

# interviewing basics

Personal interviews are one of the most commonly used tools for selecting candidates for employment. Every person involved in the interview process needs to be familiar with the “do’s and don’ts” of a legal and effective interview. Failing to recognize and address common recruitment mistakes can open your agency to liability down the road. Here are some basic tips to help any hiring manager brush up on their interviewing skills.

## interview do’s

- DO:** Prepare. Read the applicant’s resume and employment application ahead of time. See if there are other questions you need to ask or any red flags you need to be aware of. This will help your interview be more productive.
- DO:** Conduct the interview in a private setting. Minimize disruptions and give the candidate your undivided attention. Not only is this a common courtesy, it will help give you the opportunity to focus.
- DO:** Be polite and professional. Introduce yourself and shake the candidate’s hand. Remember, you are representing your organization and its image.
- DO:** Explain the process. What should the candidate expect to happen during the interview? Laying out the plan for the interview helps a candidate feel comfortable, which leads to a better interview. It also helps you keep things on track.
- DO:** Listen more than you talk. Focus on being a good facilitator. If you keep cutting the candidate off, you will never have a chance to hear enough about them to know if they’ll be a good hire.
- DO:** Use behavioral-based questions. Sometimes candidates make a great first impression, but aren’t able to do more than provide rehearsed or standard answers. Behavioral-based questions help you make hiring decisions based on things other than “feelings” or first impressions. They also predict on-the-job performance more accurately than other interview methods, as previous successes are a good indicator of future performance.
- DO:** Take notes. This will help you remember each applicant. Never write on a job application or resume - keep your notes on a separate piece of paper. A good rule of thumb: stick to the facts. Notes should be reflective of whether the candidate meets the qualifications for the position and if not, why not.
- DO:** Save your company overview for the end of the interview. Otherwise, job seekers might tell you what they think you want to hear, rather than speaking honestly. Doing this also gives you a chance to gauge whether the candidate put effort into doing research before the interview about your agency and the position.
- DO:** Give the candidate an opportunity to ask questions. Not only is this a common courtesy, sometimes you’ll learn a lot from a candidate by what they ask.
- DO:** Develop a standard closing. How will applicants hear about the status of their candidacy? When? From whom? Laying out these basics help you close the interview and will provide valuable information to the applicant. Don’t forget to thank the candidate for meeting with you and for their interest in your organization.
- DO:** Follow up with each candidate to let them know whether they got the job. This can be done by mail, email, or phone. Don’t neglect this step—it’s a professional courtesy and gives the interview process closure. It will also reduce the number of inquiries you’ll receive from applicants checking on the status of their candidacy.

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## interview don'ts

- DON'T:** Get too friendly. There's being polite and professional, and then there's going overboard. If you spend the interview chatting, you may make a hiring decision because you liked the person versus because they are truly qualified for the job.
- DON'T:** Ask illegal questions. Keep your questions job-related so that your hiring decision is based on qualifications, not personality.
- DON'T:** Ask all "yes" or "no" questions. Most candidates will know the answer you want and will give it to you—whether or not it's genuine. The same goes with overused questions like "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" If your questions are predictable and rehearsed, you can bet the candidates' answers will be too.
- DON'T:** Talk too much. Allow candidates time to describe their skills and qualifications during the interview.
- DON'T:** Invent answers. If you don't know the answer to an applicant's question, find someone who does or tell the applicant you will get back to them.
- DON'T:** Make promises or guarantees. If a candidate thinks they've got the job based on something you say, and then it's not offered to them, you have exposed yourself to the possibility of an angry phone call or worse—a lawsuit.
- DON'T:** Write on resumes or application materials. Employers are required to retain these documents as official records for certain periods of time. Your notes on these documents could be misinterpreted and, worst case scenario, create a dangerous paper trail that could be tough to explain in the event of future legal action.
- DON'T:** Skip the second interview. One meeting is nowhere near sufficient to gauge someone's capabilities and fit. Invite strong candidates back for another meeting, preferably with at least one additional team member. Ask new questions and repeat a few from the first conversation to test the candidate's consistency.

Interview skills are learned; a good manager can be a not-so-good interviewer. Regularly training hiring managers on interview techniques can help you minimize the risks associated with recruitment practices.

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## Avoid the Pitfalls of Illegal Questions

Federal and state laws prohibit prospective employers from asking questions that are not related to the job for which they are hiring. Many of these questions deal with age, family responsibilities, and lifestyle. So how can you get the information you need without going down a legally shaky path? Keep things job-related and base your questions around the essential functions of the position.

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .Are you a United States citizen?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Are you authorized to work in the United States?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .What is your native language?

**What you can ask:** . . . .What languages do you speak, read or write?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .What religion are you?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Are you able to work with our required schedule?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .When were you born?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Are you over the age of 18?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .What's your maiden name?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Have you worked under a different name?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .Do you have children?

**What you can ask:** . . . .This job requires travel and the ability to work overtime with little notice. Are you able to do that?

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .How do you feel about supervising someone of the opposite sex?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Tell me about your previous experience leading and managing teams.

**What you shouldn't ask:** . . . .Do you have any disabilities?

**What you can ask:** . . . .Are you able to perform the essential functions of this job with or without reasonable accommodation?

## First Thing First

"Tell me your story." After you have done introductions and explained the process, ask this question. It's one of the best ways to start an interview. Asking this opens the door to give the candidate an opportunity to describe what they've done, why they've made the moves and choices they have, and why they are sitting in front of you for a job interview. Other questions should be customized based on the job description and position requirements.

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## It's All in the Details: Follow up Questions

Dig beneath the surface and get the real story. A candidate's initial answer just might not tell you enough. Use follow up questions to increase the amount of information you get during an interview. Examples of follow up questions include:

- Why so?
- Please tell me more.
- How did you accomplish that?
- What made that important to you?

## Red Flags

Sometimes during an interview you'll encounter a red flag—a warning sign that something just isn't right.

*Here are some red flags that can't be ignored:*

- Negative or vague reasons for leaving past employment or worse, speaking negatively about a former employer. There's no excuse for this. Everyone's had a not-so-good job experience, but that's not a license to trash talk. If someone can't put a positive spin on a negative experience they probably can't put on a positive face when they're working for you.
- Can't explain why they want the job, or know nothing about your organization. Think about it - does the person even really want to be there?
- Job hopping—too many jobs in too little time. Chances are you'll be their next previous employer.
- Poor personal hygiene. It is reasonable to expect that people will arrive to an interview clean and free from odor, with their teeth brushed and their hair combed, being able to demonstrate a grasp of normal social etiquette.
- Arriving late to the interview. Failing to show up for an interview, and not calling to explain their absence, should also disqualify candidates from being considered for future positions. Things come up, but a candidate should at least be courteous and respectful enough to call to cancel the appointment.

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There isn't any secret or special technique that is foolproof. No matter how much practice you've had, you'll make mistakes. But a little planning will help make the hiring process easier, and less risky, for any hiring manager.

If you have any question regarding the information presented in this workshop of would like additional information, please feel free to contact

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