Asking the Right Questions When Hiring

INTERVIEWS ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR JOB CANDIDATES TO REVEAL THEIR INNER SELVES, BUT HIRING MANAGERS MUST ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ELICIT SUCH RESPONSES.

BY MARJORIE M.K. HLAVA

How do you find good people to hire? What do you look for in new employees? What kinds of interview questions do you ask?

I am asked these questions frequently by attendees at industry meetings or by clients seeking to build an in-house database or taxonomy or implement a cutting-edge search program. They want to know what kinds of questions they can ask in an interview, how they can find good people to hire, and what kinds of qualities they should look for in a job applicant.

Finding excellent employees is both an art and a science, as is retaining them. The most dangerous and risky thing organizations do is hire people—it is a corporate gamble.

At Access Innovations, we have devised a list of questions to ask potential employees. The questions are designed to give us a good indication of what kinds of people the interviewees are. In this article, I will discuss these questions, describe the kinds of responses we look for, and explain what we can discern from the responses we receive.

The Pre-interview Process

The first and most obvious step in the hiring process is to look over the résumé. Does it list the skills and education you are looking for? Does it show longevity at a previous job? Three to five years in one position is a good indicator of stability and also means the applicant is a seasoned worker.

Finding excellent employees is both an art and a science, as is retaining them. The most dangerous and risky thing organizations do is hire people—it is a corporate gamble.

We also look for gaps in employment. For example, if a résumé shows no job for a two-year period, we want to know the cause. Could the applicant have been raising a child, or moving to a new city or state? Was the applicant in prison? (Yes, we have had more than one felon apply, and in some cases we hired them.) Find out what those gaps represent—they will tell you a lot about the candidate.

If the résumé looks promising, we ask the applicant to come in, fill out an application, and take some tests. Completing an application ensures that all of our basic questions are answered if they are not covered in the résumé.

We require all potential employees to take spelling and proofreading tests at the time of application. The spelling test consists of words taken from the Gregg’s shorthand list of the 200 most
The most dangerous and risky thing organizations do is hire people—it is a corporate gamble.

frequently misspelled words. We are looking for people who are attentive to detail and have good technical writing skills. If they can’t spell or spot spelling errors, chances are their eye for detail is not as keen as we would prefer. For us, details are crucial to creating a quality product.

The final test we administer is a typing test—on an IBM Selectric typewriter. We don’t really care how fast someone can type; we care how they react to the machine. Many people (especially younger applicants) have never used a typewriter. Some applicants have even refused to take the typing test, since they are applying for a professional position.

An applicant’s performance on the tests, and the manner in which he or she treats the people administering the tests, go a long way toward determining whether the hiring process proceeds to an interview. If people refuse to take the tests, we consider them uncooperative and not good candidates for employment. (Note to younger readers: When applying for a job, pay attention to your manners with the people conducting the initial intake. These folks are part of the hiring team and often have considerable influence.)

The Interview Process
At the beginning of the interview, we outline the procedure to be followed: reviewing the application, asking leading questions (and we say up front that the questions are “leading”), describing the job, and, finally, allowing the applicant to ask questions. We do not tell an applicant about the job at the beginning because people will often couch their answers in ways they think will best suit the position. More than once, however, we have interviewed a person with one position in mind, only to find he or she is a much better fit for another position.

We start our interviews with potential employees by asking them questions about their previous jobs and encouraging them to talk about themselves. This phase of the interview gives us a good indication of a candidate’s job history and what he or she thinks is important about a job. Generally speaking, if what an applicant thinks is important compares favorably with what we think is important, odds are good that this is a potential employee.

After ensuring that the application and résumé leave no gaps or questions about experience, we commence asking questions, as follows:

**Define “professional.”** It is our feeling that a professional can be from any walk of life. A piece a paper does not make someone professional—you can be as professional a dogcatcher or garbage collector as you can a president, librarian, or chemist. Every line of work has its own aspects of professionalism.

At Access Innovations, we are looking for people who are motivated to get the job done no matter what it takes. We give interviewees a hypothetical job problem and ask them to suggest possible solutions. This gives us an idea of their approach to solving problems. One hypothetical situation we like to present is this:

**It is 3:30 p.m., and your boss comes to you with a rush job that he says he needs first thing in the morning. The building is locked at 5:00 p.m. and you are not allowed to stay past that time. You expect this assignment to take you at least four hours to complete. What do you do?**

This question gives us a clear idea of whether the applicant is a professional. Some librarians get caught up in the “professional speak” they learned in library school. I want people who will behave and think in a professional manner.

**Define “quality.”** This question gives us a very good idea of what people value in themselves and in others. We are looking not only for their definition of quality but also for an idea of what they think is important in creating a product or delivering a service.

**Describe your best boss and your worst boss.** The reason for asking this question is to identify the qualities that interviewees value in others and themselves. (If an applicant has no previous work experience, we substitute a teacher or some other authority figure for a boss.) Often, in asking about best/worst boss situations, we get interesting insights into an applicant’s strengths and weaknesses in previous job assignments.

We ask interviewees to describe their best boss first—and we ask twice. Interviewees who lead with descriptions of their worst boss may hold a generally negative outlook. We want positive people.

**What would you like to be doing in 5 years?** This is a good follow-up to the previous question, because sometimes people are merely looking for a part-time job until they finish school (which is fine) and sometimes they are looking for a career-oriented job. This question will give you a good idea of their aspirations—whether they are looking to move up into a managerial slot, want to be in the trenches working with real data, or see this as an interim step to an entirely different career.

Body language is as important a response to this question as the actual answer. Some people have a very clear-cut idea of what they want to do, while some do not. Depending on the position you are seeking to fill, that may or may not be important.

**What do you do when you get angry?** The answer to this question will give us an indication of how clearly candidates
assess themselves. We don't really care what they do when they get angry—we care how well they know themselves.

An interesting angle here is to see whether a candidate thinks he or she handles anger differently at work than at home. It is equally important to know whether a candidate is the type of person who goes away and sulks or who throws a “fit” in the office every time things don't go his or her way. In the end, it doesn't really matter whether candidates have a bad temper, only whether they can handle their temper.

**Describe your best job and your worst job.** We don't want to know which job it was, just what made it the best or worst job you ever had. The job characteristics that candidates outline in their responses generally reflect what they find most and least important in people and in work. How well do we measure up against these characteristics?

**Describe an emergency situation in which you were involved and how you reacted.** Applicants often ask us whether this question refers to an emergency situation at work. We tell them that's part of the question—we want to know what they consider an emergency and how they behave under that level of pressure. If an applicant tells us her boss came to her at 4:30 with a rush job and she had just broken a fingernail and her boyfriend was coming at 5:00 to pick her up, and she considered that an emergency, she probably is not a good candidate for us.

**How fast do you type?** We don't ask whether they type, but how fast they type. True, we already know how fast they type, because they took the typing test. What we are really looking for here are their reactions to the question, not a number.

Nowadays, nearly everyone, from the CEO to the receptionist, sits at a computer keyboard. If we are hiring for a higher-level position such as a librarian, a programmer, a technical writer, or a manager, and an applicant responds that he or she doesn’t type and is interviewing for a “professional” job, I do not want to have that person on my team. However, if candidates say they are not very good typists, I am fine with that. My concern is that people be willing to perform basic office tasks.

**What would be an ideal job for you?** We, of course, are interested in learning whether the job they are applying for is the ideal job in their eyes. More than that, however, we are interested in what kinds of things they value in a job—good people to work with, mental challenges, an ideal geographic location, and so forth. These preferences will generally come out when they respond to this question. You can also frequently tell from their answers whether applicants are trying to say what they think you want to hear or are actually telling you something about themselves.

**Do you have any questions?** We always provide job candidates with an opportunity to ask us questions, and we answer in as straightforward a fashion as possible. If they want to change any of their earlier answers, they can do so at this point.

**Concluding the Interview**

Now that the candidates have drawn a good picture of themselves, we describe the position. We do this toward the end of the interview because we want to obtain the candidates' unbiased opinions of themselves. Describing the job early in the interview might change the applicants’ answers to the questions we pose.

To conclude the interview, we ask a rather straightforward question: Why should we hire you? Most people blanch a little bit at this question, so we indicate that this is the time for their sales pitch. It is their opportunity to tell us about the qualities they have (especially those they weren’t able to discuss earlier in the interview) that would be of interest to us as potential employers. After they respond, the interview is concluded.

Following the interview, we always check at least three references. Generally, we start with the people listed on the résumé, but we do not confine our checks to only those people. The references on the résumé are for the individual; we also try to find people who have worked with or for the applicant to get a well-rounded idea of what he or she is really like. If we uncovered any possible problems during the interview, we try to probe a bit to see how serious they are.

So far, this approach has worked very well for us. In fact, many of our employees remember the questions they were asked during their interview and ask their fellow team members how they answered the questions!

I know that many other people within the information industry use very similar questions and practices to hire their employees. We do have other questions we ask, but these will give you a strong indication of how we approach the hiring process. I encourage you to use these questions or variations of them. **SLA**
Hiring Librarians and Ensuring their Early Success

HIRING A NEW LIBRARIAN IS BOTH A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY, AND IT TESTS THE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS OF THE SUPERVISOR.

BY KATHEL DUNN, PHD

Hiring a librarian is an opportunity to bring a fresh perspective to your team, add new skills to the team, and utilize the technical, project management, and overall “get things done” abilities of the new hire in accomplishing the work of the library.

For the hiring manager, hiring requires planning, a thorough understanding of the hard and soft skills needed for the position, and a commitment to devoting time to orient and mentor the new hire in the first months (if not the first year) of employment.

Planning to Hire

Hiring to fill an open position is an opportunity to think thoroughly about the skills and characteristics needed for the position and articulate those skills and characteristics to everyone involved in the search process. If you are the hiring manager, make sure that other staff are aware—and, if there is a search committee, that they are aware—of the kinds of skills you want.

Having a conversation with the other staff and the search committee about the skills needed for the position will help reveal any misconceptions, especially among the staff. For example, if you’re hiring someone with social media skills because you want to turn social media duties over to the new person, does everyone on the team know that? Or did an existing staff person think she would be able to turn some unwanted tasks over to the new person and begin leading the library’s social media efforts? Perhaps the previous holder of the position managed the reference desk schedule, so scheduling and organizational skills mattered a great deal; your intention may be to shift scheduling to someone else on the team and hire a leader-coach to develop subject-specific skills with librarians who work with researchers.

Staff who participate in the hiring process need to know the purpose and responsibilities of the new position so they can successfully participate in reviewing applications and meeting candidates. The hiring process can also serve as a succession planning tool for staff, provided you engage them in planning discussions early in the process. Staff may be able to develop themselves professionally for new opportunities if they know the direction in which the library is heading and the positions that will likely result.

Advance planning can also reduce biases in your hiring and provide a clear rationale for hiring a particular candidate. For example, say you want X, Y, and Z skills in a candidate, but members of the search committee are leaning toward a candidate with X and Y skills only, even though the candidate pool contains someone who has X, Y, and Z skills. As the hiring manager, you can choose the X-Y-Z candidate, but you’ll know why you are doing so.

KATHEL DUNN is associate fellowship coordinator at the National Library of Medicine (NLM) in Bethesda, Md. She can be reached at dunnk@mail.nlm.nih.gov. The opinions expressed in this article are her own and not those of the NLM or the National Institutes of Health.