

# The Art of the Interview

YOU'VE GOT 30 MINUTES TO DECIDE IF A CANDIDATE IS A GOOD FIT FOR YOUR BUSINESS. MAKE THE MOST OF THEM. BY MATT STILES



**THE STACK OF QUALIFIED RESUMES ON YOUR DESK SITS TALLER THAN YOUR GRANDE MOCHA FRAPPUCCINO.** You've got 30 minutes or less to spend with each applicant to find the one that fits together like "ramma lamma lamma ka-dinga da-dinga dong." First, put down that book of top ten interview questions. Pre-fab, cliché, tired

## T H E R I G H T Q U E S T I O N S

and meaningless interview questions will tell you nothing about whether the applicant sitting in your office is a fit for the job down the hall. You haven't got time to waste on questions like, "If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be and why?" What possible answer to that question will tell you anything about whether the applicant has what it takes to be a creative, reliable and manageable web designer for your IT business, or an attentive, articulate and patient customer service representative for your call center? You've got to get down to business in these interviews and have a meaningful, in-depth conversation about what the job requires and whether the applicant can do it. To save your time (and your sanity) and still make those 30 minutes useful to your business, you've got to be an accomplished master of that great business art form, the interview.

**Let's Toss Out the Stupid Questions** Just so we have an understanding of the blank canvas we're starting with here, let's go ahead and throw out all of the stupid interview questions. (Yes, despite what we were all told by our eighth grade math teachers, there really are such things as stupid questions.) Here are the most common, universally stupid interview questions in no particular order:

- If you could be any movie star (or insert another random thing or class of things), which one would you be and why?

- The aforementioned historical figure question
  - Why do you want to work here?
  - Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
  - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
  - How would your prior employers (or insert friends, family, or colleagues) describe you and your work ethic?
  - When is it okay to lie?
  - Can you handle criticism?
  - Can you work under stress and tight deadlines?
- And finally, although not technically a question:
- Tell me about yourself.

I have to admit that at one time or another I've used some, if not all of these stupid interview questions. If you've used them too, you're probably wondering why they're so stupid. Let's knock these out quickly and move on. Most of the stupid interview questions have been so overused that people have written books, articles and even blogged about how to provide so-called "model" answers to them: If the question has no direct relevance to the job, throw it out! Don't ask a question that by its very nature requires a smooth-talking, brown-nosing, kiss-ass or obvious answer. Unless you're going to promise you'll employ someone for five years (Americans' average job tenure is about three years), don't ask where they see themselves in that time frame. Finally, if you open the interview with, "Tell me about yourself," it's as good as saying, "Even though I have your resume, I haven't read it, I know nothing about you, and I haven't prepared for this interview."

**Steer Clear of the Illegal Questions** While we're covering interview questions you should not ask, let's include illegal and potentially illegal questions. Legal prohibition and the risk of liability require that you not ask applicants questions about: lawsuits

or workers' compensation claims against prior employers; age; national origin; marriage, children or plans for either; family responsibilities or lifestyle; disabilities, use of alcohol and drugs (over-the-counter, prescription or illegal) or medical history; bankruptcy; and cultural, religious, political or union affiliations.

**Effective Interviews Should Be Candid Business Conversations** You would think from all this discussion of stupid questions and illegal questions that a good business interview was just a series of questions and answers, but that's not it. The ideal interview is not a polished, packaged song and dance routine. Remember the last time that old friend from high school called you up to have lunch and after the chit chat ended (rather abruptly, as I recall), he pulled out his snazzy, multi-colored binder describing the perfect get-rich-quick-scheme? He had rainbow graphics, glossy graphs, fold-out charts, full color brochures, DVD videos and everything was pre-packaged and polished. He had a perfect answer to every one of your challenging questions. It looked too good to be true, it sounded too good to be true, and like most pyramid schemes, it WAS too good to be true! We've all been hoodwinked before and we know what getting hoodwinked feels like. A good job interview should neither look nor feel like an old-fashioned hoodwinking.

The ideal interview is a candid business conversation in a dual sales environment, one where you're truthfully selling your business (warts and all) and the applicant's selling herself. An interview done right has few questions (mostly open ended questions beginning with who, what, when, where, why and how) but provides plenty of answers for both you and the applicant. These answers should give you enough information to decide whether the applicant is a good fit for the company and provide the applicant a wealth of new information to decide whether the company is a good fit for her. >>

### The Three Questions Every Job Interview Should Answer

Unsured what to talk about in your candid business conversation? Keep it simple. You don't need to read the latest management gimmick book to conduct a good interview and hire the best talent, although if that's your bag, try *Hiring the Best: A Manager's Guide to Effective Interviewing and Recruiting*, by Martin Yate (Adams Media Corp, 2005). Now in its fifth edition, Yate's guide to recruiting is really no gimmick at all. It's the straightforward nuts and bolts of hiring top talent and a good resource for the multi-tasking manager who wants to hire smart without having to become an HR expert. He constructs a hiring process designed to answer three basic questions: (1) Is the applicant able to do the job?; (2) Is the applicant willing to do the job?; and (3) Is the applicant manageable? If those questions make sense to you—and they should seem quite obvious to you—skip the book and keep reading, because you already have most of the tools you need to interview effectively.

**Get Beyond "Willing and Able"** Yate's first two questions are the meat of a good job interview: What's this job about and who can do it? Using a well-written job description to candidly discuss the job with the applicant, most employers will have no problem deciding whether the applicant is willing and able to do the job. Still, some job requirements just can't be described on paper.

Let's say you're the office manager for a doctor's office. When you sit down to interview Bob, an applicant for a medical records clerk position, have a couple copies of your job description in hand. Give one to him and keep one for yourself. Then, one at a time, have a conversation about each item in the list of job responsibilities. Ask Bob if he can do those responsibilities. Find out whether he's done them before. Ask him for examples. If you think a particular facet of the job is harder than the others (maybe it's that filing a claim with Aetna is trickier than filing a claim with Blue Cross and Blue Shield) or that certain key relationships will be important to the success of the job (like getting along with Dr. So-and-So, who has a nasty habit—that you're trying to break—of talking down to all the staff), say so up front. Remember that no matter how well-written your job description is, a written description alone is not going to tell that

medical records clerk applicant what it's like to work for the doctor he supports. If a good working relationship with Dr. So-and-So is a must for the job, set up some time for him to meet with Bob, even if you have to chaperone. If possible, use some interview time to take Bob on a tour of the office and records room and show him where and how the job is performed. The social butterfly who happens to be an exceptional medical records clerk may end up being a poor performer working in a medical records room all by himself and isolated from the rest of the office. Communicating the work environment is just as important as communicating the work responsibilities. Your conversation about the substance of the job should be so thorough that by the end of the interview both you and Bob can picture in your minds him doing (or not doing) the job well.


**Hire for Company Values** Yate's third question—Is the applicant manageable?—is usually the toughest for hiring managers to answer, because the average two-page resume and 30 minute interview sheds little light on an applicant's manageability. Sure, resumes and applications usually show an applicant's work history, which may reflect manageability in the average tenure with prior employers and reasons for leaving them, but that's far from being a complete picture. To really get at an applicant's manageability, you're going to need more.

The head of HR for a client of mine, a successful federal contractor providing IT services to the Department of Defense, told me once that an applicant's manageability could only be determined by understanding the applicant's personal values. This particular federal contractor put that theory to work in job interviews. The company sought to hire only those applicants whose values mirrored its corporate values of (1) doing the right thing, (2) providing courteous, helpful customer service and (3) fixing the problem the first time. Like most businesses, it sought job applicants who had a record of being honest and reliable, displayed confidence, courtesy and high personal standards. Unlike most businesses,

however, it spent most of its interview time focused on these values. At the start of the interview, the company's recruiters provided applicants with the company's three core business values and asked applicants to provide specific examples of how they have embraced these values in their personal or business relationships. Recruiters said that they loved conducting these values-based interviews because they encouraged substantive conversation about the personal and business experiences of the applicants, telling recruiters more than any resume or cover letter really could about what kinds of employees the applicants would become.

It makes sense that what you want in an employee should mirror what you want for your business. Still, questions about business values should not be mistaken with religious or spiritual values. I once represented a manufacturer who, during job interviews, asked applicants if they had personally accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That employer wound up spending a lot of time in court and a lot of money on legal fees. If you want to discuss an applicant's personal values but not cross the line into illegal questions, you should follow the example of the federal contractor's recruiters and practice behavioral interviewing—getting applicants to discuss detailed, real-life examples of good workplace values and how they have exhibited them in business and personal relationships. Behavioral interviewing is an excellent technique to test whether applicants have walked the walk and not just talked the talk.

No matter how thorough your interview is, some applicants are pros at gaming the system. Still, until we come up with a better way to vet prospective employees, the interview is here to stay. So make the best of your 30 minutes and instead of asking nervous applicants what historical figure they'd like to have dinner with and why, you'll be having dinner with a thankful CEO, toasting (with something better than that frappuccino) the success of your talented work force.

Next month we'll explore strategies for closing the deal on new hires and the increasingly important role of the written job offer. 

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# Want the Job?

KILL YOUR EMOTICONS AND OTHER TIPS FOR SAVVY SEEKERS.

## 1. Communicate With Personality But Don't Be Tacky

First, no matter how inconvenient, seemingly absurd, or unfair it sounds, follow the employer's directions on how it wants to be contacted. If you really want the job, you'll communicate in smoke signals if that's the way the employer wants it. Second, remember that the language and tone of your letters, emails and other written contacts to potential employers speak volumes about you and your vocabulary, grammar, professionalism and background. A potential employer is going to read your letter and ask herself whether it looks like the kind of writing she would want on her company letterhead. If your first contact with a potential employer is an email written in text message slang, including emoticons :-), don't expect to be called for an interview :-).

## 2. Be On Time

Employers aren't impressed when you show up late, frazzled and sweaty for an interview and then have the nerve to complain about downtown traffic and parking. Everyone knows that traffic and parking downtown are a hassle. Plan ahead. If you can't avoid being late, call ahead and let the interviewer know how far behind you are. An interviewer's going to spit nails if you're 20 minutes late. If you call ahead and he uses those 20 minutes to get more work done instead of thinking about different ways to torture you in the interview, he's going to appreciate that you understand the value of his time and you'll have a better interview. If you have to be late and can't call ahead, don't offer excuses. Sincerely apologize to your interviewer, let him know that's not the kind of employee you would be and dazzle him with the rest of your interview.

## 3. Research Your Potential Employer

A knowledgeable applicant impresses the interviewer as an applicant who means business and wants the job. Make sure you really understand the business you're interviewing with and have enough information to substantively discuss the business's history, culture, key personnel (including your interviewer, if possible), products, competitors, performance and prospects for growth. You can find this information on its website, in its marketing materials and in its annual report. If it's a publicly-traded company, you're absolutely short-changing yourself if you don't read its annual report to shareholders before your interview. In just a few pages, an annual report can tell you what the company thinks of itself, its employees, its customers, its industry, its performance, its growth and its various departments. Just don't use this research to fuel unsolicited criticisms of the company's products, services, customers, marketing or website during the interview.

Once you've read everything that the business has written or said about itself, Google the business name and the names of its executives/owners; you might be surprised to find that the business is one of the good guys (it's a good corporate citizen involved in responsible charitable giving, supports bold and progressive community initiatives and its owners/executives are actively involved in community affairs) or that the business isn't too far away from being the next headline in a long line of recent corporate scandals (maybe the company recently filed

bankruptcy, is under criminal investigation or is being sued by its customers for fraudulent conduct).

## 4. Practice and Prepare for Behavioral Interviews

Prepare a list of talking points about your skills and qualifications for the job, as well as a list of potential questions that you can expect to be asked by your interviewer. Hear yourself conversationally going through your talking points and answering questions. Interviewing for a sales job? Organize a list of your toughest sales in prior positions, write down what made them tough, include how you handled them and note the value of the deal. Pull together some information on your book of business numbers from each prior sales job and in chronological order, be prepared to show how you've grown your customer base at each stop throughout your sales career. When you have your outline of information together, turn the TV off, put the kids to bed and spend some time with your spouse going over your talking points about why you'd make a good salesman. Ask your partner to conduct a mock interview, posing the questions you think you might be asked and any additional questions that come to mind. (If your partner left after your first sales job, work with a friend or use my favorite trial preparation partner, the bathroom mirror.)

## 5. Make a List of Your Questions About the Job

Applicants who don't have questions about the job they're interviewing for are applicants who haven't really thought about the job. Make a list of the things that you must know before deciding whether you want to work for the potential employer. If you don't have a knack for remembering them in the interview, it's okay to take an outline of questions with you.

## 6. Use Your Dale Carnegie

In his well known self-help book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie taught that the best way to obtain what you want is to show someone who can make it happen how it benefits them to do so. It's obvious you want the job, but what does the employer want? How can you serve the employer's interests with your skills? Sell the employer on those skills and what they can do for him.

## 7. Be Deferential to Your Interviewer

Sure, be yourself for the job interview, but let the demeanor, decorum, and interests of the interviewer dictate your conduct and where the interview goes. I'll never forget one of my own interviews where I showed up prepared to talk about why I was the best candidate for the job and all the interviewer wanted to talk about was college football. If you get stuck in that situation, trust me, talk about college football.

## 8. Show Your Gratitude

After your interview, send a well-written, thoughtful and personal thank you note to your interviewer(s). Handwritten thank you notes on tasteful stationery make the best impression, but only if your handwriting is legible. Otherwise, send a typed business letter thank you note. I've talked to many hiring managers who said it was the genuine sincerity of a thank you note that broke the tie between two equally qualified candidates. 