

DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND WHEN TO USE THEM

It is always best to plan and prepare your interviews. Apart from the fact that a consistent approach will protect you in case of a claim that you have treated a candidate unfairly, planning your interview questions will ensure you treat people fairly and don't lose your thread.

Whilst you could script every question, we recommend that you leave a little room for flexibility in your questions to allow you to drill down for more information if you want. We think it is better to plan the overall structure, the areas you want to explore, who is doing what, and the starter questions for each section.

But how do you choose what is the right type of interview question to use? Below is a summary of the commonly used approaches to interviews:

Different types of interview

Biographical interview

Sometimes referred to as a career history interview, this is a fairly traditional approach where you work through the candidate's CV. You ask questions about what a person was doing, what they were responsible for, and why they left a role for another.

- *Tell me about your responsibilities at xxx.*
- *What were you responsible for at xxx?*
- *How many people were you liaising with?*
- *How did you approach xxx aspect of your role?*
- *What made you leave that role?*

This approach will help you understand a candidate's experience, some aspects of what they did, as well as their motives for moving between different jobs.

Best used: as a very first conversation with a candidate such as an initial screen (face to face or over the telephone), to get an introduction to their "story".

Downsides: the approach tells you little about how people behaved, and struggles to get behind a fairly easily rehearsed set of facts. It is also fairly hard for younger people, or people with little relevant experience, to engage with.

Competency interview

This approach is useful if you have some specific competencies, capabilities or behaviours you are looking for. It presupposes you already know what good looks like in these competencies/behaviours through the use of behavioural indicators.

Questions are typically asked using a funnel format, with a broad opening question followed by further more specific or narrower probing questions. A typical question may start, “Tell me about a time when.....” allowing the candidate to choose from their previous experience their most relevant evidence.

- *Describe a situation where it was important that you identified and understood the needs of others.*
 - *What were you trying to achieve?*
 - *How did you communicate with those involved?*
 - *What happened next?*
 - *What was the outcome?*
- *Give me an example when you had to be particularly supportive to someone*
 - *How did you identify that they needed support?*
 - *How did you decide that was the best approach?*
 - *What factors did you consider when deciding how best to support them?*
 - *To what extent do you feel that you understood their feelings and concerns?*

Best used: when you want to explore specific skills and find out if a candidate has previously shown competency (ability) in a skill or task. It is very useful if you have a candidate who has not done the role previously but may be able to demonstrate transferable skills from another profession or situation.

Downsides: experienced candidates will have rehearsed their answers to competencies they would expect in the role, whilst others can struggle to think of a good example in the heat of the moment. Also, the focus is still very much what someone did, and what approach they took; the facts. It is not always guaranteed that you will find out why someone took an approach and hence be able to get an understanding of their motivators and values.

Behavioural event interview

This is a fairly specialist approach used to collect information about an individual’s past behaviour in a given situation. It works on the basis that past behaviour is a good predictor of future performance behaviour by focussing on what people actually did, rather than what they think.

Typically, you will ask the candidate to think of a specific event in their recent career history that they feel is a good example of when they were achieving something relevant to you. You can allow them some preparation time for this. Then you ask them to recount it in some detail, whilst you encourage further detail with questions like “what happened next?”, “what did you do then?”.

- *Tell me about a time when a customer requested special treatment that was out of the scope of normal procedures. What was the situation and how did you handle it?*

The secret with this approach is to provide every opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate their approach to something relevant whilst you listen for evidence of the indicators you need, without promoting or leading them by asking questions which give the game away with what you are looking

for. For example, “how did you ensure you stuck to the project plan” is by inference telling the candidate that sticking to the project plan is important. And guess what, you will get an answer back of how well they did that.

Best used: to explore an incident in-depth and find out how a candidate handled a relevant situation previously to see if that is a way of behaving that you need. Hard to prepare for so answers are likely to be genuine, if potentially unpolished.

Downsides: It takes a lot of discipline from the recruiter not to prompt and lead a candidate, and can also feel a bit weird for the candidate as it is not a two-way conversation. Also, some candidates can struggle to “get” what they are being asked to do, or struggle to analyse their behaviours saying “well I just did it”.

Strengths based interview

This approach is all about understanding how easily a candidate will fit in a role and what they have a natural aptitude for, rather than what they can do. The enjoyment of carrying out a task can lead to a state of consciousness recognised as “flow”. In this state, people lose a sense of time as they become thoroughly engrossed and engaged in what they are doing, and in turn, perform to a higher standard.

Start by asking general open questions and then probe using “why”, “what reason”, “how did that happen” type probes to really understand who the candidate is and what motivates them.

- *What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?*
- *Tell me about something you are particularly proud of?*
- *What do you find is always left to last or left undone on your to-do list?*
- *When would your family and friends say you are at your happiest?*
- *Tell me about an activity that comes easily to you.*
- *What were your favourite subjects at school?*
- *In what unique way are you different from other people?*
- *Describe a situation when you have felt most yourself.*
- *What would a successful day look like?*
- *When have you been “in flow” recently?*

Best used: when you really want to get a sense of who the candidate is and whether they are likely to be engaged with the role. It is very useful for interviewing people who have little work experience.

Downsides: It will tell you little about their technical skill which you will need to look for separately.

Conversational interviews

It is possible to run an interview making it feel like a conversation or chat, but actually, through engaging conversation, you will be to listen for evidence of key criteria and motivations needed for the role. The idea is to make them feel like a chat to get the candidate talking informally and in an unrehearsed mode. You may want to think about them being in more informal settings such as over a coffee or dinner, and certainly do not take notes. Clearly, you will need to write up afterwards!

Best used: when seeing how people perform in a social setting is important (such as for roles requiring networking), or if you have a VIP candidate (such as a current customer or stakeholder) and you don't want the interview to appear like a grilling.

Downsides: to avoid any hints of bias, you must make sure you know what you are looking for in advance and you must make notes straight afterwards. It is advisable to combine this technique with other interviews or tools (perhaps at a later stage) to ensure thorough evidence based criteria is captured.

Pressure interviews

Less commonly used although apparently still a technique enjoyed by some, particularly for graduates or people trying to enter universities, is the approach of deliberately putting people under pressure to see how they cope. It involves asking questions that at first do not seem relevant to the role, such as, "How many paperclips would it take to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool", or "Sell me this drinks coaster".

The purpose is not necessarily about whether the candidate tells you the right answer, but whether they can cope with something unusual under pressure. It is important that you know what good looks like in this approach.

Best used: when you want to see whether candidate can reason or think logically under pressure.

Downsides: can feel a little random or even cruel to a candidate. You must make sure you know what you are looking for in their response. Do not overuse; one question only.

How to probe for more information

As a recruiter, you will come across times when you feel the candidate has not given you the depth you need. You need to probe further. A useful model to have in the back of your mind is the STAR concept:

S: SITUATION Have they described the Situation they were in, including where, when and why.

T: TASK What Tasks did they undertake to deal with the situation?

A: ACTION What specific Action did they take to ensure the tasks were addressed?

R: RESULT What were the Results or outcomes of their actions and what did they learn?

This technique is sometimes referred to as SOAR where 'Task' is replaced by 'Objective'.

This model is useful with competency and biographical interviews. It helps you be sure they have told you everything you need to judge whether they have the competence you are looking for. Typically, a candidate will spend more time on the T, and less (or even nothing) on the others. If you can mentally be working your way through the STAR model as they are talking, it will highlight where to probe.

An alternative model to have in mind is the SARR approach:

S: SITUATION Tell us about....

A: ACTION What specifically did you do next?

R: REASON Why was that important to you? What was the reason you chose...? What motivated you to do it that way?

R: RESULTS What impact did that have? What did you learn from that experience? What does that tell you about your approach to....?

This structure is particularly useful in strengths based interviews where you are trying to explore a candidate's motivators and values to see if they will fit.

Whichever structure to keep in mind, probe questions are usually open questions starting What, How, When, and sometimes, Why.

How to structure the overall interview

There is no perfect way of structuring the overall interview. Some companies have a number of different interview styles, either held back to back on one day, or staggered through different recruitment stages, where you can use different techniques mentioned above.

Alternatively, you may be short on time or resources and want to cover as many options in one interview. In this case, we tend to find ourselves structuring interviews as follows:

