

**The Human Resource**  
**A head for business, a heart for people**

# **The Expert Interviewer's Guide**

**Ask the right questions**

**Never choose the wrong  
applicant again**

**Stay out of employment  
tribunals**

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## Why interview?

If you have a job to fill, the way to go about it is to interview at least one person and ideally several.

Right?

Maybe not. It depends on the interview. Because research has shown that unstructured interviewing has as much chance of selecting the right person for the job as tossing a coin.

If you select the wrong person, you can waste a significant sum in advertising costs, agency fees, interview time, training time and costs, internal disruption and lowered morale. Plenty of research has shown that the cost of getting it wrong is two or three times the annual salary of the individual.

Then there's the waste of all the perfectly suitable applicants who got away!

If the interview process casts you or your business in an unfavourable light as an employer, it's very likely that the applicant you want for the role will turn you down. And the others you interview will pass on their negative impressions of the organisation to their friends and family. You may even lose customers and local reputation.

In this guide we show you how to identify the right person for the job so that you have a significantly better chance of selecting the right person than tossing that coin!

And when you've found the right person, how to make sure they want to accept your offer and start their new role feeling proud to work for you, full of enthusiasm and motivation to do a great job.

Recruiting doesn't have to give you a headache, but you do need to be prepared, use the time effectively and really mean business.

In this guide we show you how.

## Before you sit down in front of the applicant

### Plan what you're looking for

Before the agency was briefed or you wrote the advert, you will have analysed what the requirements are for the role. This is the person specification.

The key question is: what does the successful applicant need to be able to do? Clichés such as “team worker” and “reliable” don't help. The more specific you are about the skills and behaviours required for the job, the easier it will be for you to frame the right questions and to recognize the right applicant at interview.

If you've employed people in a similar job in the past, it's often helpful to review what made the significant differences between those who succeeded and those who didn't.

This person specification will ensure that your interviews stay focused on what you're looking for, and that all the applicants are measured against the same standards.

It will also make decision making easier once you've finished all the interviews for the job. More often than not, the final choice will be between two or three applicants each with a different blend of strong and weak points, and if you're clear beforehand about which qualities are particularly important in doing the job, the person specification will help you focus objectively on what really matters.

### Screening CVs

People without the essential education, training and qualifications needed for the role should be weeded out at CV screening stage, so that you don't waste time interviewing the no-hopers. The CV is a sales document for the applicant that they've put together themselves: so if you're looking for a detail conscious person and there are typos in the CV, don't interview them.

### Co-interviewing

If you're interviewing with someone else, organise a pre-meeting together to talk through the practicalities of the day. Make sure the co-interviewer understands what you're looking for.

Consideration of the smaller details will enable joint interviews to run smoothly and ensure that both the interviewers and candidates are put at ease, such as:

- Who will sit where
- Which role will each interviewer take, e.g. who will collect the candidate and bring them to the room?
- Will you all stand or remain seated when the candidates come in, will you shake their hands before or after the interview?

- Who will be responsible for each area of questioning and in what order will you run?
- Do you all have a copy of the CVs, person specification and a supply of interview assessment forms to complete afterwards?

If you're interviewing with people with busy diaries, make plans well in advance for a wash up meeting after the interviews are complete, to ensure the decision isn't delayed.

## Timing

A recruitment cycle needs to maintain a brisk momentum once it's started, otherwise you risk losing good candidates because you simply took too long to get back to them. On the other hand, filling positions too quickly is one of the main reasons for recruitment mistakes: leave enough time for applicants to apply, for them to arrange time off for interviews and if necessary to call them back for a second look.

The timeframes you can expect on average are that CVs will start coming in within a week of advertising online and via agencies, and within two or three weeks you'll have a critical mass of applicants to screen for interview. Applicants will normally need at least a week's notice to arrange an interview time especially if they have to take time off work.

Block time out of your diary for interviews about four or five weeks after you've advertised the role.

## Preparing on the day

On the day of the interviews take time to visit the interview room and make sure the furniture is suitably laid out and that any equipment you have booked is set up and ready to use. Think about lighting and ventilation and put any phones in the room on divert. If any candidates have made requests for reasonable adjustments (e.g. wheelchair access), check in advance that these are in place. It is also worth informing the building's reception that you are carrying out interviews so that candidates may be directed to the right place.

Be prepared, so you can concentrate on connecting with the interviewees. Last minute scrambling. Inadequate preparation. These lead to messy, disorganized interviews. You'll be hesitating, then sticking too much to a recitation of the applicant's CV. Good candidates will be left with the impression that you're not really interested in them. To avoid this, have a solid interview framework to fall back on.

Review the candidate's CV immediately before the interview and prepare specific questions about it. Decide which parts of the employment history are most relevant to the job so you can focus the applicant on these, in order to make the best use of time. Look for any gaps in the employment history and ask the applicant about them as you go through the CV. By preparing your questions specific to the individual, you are showing the candidate you have taken the time to ensure a productive interview.

Put your phone and email messages on hold. And... it may seem blindingly obvious but we have come across very experienced directors who've failed at this one... take a copy of the CV into the interview.

## Structure and sequence

### Opening the interview

At the beginning of the interview welcome the candidate and introduce yourself and any other interviewers with their roles in the organisation, explaining why they are involved in the interview process. Outline approximately how long the interview will last and make it clear that you appreciate the two-wayness of the process, and that the candidate will have a chance to ask questions at the end.

Outline the interview structure for the candidate. This sets up the parameters of the interview, keeps you both focused, and gives the candidate an idea of what to expect. For example:

*Thank you for coming in today.*

*Did you find us OK/did you have to fight the traffic getting here today?.....*

*Can I offer you a drink before we start?*

*You've applied for the position of Marketing Manager [refer back to advert or recruitment agency] As part of our meeting today we'll make sure that you have a clear idea about what the job involves, and answer any questions you may have. We want you to have enough information to decide whether you'd like to accept the job if you're offered it.*

*Before we come on to discussing the job, we'd like to hear about you and your work experience, is that OK? We'd like to start with your most recent role.*

### The applicant's skills and experience

In the next section of the interview you are matching each candidate against the requirements, looking for evidence and patterns to indicate whether or not this is the right person for the job.

Candidates will find it easier to shine and find their self-confidence if they start talking about themselves early in the interview, on comfortable ground. You want to give every applicant the opportunity to show themselves in their best light. Start off by asking less demanding questions to put the candidate at ease.

Question the candidate about their work experience. You could start with the current job and spend most of the time talking about that and less time on earlier jobs, or you could work through the jobs chronologically from the start.

Follow the sequence of questions you decided upon beforehand and avoid jumping between topics and between jobs.

Take notes from time to time as prompts for you to complete an interview assessment form afterwards. Don't do this obtrusively: it adds a formality and officiousness as though as though you're both in court, and it will disengage the applicant.

## The job and company

Once you've completed your questions about the applicant's work experience, move the subject on to the job and your company.

Ask the candidate what they have found out about the company already. It's very easy to do this nowadays using Google and if your applicant hasn't bothered, it's unlikely they are strongly motivated, curious or well organised. Building on what the applicant already knows, describe your company, what it does, and the role of the job within that.

Invite the candidate to ask questions about the job. You will be able to tell a lot about a candidate from the amount of thought they've given to the role and what they choose to ask about. Explain to the applicant why the role exists (e.g. *"It's a newly created role to help with the increased amount of work coming into the company."*)

Some interviewers prefer to describe the job in detail at the beginning of the interview before questioning the applicant. One disadvantage of sequencing this way is that a cunning applicant can put a creative spin on certain aspects of their skills and experience to tailor themselves into your perfect applicant if you give away too much. On the other hand if the candidate starts talking about themselves early in the interview, on comfortable ground such as the job they're doing at the moment, they're more likely to relax into the interview and demonstrate themselves at their best.

## Next steps

Bring the interview to a close courteously. Inform the candidate of timescales for decision making and how they will be notified of the outcome (by email, phone, by their agency).

Thank the candidate for their application and taking the time to come to interview.

## A two-way process

Interviewing provides you with the opportunity to pick out the best candidate for the job. It also provides an opportunity for the candidates to determine whether or not they are a good fit with the department and your company. It's a two-way process: they're deciding whether they want to work for you just as much as you're trying to decide whether to hire them. You're looking for the best people for your roles, but even in this tough economic climate, high calibre applicants can often afford to be choosy.

If you're doing things during interviews to turn the candidate off, such as failing to make eye contact, constantly interrupting, asking naff questions or glancing at your iPhone every five minutes, you may be disengaging the best applicants. They in turn may tell others, thereby spreading the damage you've caused. It can't be stressed enough how interviewing impacts on your company's public relations. It's been estimated that every applicant who has a bad interview experience will tell at least nine other people.

Don't give off the wrong message about your business because you haven't planned your recruitment processes sufficiently. This starts at the very beginning of the process. How are you communicating with candidates in a way that demonstrates that you value them? How are you giving them an experience that is representative of what it's really like to work with you? And how are you ensuring that you're grabbing their attention and making your offer more compelling than that of your competitors?

Part of your role as interviewer is to sell the role and the company, so consider what a prospective candidate would want to know and prepare your responses accordingly. Remember that candidates are likely to form an opinion on the whole company based on their interview. It is important to be welcoming to the diversity of candidates you will see and to keep the tone of the interview friendly and engaging.

Having been interviewed, some candidates may indicate that they feel the role or the organisation isn't right for them. It's better that this happens now rather than after an offer has been made to them. Sell the role to the individual, but give honest and realistic answers to the candidate's questions so that they too can make an informed decision.

## Keeping the candidate engaged

### Your manner

Remember what it felt like when it was you being interviewed for your job? Show some heart to the person sitting across from you now (who is generally nervous and only wants to make a good impression). Putting the candidate at ease is more important than trying to trip them up.

Keep all your questions job-related. If you spend the interview chatting, you may make a hiring decision because you liked the candidate instead of whether the person is truly qualified for the job. The key is: polite & professional, but not over-friendly.

### Create a conversation

Interviews can turn into a one-sided interrogation of the candidate. You ask them a question...then another...then another. Perhaps reading from a list of questions in front of you. Instead of this rapid-fire approach, strive to create more of a dialogue. Ask a question, listen to the answer, make an encouraging comment, or tie their answer to a very brief story of your own before asking the next question. Conversations tend to put the candidate at ease.

### Listen

Listen more than you speak, a 70:30 listening:speaking ratio is about right.

Use active listening techniques to show you're truly attentive: reflect back what the person has said, nod your head in agreement, say things like "That makes sense", plus ask for clarification where necessary.

Remember that silence is okay! Pauses can allow time for the candidate to develop an answer; it also allows everyone in the room a chance to gather their thoughts in between questions.

### Respect and sensitivity

Avoid asking any of the "illegal" questions (listed on page 19), or those that are intrusive but irrelevant to the job. They can shut down conversation in an instant. Show cultural sensitivity and respect ethnic differences. As well, always invite the candidate to ask questions of their own.

By treating the person you're interviewing with respect, you convey a lot about you and your company. This engages candidates. They become willing to share more of who they really are with you. You get to learn extra about them. And they are more likely to say "yes" if you ask them back for the next stage.

### Extend professional courtesies

Offer candidates a glass of water, and ask if they had difficulty finding the place. Be on time. Consider giving them a tour of the office. If it's appropriate - for

example at a second stage interview - give them an opportunity to speak with other team members or prospective co-workers.

**Watch your non-verbal signals.**

Just as you are looking out for eye contact and appropriate dress, the candidate is looking for those unspoken signals from you. Be sure your tone of voice is appropriate and professional. Be conscious of your body language, look attentive and interested. Lean forward in your chair. Maintain appropriate eye contact.

Clearly articulate the job's duties and the company's mission. Dress as you normally would, and pay attention to manners. You are a representative of your company and department, so make sure your actions reflect this.

## Questioning

Whatever you ask should be designed to test the candidate's skills and behaviours needed for the job. While you'll need to ask all interviewees the same set of core questions relating to the skills and behaviours needed for the job, other questions will react to the individual's responses and ask more probing secondary questions. You'll ask most interviewees broadly similar questions about their CV, and you'll also follow up their answers with **probing questions** to encourage the candidate to expand or clarify an answer.

**Linking questions** - where you use a candidate's response to flow into another question – add a smoothness and professionalism to the process and demonstrate that you're listening carefully.

**Open questions** e.g. *How did you go about organising this project?* should be used extensively as they invite the candidate to talk freely and descriptively. The opposite, **Closed questions** where you ask for a specific fact, e.g. *Who did you report to?* can be useful though they should be used sparingly as they generate such a short response.

**Sensitive questions** There may be aspects of certain applications that require clarification, such as gaps in the employment history. There may be perfectly acceptable explanations for this, for example, candidates may have taken time out of employment for maternity leave or caring responsibilities, or because of a health or disability issue. It's perfectly acceptable to ask about these, e.g. *What made you move on from there? What were you doing during those two years?* but be careful not to imply any judgement about the response, even in your non-verbals.

**Competency based questions** where you ask for specific examples of the interviewee's past performance and behaviour. ...as in "tell me about a time when you..." then funnelling down into detail is your most useful tool in gauging the interviewee's typical behaviours, skills and competence. Lots of research has shown that questioning this way is more likely to predict future performance in the workplace. It outperforms the more impressionistic, unstructured interview format, because:

- **Past behaviour is a good predictor of future behaviour.** Our behaviour is consistent over time, for example if the applicant has demonstrated the ability to work in an organised and structured way in the past then they will do this in all their jobs. This is not to say that we cannot learn or change and a good interview will explore the applicant's learning.
- **Competencies demonstrated at interview are a good indicator of success at a job**, and vice versa. For example, people who score poorly on 'focusing on customers' in an interview also tend not to perform well in this area in a job. The interviewer's task is to explore each area relating to success in the job thoroughly enough to be able to confidently rate the applicant's likely performance in that competency.

- **Objectivity is higher.** Maintaining a structure and exploring the same competencies with each candidate means that you can systematically differentiate between them. If you ask the same basic questions and explore the same competencies with each candidate, you have data to make an accurate and objective assessment of who is the strongest.

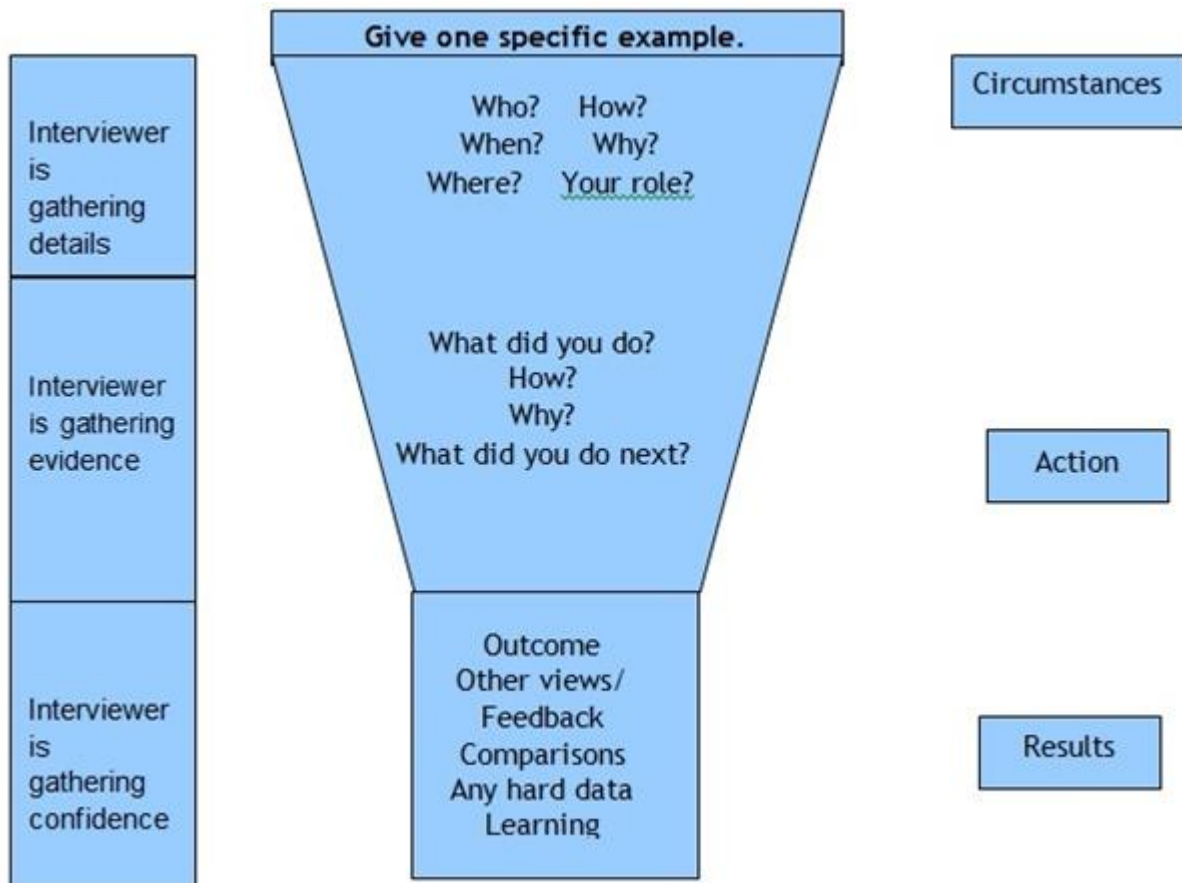
## Funnel technique

Competency based questioning starts with the same broad questions and funnels down in response to what the applicant says, to probe in more and more depth and gather very specific details about what the applicant did in a particular situation.

Start with a broad question designed to elicit a specific example, for example, *"Describe to me a time where you helped a member of your team to improve their performance."* Listen to the response, then gather further details such as the circumstances, who was involved, when this was, where, what the applicant's role was and why they were involved.

Move onto gathering information about what the applicant did – their actions, why they did it, and what other options they considered. Elicit a step by step run through of what the applicant did.

Finally, ask about the outcome or results of that situation. What sort of feedback did the applicant receive, what hard data do they have about the outcome, what did they learn, would they do anything differently if faced with a similar situation?



With this level of questioning and probing it would be very difficult for the interviewee to make something up on the spur of the moment. You're not only collecting details of what the person has done, you are also building confidence that they're being truthful with responses. It is very difficult to invent answers in this situation – it shows.

### Question bank for competency based questions

Prioritise the areas of competency you are going to assess at interview by defining the behaviours and qualities needed for success and to excel in the role: the top five would be reasonable for an hour's interview. For each competency you're assessing, develop two or three starter questions to ask applicants that will be relevant to your working environment.

These are examples of competency based questions:

Competency	Sample questions
<b>Achievement orientation</b>	<p><i>Can you give me an example of something you've worked hard to achieve over a long period of time. Why was it important to you? How did you keep going?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about the sort of results you've achieved at work that</i></p>

<p><b>Planning &amp; organising</b></p>	<p><i>you're the most proud of.</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about a time when you improved the way things were typically done on the job.</i></p> <p><i>Describe something you have done to improve the performance/efficiency of your team.</i></p> <p><i>Examples of situations where you have had to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Organise something relatively complex</i></li> <li>• <i>Deliver something to a tight deadline (how did you prioritise, handle pressure etc)</i></li> <li>• <i>Implement a new process/system</i></li> <li>• <i>Co-ordinate resources to meet a goal</i></li> </ul> <p><i>Describe an event that you have personally organised. How did you go about it? Did everything go according to plan? How did you ensure it went smoothly?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me how you organise your workload.</i></p>
<p><b>Energy &amp; drive</b></p>	<p><i>Give me an example of a time when you've overcome significant challenges to achieve an objective/ what you particularly wanted to achieve.</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about the toughest problems you've been faced with at work. ...Pick one out to talk through why it was so tough, what you did and how it was resolved.</i></p> <p><i>Are there any times at work when you've been in a high pressure situation? What was happening? How do you manage it?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever been in a situation where you've had to adapt to a lot of change at work? What sort of changes/ how did it affect you/ how did you feel / what was your response.</i></p>
<p><b>Judgement &amp; decision making</b></p>	<p><i>What sort of decisions are you personally responsible for making in your role and which would you refer up to your manager? Give me some examples of decisions that you make in your current role on a regular basis</i></p> <p><i>How far do you have to exercise personal judgement with how you do your work? Give me some examples of the sort of choices might you make. Which do you find difficult/simple? What have you learned from these experiences?</i></p>

<p><b>Analytical thinking</b></p>	<p><i>In your job, have you ever needed to challenge a decision made by someone else? Why did you challenge it? How did you go about it? What was the outcome?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever had to make an unpopular decision? Why was it unpopular? How did you deal with people's reactions? Is there anything you would do differently if confronted by this situation again?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficulty managing resource, either people, materials, or assets.</i></p> <p><i>When you're sending out anything in writing, what sort of checking process do you go through?</i></p> <p><i>How do you see the future within the ... Industry? What potential business strategies would you recommend or identify in response?</i></p> <p><i>Based on your analysis of the industry/business you're in, what challenges or opportunities can you identify? Can you give me an example of a time when you've developed a strategy to respond to such challenges? Something to achieve a longer term business objective?</i></p> <p><i>Sometimes before you make a decision there may be conflicting information. Describe an occasion when you've had to take into account a lot of conflicting information before making a decision.</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about a time when you had to anticipate potential problems and how you went about developing contingencies.</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me about a time when you were faced with a problem that you couldn't resolve - what did you do?</i></p>
<p><b>Creativity &amp; innovation</b></p>	<p><i>Describe the culture of your organisation. How do you work best within this culture to get things done? – give me some examples.</i></p> <p><i>What do you think the differences would be for you working here compared with your current employer? Specifics.</i></p> <p><i>What sort of new processes have you set up in your job? Where did the idea come from? Why? Effects?</i></p>



<p><b>Developing others</b></p>	<p><i>stakeholders who have differing perspectives.</i></p> <p><i>Examples of situations where you've had to pass on your knowledge and skills.</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about a time when you coached/developed someone to help them improve their skills or job performance. What did you do? What worked/didn't work.</i></p> <p><i>Describe a time when you provided feedback to someone about something they had done at work – positive or negative. What did you say etc, how was it received, what was the result.</i></p>
<p><b>Team leadership</b></p>	<p><i>Give me an example of a time when you recognized that a member of your team wasn't performing. What was happening? What did you do?</i></p> <p><i>Examples of situations when you've had to make 'people' decisions such as who to put into a team or who to promote. How... why ....result....lessons learned.</i></p> <p><i>What sort leadership style do you think works best in which situation? Can you describe how you've adapted your own style?</i></p> <p><i>Example of a member of the team who didn't do something important that you'd asked of them. How do you handle it?</i></p>
<p><b>Team working</b></p>	<p><i>Tell me about the sort of teams you've worked in. What sort of team do you work at your best in as a team member? Worst?</i></p> <p><i>What sort of jobs have you done where you've needed to rely on your colleagues for doing parts of the job? Worked closely together sharing information? Give me examples of when this has worked well/ not so well.</i></p> <p><i>Describe an occasion when you came across others in the team who you found difficult to deal with. Why difficult?... How did you handle the situation?</i></p>

### **Wash-up questions**

At the end of your questioning, once the applicant has had full opportunity to demonstrate what they can offer, you have the opportunity to ask the more sensitive questions - with a higher chance of a genuine reply:

- *What attracted you to/motivated you to apply for this position?*
- *Why are you looking to change jobs at this point?*
- *What other opportunities are you considering?*
- *What is your salary in your current role?*
- *How long would your daily commute be?*

## Questions you should never ask

If you're in the process of recruiting new staff members for your business, you'll know that the interview process can be more than just a little bit daunting. You need to find the best people for the job as quickly as possible, but you're also aware that you need to stay on the right side of the law and ensure that your processes aren't in any way discriminatory.

They can't **appear** to be discriminatory either. Applicants can bring employment tribunal claims for illegal discrimination against the potential employer who interviewed them and they will base this on the implications behind your questions.

Most interviewers genuinely intend to give everyone an equal opportunity to succeed, but applying legislation in the interview situation can be tricky. To give you that extra peace of mind, here are the interview questions that you absolutely must avoid to make sure that you don't break the law or bring your business into disrepute. You'll find the reasons why the questions might be considered illegal, as well as guidance on the questions you should ask instead. Some of them will be obvious to many experienced managers, some of them are a little more complex:

### *'How old are you?'*

It's usually against the law to ask candidates how old they are when they're applying for a job, whether it's in the application form or during a face-to-face interview. The reason for this is quite simple – it prevents discrimination. Stopping employers from gathering personal information about age means that they'll have to weigh up a candidate's suitability based purely on their ability to do the job in question, giving everyone an equal opportunity.

There are some exceptions to this rule. The Equality Act permits direct discrimination on the basis of age if there is a Genuine Occupational Requirement, such as when a certain role involves serving alcohol. As the law states that individuals must be over the age of 18 to serve alcoholic drinks to customers, it would be acceptable to ask that applicants are over 18.

### *'What are your religious views?'*

It's generally unacceptable, and indeed unlawful, to ask candidates about their religious beliefs during the interview process. In the majority of cases, the answer will have no impact whatsoever on their ability to carry out a particular job.

Again though, there are certain cases in which a Genuine Occupational Requirement might exist. If a religious organisation is recruiting a minister, for example, it's easy to see why candidates must belong to a certain religious group. Similarly it's easy to see why the role of Halal butcher would require a person of Muslim faith. However, just because an

organisation has a particular religious stance, it doesn't mean that all employees must share the same views. It would be difficult, for example, to justify the case that a receptionist should hold the same views as it would not be an integral part of the role.

### ***What is your marital status?***

Questions about marital status have no place in a job interview. Any question that is of a personal nature (including age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability) is not only unethical, but often illegal.

Some employers may have the preconception that single applicants are their best choice as they'll have fewer commitments outside the workplace. Others may stereotype married candidates to be the better option as they might be more settled. There would be grounds for a discrimination case if decisions are based on this issue – or if they appear to be by asking the question.

### ***'What are your childcare arrangements?'***

It's against the law to ask your candidates about their childcare arrangements, regardless of whether or not you know that they have a young family. It's potentially discriminatory, and will certainly give off the wrong messages about your business.

It makes sense that you want to know whether your candidates are able to work the hours that you need, but it's all about doing it in the right way. Asking whether there are any issues that would interfere with their regular attendance in the work place is a great (and completely legal) way to find out if your potential employee is in a position to take on the role.

Recognise that employers will lead differing lifestyles outside of the workplace, but that doesn't necessarily tell you anything at all at just how suitable they'll be to work within your business.

### ***'Where were you born?'***

As a potential employer you're responsible for checking that the candidate is eligible to work in the UK before making an offer. You could be fined up to £20,000 if you employ illegal workers, and this includes students whose visas have expired and people who are working on a visitor's visa.

However, a candidate's place of birth or ethnic background should not be discussed in an interview setting. The answer could provide grounds for discrimination and won't have any impact on their ability to carry out a job.

### ***'How tall are you?'***

Asking a person's height may seem unnecessary, and even slightly bizarre, though there could be some issues around this if you're recruiting for a particular job that requires manual labour, such as lifting and moving

boxes in a warehouse. Stating explicitly that a person must be taller than 6 foot, for example, will mean that you're indirectly discriminating against women, who will typically be shorter than men. However it would be acceptable to ask a candidate whether they could lift heavy boxes, if that is a key part of the job role. Rather than asking them and taking it on trust, it would be more objective and fair to give all the final stage interviewees some sort of a lifting test (carried out with full safety precautions of course).

Consider the implications of the questions that you're asking, and ask yourself whether there's a genuine need for the question to be asked, and whether it has a bearing on an individual's ability to carry out the job. Be realistic about the solutions you put in place to make sure you're giving candidates an equal chance. Installing ladders in a warehouse, for example, wouldn't be costly or take a great deal of time, and could mean that your initial height requirement is no longer necessary.

### ***'How do you feel about managing men?'***

If you're recruiting a manager who will be responsible for a team of men within the workplace, you may think that it would be acceptable to ask a female candidate whether she would feel comfortable about this, and vice versa. But whilst you should ask about an individual's ability to deal with the challenges of a particular role, you should not imply that gender might have an impact on this.

Instead, ask questions to unearth details of their previous management experience, and how they've dealt with any particular issues along the way, e.g.

*What do you consider to be the biggest challenges that you've faced when managing teams.... What have you they learned from the experience?*

It's this type of questioning that will determine whether they're capable of effective people management.

### ***'Can you tell me a little more about your disability?'***

Though it's wise to ask questions about any skills, training, and education interviewees have that would help them to succeed in a particular position, it's illegal to ask them to talk about a condition or disability that would affect their capacity to carry out work to a high standard.

On a similar note, you shouldn't ask candidates whether they've ever suffered from mental health problems, if they're taking any medication, why they use a wheelchair, or if they're likely to need to take time off work for medical or disability-related reasons.

However there are instances during the recruitment process when it might be acceptable to ask about disability. If the job absolutely couldn't be carried out by someone with mobility issues, for example, even with reasonable adjustments, then there would be a genuine need to establish whether any such barriers existed.

In cases where you have been made aware of a candidate's disability during the selection process, you should ask what reasonable adjustments the candidate would require should they be offered the post. For example, someone partially sighted may require a magnified screen and this would be a reasonable adjustment to make. Such a question must be sensitively posed and you should make it very clear that this is solely for information purposes. If you have any concerns about how to pose such questions, speak to The Human Resource before the day of interviews.

### ***'What's your Facebook password?'***

Amazingly, it's been reported in the media several times in recent years that employers have asked candidates to hand over their social media login details as part of the selection process. Though the legal advice surrounding this is unclear at best, it's a practice that you should certainly avoid. A blatant breach of privacy, a clear violation of Facebook's Statement of Rights and responsibilities, and a tactic that's likely to lose you many high quality candidates along the way, as well as create a bad reputation for your business.

### **Comments you should never make**

A recent employment tribunal case brought by a former Personal Assistant ruled that her boss, the Chief Executive, was guilty of sexual discrimination, and ordered him to pay her £10,500. The panel also commented that the remarks the Chief Executive (David) made were "intimidating," and made for a "hostile and humiliating working environment."

Part of the PA's case was she had found sexist and offensive notes on her job application. She told the panel that she made the discovery upon finding her old application form in a pile of papers on David's desk.

On the note was scrawled: "Red lipstick, heels, good; tattoos, do not approve; wearing a dress excellent."

She also told the panel that her former employer had said after interviewing another candidate: "We can't hire her as she is ugly and overweight and I only employ beautiful women."

On a different occasion, he explained: "How are we supposed to hire her, did you see what she was wearing and the size of her? We can't have her on the frontline representing [our product] looking like that."

## Naff questions

Some interviewers adopt favourite questions that - while not actually illegal and discriminatory - are cringe-inducingly naff and corny. The applicant's response (perhaps after an inward snigger) will contribute nothing to the task of identifying whether the person can do the job. Not only can a bad interview question take your interview wildly off course, it may also put you in a negative light in the mind of the interviewee.

Here are a few to avoid:

- **Tell me about yourself** —it's far too broad. What you need to know about someone relates to work so provide a clear starting point: then the response might tell you what you were hoping to find out. Try an alternative such as "*What led you to choose this career path?*"
- **What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?**  
This is such a common question people have either answered it multiple times in interviews or have read articles on the best way to answer it. Either way, it will give you absolutely useless answers. So what if a person says they can deliver on time or has a temper? You'll never really know whether the candidate has just listed points from a "best answers" cribsheet and it has no actual basis in fact. Instead you could ask about a story of failure which will more appropriately tell you the person's weaknesses rather than simply asking about them: "*Tell me about a time you failed at a goal you needed to achieve.*" A good interview question extracts information indirectly rather than getting answers which could have been Googled.
- **Where do you want to be in five years?** — The truthful answer might be on a beach in The Bahamas after winning the lottery. The answer you'll be given will probably be a platitude like "*to have progressed within your company into a management position*" or an equally 'interviewer pleasing' answer. Or even "*I want your job.*" Instead, ask "*Which of your skills do you hope to develop over the next few years to help you take a step up in your career?*"
- **What can you do for us that others can't?** — Isn't that your job as the interviewer to figure out? The candidate won't know about the strengths and weaknesses of their competitors, so will generally resort to an answer related to their work ethic. Instead, "*What makes you the ideal applicant for this role?*" will give you much more useful answers.
- **If you were an animal, which one would you be?** — This used to surprise candidates, but many will now be prepared for this amateur attempt at psychological analysis as it's been widely communicated as laughable on social media. If you're looking for a lion (or someone who shows leadership) then ask a more direct question about their leadership skills.
- **What salary are you hoping for?** — This is something that can be discussed before or after a job interview, but not during as it's not right to put your interviewee under pressure to commit to a figure on the spot.

You could however check what the applicant is earning currently or how much they earned in their last job, to give you a point of reference if you decide to make an offer.

Other question types to avoid based on their ineffective structure and phrasing:

**Hypothetical questions** – "*What would you do if...*" - should be used sparingly as they invite model answers which may not reflect the candidates' realistic experiences.

**Leading questions** where you imply the answer you want in the question e.g. "*Can you cope? Are you a good teamplayer?*" should be avoided as they inspire meaningless answers. If you ask a question where the answer you want is obvious, it will add little to your understanding of the candidate.

**Multi-part questions** may confuse the candidate; they also give them an opportunity to skip over the parts which they would rather not answer.

## After the interview

It's often a good idea to invite the best one or two applicants back for a second interview before deciding.

If you do this, it's important not to re-cover old ground. Create an experience where you'll see the applicant in a different light: for example, explore some other competencies at a short interview, give ability tests or arrange for a colleague to interview.

## Other methods of selection

To supplement what you've found out at interview, you'll be much more likely to identify specific skills objectively if you give applicants case studies or ability tests and compare the results. This has the added advantage of giving the applicant a taster of the sort of work they will be doing if they join you.

For example:

- A simulation of a typical incoming emailed query where the applicant generates a response under timed conditions
- A numerical reasoning test for accountants
- A stress profile personality analysis for customer service roles
- A Sales aptitude profile for sales roles adapted to the level and type of sale
- A presentation on a topical aspect of the business to a small internal audience
- An accuracy test for roles where detail is important

For a final shortlist applicant, you could also arrange a lunch to observe them interacting with people they may have to work with.

These types of activities will tell you much more about their attitudes and values. These are consistently proven to be the best determinants of future performance (qualifications and experience can be pretty irrelevant!).

The Human Resource will help you to develop appropriate tests and case studies for applicants and will provide and interpret a wide range of psychometric materials, identifying the most suitable for your needs.

## Assessment and decision making

Structuring the interview does improve its ability to predict performance in the job and a growing number of employers take this approach.

During the interview you are gathering information systematically in order to predict how the candidate would be likely to perform in the job and to select the best person for the job.

But make sure you don't fall into any of these bias traps which will skew your assessment:

- **The self-fulfilling prophecy effect.** Unskilled interviewers often say that they make up their mind about the applicant during the first few seconds or minutes. The tendency is that this sort of interviewer will then spend the rest of the interview confirming that they were right. For example they will ask questions designed to confirm initial impressions of candidates gained either before the interview or in its early stages. The outcome will be a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- **The stereotyping effect.** Interviewers sometimes assume that particular characteristics are typical of members of a particular group. In the case of sex, race, disability, marital status or ex-offenders, decisions made on this basis are often illegal. However, the effect occurs in the case of all kinds of social groups. Some people even make stereotyped assumptions about people with red hair.
- **The halo and horns effect.** Once interviewers rate candidates as 'good' or 'bad' in some aspects, they often replicate this judgement across the board, reaching unbalanced decisions.
- **The contrast effect.** Interviewers can allow the experience of interviewing one candidate to affect the way they interview others who are seen later in the selection process.
- **The similar-to-me effect.** Interviewers sometimes give preference to candidates they perceive as having a similar background, career history, personality or attitudes to themselves. The result is a team of clones of the manager.
- **The personal liking effect.** Interviewers may make decisions on the basis of whether they personally like or dislike the candidate.

## The role of instinct

Intuition is something that we're conditioned to ignore. We often look back at decisions that we have made and say, "I had a bad feeling about that person but I ignored it. If only I had listened to my instincts." When we make a bad recruitment decision, we have very often ignored that little voice that tells us we shouldn't be choosing that person.

Call it whatever you want, a sixth sense, or a gut feeling. Call it your instincts or just plain intuition. Our mind picks up on things that can't easily be defined. Whenever we interact with people, we are picking up on imperceptible messages that give us a feeling that isn't necessarily based on fact.

Leave your judgments at the door of the interview room. Neutrality makes you really aware of what your little voice is telling you. That takes a lot of practice and will only develop if you focus on the skill.

Intuition often has no basis in fact. We pick up on something that we often can't explain that the other person is giving off and it gives us an impression, or idea of how to proceed that isn't necessarily logical. Although it's not concrete, is actually based on the feelings we get from the expertise we have developed in life.

A person could look like the perfect candidate. They have all the right qualities. They answer all the questions exactly like you think they should yet something tells you that you don't like them or that they aren't right. This is a key element to making the right hiring choice.

Intuition is one of the skills that you will be using when you interview. Ask good questions, pay attention to body language, be a good listener, and pay attention to what your intuition is telling you. It is a skill that you can master to get better at interviewing candidates. There is no substitute for a very good conversation with a prospective job candidate. There is no getting away from asking the questions that you believe need to be answered during the interview process. Using intuition as part of your bag of tricks needs to be an essential component of the selection process. If you feel it, it is probably worth paying attention to.

## Follow up

Whether it's by email or phone, or via a recruitment agency, follow up to let candidates know whether they got the job. This is one more way of extending a professional courtesy and gives the interview process closure.

## A cautionary true tale: how not to do it

What you **don't** do after the interview is to email the applicant that he's:

*"one of the most irritating, rude, obnoxious and arrogant people I had ever had the misfortune to meet. I only wish I'd have seen your CV beforehand, to save us both the time, as I would have probably noticed your main job role as 'professional p\*\*\*\*'. You are not only the most inappropriate person for this job, but probably for any job. You will spend the next few years applying for, only to get rejected as soon as they meet you. Also for an old aesthetically challenged guy with no teeth, you have an unbelievable amount of confidence"...*

as an interviewer recruiting for a labourer job - Sarah - emailed an unsuccessful applicant recently.

Even though this was a private rant written by Sarah and never intended for the applicant to see, it gives an insight into the heightened emotions and damaging loss of control that have crept into the routine process of interviewing for a job. Sarah then defended herself by telling the Press that the applicant:

*"... was so unbelievably rude, inappropriate and insulting, towards me personally and also the company. I was genuinely shocked, hurt and angered by his behaviour and attitude, and the things he said. We have worked very hard to build this family business up and when someone is insulting the business it does feel like they are hurting a member of your family. He was derogatory, belittling and offensive and I felt extremely uncomfortable the entire time he was there".*

Sarah's family business was looking for a self-employed labourer to help carry out basic tasks such as carrying materials and digging holes. First problem, the CV was not reviewed beforehand to decide whether or not to interview. Successful, time efficient recruitment starts with carefully screening CVs against a shopping list of requirements that you've decided on in advance and, if you decide to interview, planning your questions to check whether the applicant genuinely possesses these. During the interview keep challenging yourself inwardly that you're fairly assessing against your checklist of what you're looking for and that you're not dismissing applicants based on criteria that are irrelevant for success in the job - like the interviewee apparently being "an old aesthetically challenged guy with no teeth" with "an unbelievable amount of confidence".

What **was** relevant was that he was apparently "derogatory, belittling and offensive and I felt extremely uncomfortable the entire time he was there". However the applicant has perceived the interview very differently: as far as he's concerned, their initial meeting had gone well.

To stop the interview getting out of hand, or overwhelming you with anger as in this case, stay objective and in control. Don't get into an argument with the applicant, and check whether your reactions are proportionate compared with what's been said. If you do experience the applicant as insulting and derogatory in a situation where you would expect them to sell themselves, this obviously isn't the right job for them. Cut things short, speaking slowly with something like "What we need to do in the short time left is to focus on the job I'm interviewing for. Is there anything we may have missed that's relevant to the

job that you'd like to tell me before we finish? No? OK, I'll consider what we've discussed here alongside the other applicants once I've interviewed them, and should be able to let you know my decision by email within the next 10 days. Thank you for your time today."

No one would want to take on someone whom they found "unbelievably rude, inappropriate and insulting, towards me personally and also the company" – it's a reflection of what he would be like in the future. Indeed the applicant and indeed it was reported in today's Telegraph that Mr Allen emailed Ms Heseler the evening of his interview:

*"Just a quick email to say that you promised to phone me today. You did not. I rang your mobile but you did not answer. I sent a text you did not answer. When you promise something you carry it through."*

Once again there is a difference in perception: Sarah told the Press that when he left she politely said 'Thanks, I'll give you a ring to let you know'. Be very clear with applicants at the end of the interview to structure their expectations so they know when they will hear, to make sure they don't chase you up like this. Don't give out your mobile number.

Applicants need to know reasonably promptly about the decision after the interview and what to expect next. Communication within a week by email or via the recruitment agency is perfectly reasonable. You're responsible for making this clear at the end of the interview.

You aren't required to give applicants any feedback at all – though it is good practice to give internal applicants constructive feedback to support their personal development. Any feedback you do give must be related to the requirements for the job, or if that's not possible, a blanket frame of words like "Other applicants had skills and experience that are more in line with our requirements for the role". It's critical that any feedback - either written or verbal – does not imply that your decision was based on illegal discrimination, such as age, gender, disability (this includes obesity), sexual orientation, pregnancy, having a child, race, religion. This could severely jeopardise your company's reputation and incur significant costs: any applicants can bring employment tribunal claims for illegal discrimination in the recruitment process, they don't have to be employed by you.

And finally, it can't be stressed enough how interviewing impacts on your company's public relations. It's been estimated that every applicant who has a bad interview experience will tell at least nine other people. In this case the applicant told the Press and the story was picked up by the nationals. But Sarah compounded matters by defending herself publically and not giving a simple apology, so that the original story was rehashed all over again. Least said....

## Top 10 tips for successful interviews

1. Analyse what you're looking for and how you'll recognise it
2. Screen out the no-hopers before interview
3. Plan beforehand which parts of the individual's CV you'll focus on and core questions for all applicants
4. Bring out the best in the applicant with good listening and questioning
5. Make sure you don't ask illegal questions but face up to sensitive ones
6. Assess what you hear objectively and analytically against the requirements for the job
7. Screen out your personal biases but don't ignore your instinct
8. Let applicants demonstrate to you what they've found out about the company and what they want to know about the job
9. Use ability tests and personality profiles to supplement your judgement at interview
10. Communicate the decision within the timeframe you gave the applicant

Recruiting doesn't have to give you a headache or damage your company's image, but you do need to be prepared, in control and know what you're looking for.

Need help with an upcoming recruitment exercise? – defining what you're looking for and how you'll recognize it, wording the advert, questions to ask at interview, coaching in interview skills, decision making?

Email The Human Resource on [enquiries@thehr.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@thehr.co.uk) to arrange a no-obligation chat.

More information about the help we provide to business owners with employment is on our website [www.thehr.co.uk](http://www.thehr.co.uk).

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