

Watch Words for Success in Job Interview

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



There's good news! American businesses are hiring again. They have awakened from their deep sleep to add more than a half-million jobs this year. The U.S. economy has recorded the best three-month gain in private-sector employment in five years.

And...there's still some bad news, too. There are still a lot of people out of work looking for jobs. Competition is fierce. And with just a small window of opportunity to add employees, businesses are being very cautious. They are taking extra steps to ensure they are hiring the “very best.” These “extra steps” begin with the job interview.

Answering and asking probing questions is critical for both the job applicant and interviewer. Every human resources professional has favorite questions they ask to prompt applicants to open windows into their true selves. So do I.

But those involved in hiring must never forget the best interview questions are those that help determine if a job applicant is qualified to do the job. Those questions focus on an applicant's education, training and work experience.

After those critical questions come the more nuanced inquiries that can help determine if an applicant will be the “right fit” for the company and the work place.

I frequently recommend interviewers ask applicants to describe their “best boss.” If the job applicant is a recent college graduate, it might be a “best coach,” or “best teacher.” This is a “good fit” question. For example, if the “best boss” was one that allowed the applicant to work independently, with little interference, he or she might be a “bad fit” with a boss that tends to want tighter controls.

An additional way for the interviewer to determine “fit” is to ask the applicant to describe his or her dream job. This helps identify what an applicant values, the type of work environment desired and the applicant's work ethic. For example, if an applicant's ideal job is one that is outdoors, likely a desk job might be too confining.

Another common question I ask: Why are you the best candidate for the job? Applicants must “sell themselves,” without looking self-important. Regrettably, people tend to exaggerate. Applicants should watch a hiring manager's “non-verbal reactions.” Do they lose eye contact with you? Do they look impatient? These may be clues that you are over-selling yourself.

Most applicants will be asked why they left a previous job or why they want to leave the one they have. From the response, a hiring manager can determine an applicant's level of ambition, desire to progress and likely commitment to the job being filled.

Applicants should be prepared to list their strengths and weaknesses. Don't try to be clever by characterizing "strengths" as "weaknesses." For example, "My weakness is that I work too hard." Really?? That answer lacks credibility and brings the applicant's truthfulness into question. Anticipate this question by preparing an honest, thoughtful response.

For the interviewer, asking an applicant to describe an instance when they failed at something can determine a willingness to take risks and an ability to solve problems. I usually follow up by asking an applicant what they learned from the experience. We all know that we often learn more from our failures than from our successes. Showing a positive outcome from a failure can leave a favorable impression with a hiring manager.

A tough, but common question is: asking where the applicant wants to be professionally in five years. If the applicant is honest, this question seeks to determine an applicant's goals, ambitions and commitment. The answer is tricky, though, and applicants need to be honest and realistic, showing ambition, but not arrogance.

Depending on the type of job and the pool of applicants, the additional questions I ask can be wide ranging. They include: What did you think of our company's website? What questions about our organization did it prompt for you? What is the most difficult part of your current job? What is your most proud career accomplishment? Does your current employer have a formal appraisal system? If so, may I have a copy of your last appraisal?

Why are you interested in working for us? What kinds of tasks would you prefer not to do or refuse to do? When you complete a difficult task or assignment, what types of recognition do you expect to receive? What can you do for us if we hire you, and when can we expect to see concrete results?

What is the title of the last book you read? Tell me about it. For what do people most often criticize you? During a thorough reference check, what areas can we expect to find where your overall performance and effectiveness might be improved? What would you like your epitaph to say?

The best interviews are conversations, not inquisitions. Hiring managers should keep an open mind; let the applicant do the talking; remain attentive; observe body language; maintain control; probe incomplete answers; ask for examples; and take notes, but never on the application or resume.

Close on a positive note without announcing a decision. Write an interview summary immediately after completing the interview.

In the end, whether you are the interviewer or interviewee, thoughtful preparation in advance and detailed follow-through afterwards are the keys to a successful job interview.

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