has children. However, if the job involves spending 30 percent of the employee's time on overnight travel, you can ask each applicant something like the question above.

- “Can you lift up to 50 packages per day, each may weigh 30 pounds?”

You can't ask if a person has any disabilities. However, if the job requires the ability to lift up to 50 packages per day, each of which weights up to 30 pounds, you can ask each candidate something like the question above.



Note!

When there are certain valid requirements for the job, you can ask questions that might otherwise be considered discriminatory...if you do it very carefully and if you ask each candidate the same questions. If you have any doubt about a specific job qualification that some might consider to be discriminatory in nature and how to determine if candidates can meet that job qualification, seek guidance from the Office of the General Counsel.



Practice

A list of possible interview questions follows. Place a check mark in front of the discriminatory questions and explain why they are discriminatory.

- ___ 1. “I see you're interested in a transcriber's position. Do you have good hearing?”

If this is a discriminatory question, explain why: _____

- ___ 2. “Everyone who hires on must work alternate weekends. Would you have difficulty meeting that schedule on a regular basis?”

If this is a discriminatory question, explain why: _____

- ___ 3. “This position requires standing for extended periods of time. Would that be a problem for you?”

If this is a discriminatory question, explain why: _____

- ___ 4. “Do you have someone to take care of your children if they get sick during the day?”

If this is a discriminatory question, explain why: _____



How to Write Interview Questions

Principle To develop fair and effective interview questions, you must focus on the candidate's bona fide occupational qualifications.

Guidelines To focus your interview questions on a candidate's bona fide occupational qualities, follow these guidelines:

- determine which of the required technical skills you will investigate during the interview
- determine which of the required performance skills you will investigate during the interview
- formulate a question for each selected technical and performance skill
- write questions that are:
 - job-relevant
 - behavior-based asking for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
 - open-ended
 - non-discriminatory
- review questions to ensure they meet the above stated guidelines

Example 1 Lynn wants to fill a vacant executive secretary's position in your office. She completes the job analysis, lists the required technical and performance skills and highlights those skills she plans to investigate during the interview.

Technical Skills

1. Operate SUN terminal
2. Operate STU-III and fax
3. Use FrameMaker
4. Operate phone system

Professional Skills

1. Deal with senior managers
2. Manage office staff
3. Follow through on tasks and report results
4. Cope with numerous, simultaneous inquires

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How to Write Interview Questions, Continued

Example 1, (continued)

Lynn prepares the these questions to ask each candidate during the interview.

1. In our office ,we work exclusively with FrameMaker on SUN terminals. Describe a situation in which you had to format a large document in FrameMaker on a SUN terminal and how you did that.
2. This position will require you to deal with senior managers who may not be happy about to wait to see me. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with someone senior to yourself who was unhappy about information you were providing. How did you handle that?
3. Think about a time when you people waiting to see you, phone calls coming in, and your boss calling for assistance on the intercom. How did you deal with that situation?

Lynn reviews the questions:

Question 1:

- Relates to Technical Skills 1 and 3
- Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
- Is open-ended
- Is non-discriminatory

Question 2:

- Relates to Performance Skill 1
- Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
- Is open-ended
- Is non-discriminatory

Question 3:

- Relates to Performance Skill 4
 - Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
 - Is open-ended
 - Is non-discriminatory
-

How to Write Interview Questions, Continued

Example 2

Pat needs to fill a branch manager's position in a language translation shop. He completes the job analysis, lists the required technical and performance skills and highlights those skills he plans to investigate during the interview.

Technical Skills

1. Translate at master level
2. Operate PC to view scripts and write translation
3. Operate PC to produce final report
4. Operate phone system

Professional Skills

1. Provide career counseling
2. Provide feedback (good and bad) to subordinates
3. Interact with seniors
4. Interact with customers
5. Cope with stressful work environment and help subordinates to do so

Pat prepares the following questions to ask each candidate during the interview.

1. In this organization, we are insistent upon providing appropriate feedback to subordinates who are not performing up to expectations. Describe a recent session where you had to give negative feedback to a subordinate. How did you handle it?
2. Your target area is very hot now and more than likely you'll be called in to manage crisis situations. First of all, is there any reason why you would not be able to come in after normal duty hours?
3. Back to managing crisis situations, tell me about a time when your present organization was working under crisis conditions. How did you handle the stress yourself and how did you help your subordinates deal with the stress?

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How to Write Interview Questions, Continued

**Example 2,
(continued)**

Pat reviews the questions:

Question 1:

- Relates to Performance Skill 2
- Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
- Is open-ended
- Is non-discriminatory

Question 2:

- Relates to Performance Skill 5
- Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
- Is open-ended
- Although this could be a touchy area regarding marital status, this question has been phrased carefully and, if asked of all candidates, would not be considered discriminatory

Question 3:

- Relates to Performance Skill 5
 - Asks for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
 - Is open-ended
 - Is non-discriminatory
-



How to Write Interview Questions, Continued



Practice Directions

In the following scenario, identify three skills you want to investigate further and write interview questions which:

- Relate to the selected skills
- Ask for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
- Are open-ended
- Are non-discriminatory

Scenario

Job Description for Senior Intelligence Analyst

This is a senior level position for a certified Intelligence Analyst. The employee will review all incoming data, prioritize it, and assign research tasks to five junior analysts according to their ability. To do this, the analyst must be thoroughly proficient in the use of DATAFOR (the data forwarding system) and PRODPREP (the analysis and reporting system) in addition to available research data bases. The employee will act as coach and mentor to five junior analysts and will be expected to provide periodic performance feedback to them. In addition, the employee will act as a liaison with the DATAFOR and PRODPRED system analysts.

Task 1

1. List three skills (technical/performance) you want to investigate in the interview. Label each as technical or performance.
 - A) _____ Type of Skill (T or P)
 - B) _____ Type of Skill (T or P)
 - C) _____ Type of Skill (T or P)

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How to Write Interview Questions, Continued

Task 2

- 2. Write three interview questions which
 - Relate to the selected skills
 - Ask for specific examples of a candidate's past behavior
 - Are open-ended
 - Are non-discriminatory

A) _____

B) _____

C) _____



Summary

What You've Learned

The questions you ask a candidate during an interview will determine the value of the data on which you will ultimately make your hiring decision. It is critical that your interview questions focus on a candidate's bona fide occupational qualifications. In this lesson you have learned.

- What is behavior-based interviewing?
 - What are open-ended questions?
 - What are discriminatory questions?
 - How to write interview questions
-