



Conducting Job Interviews the Right Way

AND STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE
WHILE YOU'RE DOING IT

By William Lynott

On the surface, it appears to be a routine business chore. You need to hire a chauffeur, or you have some other job to fill. Now, you must interview the applicants and select the most promising. In truth, interviewing job candidates today is anything but routine.

One of the toughest issues to resolve with new hires, especially chauffeurs, is measuring the applicant's level of experience and dependability. How can you tell if a job applicant has the level of skills and experience that you demand? Chances are you've developed your own methods for appraising these intangibles in new applicants. Still, it's important to remember there are other considerations that may be at least as important.

There has never been a time when pre-employment interviewing skills have been more important than they are today," says Therese

Be Aware of Compatibility

"Ask questions about the candidate's preferred management style to determine if he or she will be a good fit for you," says Mulling. "For example, a candidate who likes to work independently won't fit with a boss who's a micro-manager."



"You should also ask the candidate to describe the best work environment he or she ever had," Mulling says. "Again, you're looking for compatibility with the work environment in your operation. A candidate who thrives in competition among co-workers won't fit in a team-based culture that values partnership over competitiveness."

When Possible, Interview Your Candidate More Than Once



"This is a given when hiring dispatchers or supervisors. Applicants for these jobs usually expect to be interviewed more than once," says Walsh. "It can pay off with other people in

your organization, too. The second and third interviews give both the applicant and the interviewer every opportunity to test compatibility."

Dickson suggests that more than one person do the interviewing. "Whenever possible," he says, candidates should be interviewed by two people. This will greatly improve your chances of making the right choice."

• Listen Carefully to the Answers

"Even after asking the right questions, some interviewers make the wrong choice because they didn't listen carefully to the answers," says Mulling. "Don't kid yourself into thinking you can overcome potential conflicts and make someone fit in just because you like them or because their skills are a perfect match for the job."

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Hoehne, Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR). Hoehne is director of human resources at Aurora University in Aurora, Ill. She cautions, "You must always keep in mind that there are many complex laws that govern the interviewing/hiring process today."

Selecting the right person from among a group of job candidates has never been easy, and today's legal constraints have made that job more complex than ever. Fortunately, there are simple techniques that can help you negotiate that difficult path. We asked three experts to give us their best advice. Here's what they told us:

Talk Less, Listen More

"Most interviewers talk too much," says Emory Mulling, chairman of The Mulling Companies in Atlanta, and author of *The Mulling Factor: Get Back Your Life by Taking Control of Your Career*. "The interviewer's role is to get information from the candidate. Too often, interviewers spend too much time talking about the job and the company and not enough time asking relevant questions of the candidate."

Human resources professionals agree that talking too much during

an interview is a common mistake. Remember, your job during a pre-employment interview is to obtain as much meaningful information from the applicant as possible. You can't listen when you're talking.

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Keep the Interview on Track

As with any conversation, a pre-employment interview can stray far off its proper path if not carefully controlled.

"If I had a friend conducting an interview, I would advise him to ask only those job-related questions that he needs to ask to make a lawful hiring decision," says labor attorney John Romeo in Philadelphia. "I would advise him to pay close attention to the direction the conversation takes during the interview. An interview can easily turn into a conversation about family, religion, or national origin," he says. "If the interviewer sees the conversation going in this direction, she should make a concerted effort to stop and switch gears — get the conversation onto a proper and legal topic."

Prepare a Written List of Questions

You must not ask different questions of male and female applicants. To do so is to risk violation of discrimination laws. "I usually create a list of questions that I'm going to ask all candidates before the interview process starts," says Hoehne. "I then put those questions on a sheet of paper with space between them to take notes."

James Walsh, author of *Rightful Termination: Defensive Strategies for Hiring and Firing in the Law-suit-Happy '90s*, advises starting with what hiring experts call structured questions. "Ask them of every candidate and base your comparisons on their answers." He suggests using a standardized worksheet to do this, checking off each applicant's strengths against the job skills required for the position.

Bob Dickson, former director of labor relations and personnel for Merck & Co. in West Point, Penn., also believes in using a carefully structured set of questions prepared in advance of the interview. "I recommend that you summarize what you have learned immediately after the interview. One way to do this is to list relevant answers and information next to each question on your list." You must not ask different questions of male and female applicants. To do so is to risk violation of discrimination laws. "I usually create a list of questions that I'm going to ask all candidates before the interview process starts," says Hoehne. "I then put those questions on a sheet of paper with space between them to take notes."

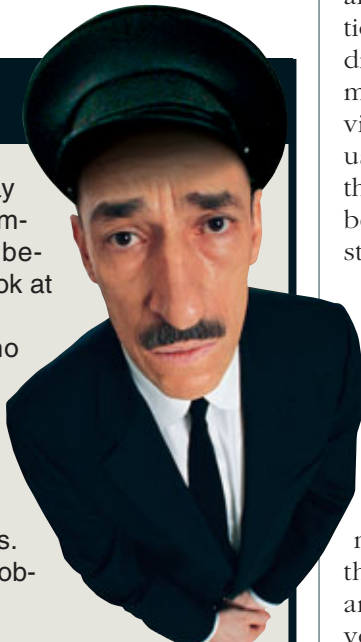
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EXAMINE RÉSUMÉS AND APPLICATIONS CAREFULLY

While complete honesty on a job application may not be the norm today, most experts advise employers to question the obvious. Time gaps between jobs often signal the need for a closer look at an applicant's employment history.

"Look for 'short-timer-itis' — the person who seems to switch jobs every 12 months," says Hoehne. "If the applicant is new to the job market and has already had two or three jobs, this may or may not be a warning sign. However, if the applicant has 10 year's experience and 10 jobs, you will want to discuss the reasons. This could signal a 'job-hopper' at best and a problem employee at worst."



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PLACES YOU DON'T WANT TO GO

Don't Get Tripped Up By Illegal Questions

In the early '90s, courts outlawed the use of questions the answers to which might be used to discriminate against applicants. Now, an interviewer who asks them may face a discrimination lawsuit. “The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1991 make hiring a potential nightmare,” says Walsh.

It's in an interviewer's best interest to know what questions may lead to litigation. Interviewers must not ask any questions concerning so-called protected classes, including race, sex, age, national origin, religion, or disabilities. In general, questions about workers' compensation or health history are also prohibited.

You should also avoid questions about pregnancy. “Except in limited circumstances, employers cannot make hiring decisions based on an applicant's pregnancy,” says Romeo. “If an interviewer asks an applicant whether or not she was — or planned to be — pregnant, the employer is setting itself up for a discrimination claim.”

“Watch out for questions that seem innocuous but lead to information that could be used to discriminate against the applicant,”

Romeo adds. “For example, asking an applicant what year he graduated from high school can give rise to an age discrimination claim, since the applicant could allege that the employer used the information to figure out the applicant's age. A better question is, simply, ‘Did you graduate from high school?’”

Romeo offers these examples of questions that you should NOT ask during an interview:

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- Are you planning on having a family?
- Do you have children?
- Have you ever been injured on the job?
- What year were you born?
- Do you have a disability?

In *Rightful Termination*, author Walsh cautions that this list of pitfalls is likely to grow over the years as the courts seek to gauge the meaning of vaguely worded discrimination laws.

“I suggest that interviewers think of it this way,” says Mr. Romeo. “Don't ask a question if you cannot lawfully base a hiring decision on the answer. You cannot discriminate based on information you do not have. So, if you don't need to know, don't ask.”

As They Say in a Courtroom, “Don't Lead the Witness”

Mulling cautions interviewers not to give away too many details of

what they are looking for in a candidate. “If you do that,” he says, “the candidate will mold his or her answers to what the interviewer wants to hear. That can result in the candidate being hired, qualified or not.”

Don't Focus Exclusively on Hard Skills

“Some interviewers take a résumé point by point and discuss only the candidate's hard skills,” says Mulling. “Technical skills are not always the best indicator of success on the job. The candidate must also be a good fit for the boss and the work environment. Two candidates can be equally qualified in technical skills, but vastly different in terms of personality and work-style preferences.”

Pre-employment Tests Should Measure Only Relevant Skills

A 1971 Supreme Court decision, *Griggs v. Duke Power*, provided a major precedent in pre-employment testing. In that case, an applicant for a janitorial job was required to take an intelligence test and show a high school diploma.

When the company did not hire him, the applicant sued and took his case all the way to the Supreme Court. The court ruled that a high school diploma was irrelevant to the janitorial position in question. The court also ruled that pre-employment testing must measure only skills directly related to performance on the job being sought.

While pre-employment tests are still widely used, most have been carefully designed to comply with the 1971 Supreme Court decision.

You should never take pre-employment interviewing lightly. “Interviewing is perhaps the most critical part of the employment process,” Dickson says. “It's a responsibility that you will want to prepare for carefully. The information you obtain from the candidates will become the most important factor in your final decision.” **LCT**

AVOID ANY STATEMENT THAT IMPLIES A PROMISE OF PERMANENT EMPLOYMENT

“The employer's vulnerability in a wrongful discharge suit begins in the early stages of the relationship,” says Walsh. “The courts sometimes find a contractual relationship in seemingly harmless statements about job security or advancement opportunities. Even an oral promise of a salary review after a specified length of time should be avoided; the courts may find a contract of employment for that length of time in any such promise.”