Employer Guide

to Interviewing
Hiring is risky, and the demands are high. You want to hire someone who will stay with the organization long term and make a meaningful impact. Candidates want to do work that matters for an organization they respect. Yet finding the right match of employer and employee is prone to failure.

You might hire someone who succeeded elsewhere but performs poorly in your work environment. Or you might hire someone who seemed likely, but turns out to have been more confident and engaged in the interview than competent and effective on the job. You might even hire someone perfectly capable of handling the current job, but who cannot adapt to future needs and ongoing circumstances.

A well-structured interview process helps you hire more quickly and mitigates the risk of hiring the wrong person. And the right process sets performance expectations long before your new employee shows up for the first day of work.

The key to successful interviewing is to look beyond superficial factors and determine whether someone can actually do the most important aspects of the job.
BEFORE THE FIRST INTERVIEW

Just as in every other important project, preparation is key to great hiring.

What Should Be Discussed?

Decide what you want to learn before the first interview. To get more value from your interview time, avoid looking for generic characteristics, like team player, or self-starter, or strategic thinker. Instead, look for someone who can deliver a specific set of business impacts in your unique work environment. Before the interview, think through these questions:

- What is the primary business problem you need this new hire to solve? What are the scenarios and situations this person must be prepared to confront?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities (competencies) will enable someone to drive that impact, given the resources and challenges in your organization today?
- What support are you willing and able to offer someone in this role? Are there complementary competencies in the rest of the team or organization that will help support this person’s success?
- What is it about your work environment that will enable this person to do the best work of their life? What will challenge them?

Your interviews will be more productive when you think in terms of competencies instead of generic attributes. Rather than debating if candidates are strategic, evaluate if they are ready to handle specific business situations. This kind of analysis will result in a more rigorous assessment and is far more likely to predict success on the job. This tangible, concrete clarity of expectations also helps to build trust with candidates.
Cultural Fit

From conducting hundreds of searches across several decades, we’ve learned unequivocally that what you see in a resume rarely predicts who you see in the room. It is impossible to determine cultural fit from a resume alone, so don’t bother trying. Assessing cultural fit must be done in conversation with the person during the interview sequence and not guessed in advance.

Competencies are not always transferable. Knowing that someone has the relevant experience, credentials, and technical skills for success in another organization does not mean they will perform well in your environment.

It is often said that people are hired for skills, but fired for fit. But what is fit, and how can it be determined before making a hire? Fit is partly about personal values and partly about “how we like to do things around here.” Someone may have the key skills and competencies needed, but have a work style that may drain everyone’s energy and lower team productivity. (It is torture for this misfit too—no one wants to be inside an organization that clashes with personal values.)

To get at cultural fit in the interview, take an objective look at your work environment. (Specific advice on what to evaluate can be found here.) Then, while interviewing, in addition to considering candidates’ credentials and experience, you also will want to look at how they achieved results in their last few jobs. Look both at what they enjoyed and what was a struggle. Observe how your environment compares. Candidates won’t have enough information to assess their own cultural fit. That is your role as the interviewer.

It is impossible to determine cultural fit from a resume alone, so don’t bother trying.
Who Should Be Involved?

Before you decide which candidates you want to interview, decide who will be helping you to interview them. Pre-planning results in a more structured sequence, with input from all key people, and a fast, predictable sequence for the candidates.

When managing the hiring process, it’s best to divide interviewers mentally into two categories:

**Veto Voters:** These people can stop any hire, at any time, simply by declining to support them. Obviously, their opinion matters most in the hiring decision. Beware of giving unintentional veto power to someone who you simply invited to help you interview.

Veto voters should be people who will work with the new employee regularly. Sometimes the veto voter is you, or a peer-level colleague, a boss, or even an influential board member. But ideally, they:

- Understand the job.
- Understand the competencies required to succeed.
- Have a proven track record of making good hiring decisions.

If anyone involved in the hiring sequence is missing any of those three key factors, perfectly well-qualified candidates could be derailed for deeply flawed reasons.

It is fine to gather input on the hiring decision from a variety of people, but avoid allowing inexperienced interviewers to conduct one-on-one interviews, and don’t waste too much energy trying to seek consensus on the hiring decision with less skilled interviewers who may not be as familiar with the job as you.

**Courtesy Interviewers:** These people may have something to contribute, but their input is unlikely to change your hiring decision. These interviewers may be peers who will work closely with the new hires, but either they do not have detailed knowledge of the job or are not seasoned interviewers with a proven hiring track record. While they may want to exert influence on the hiring decision, they often add more noise than light to the process. Unskilled or unfamiliar interviewers can blunder into issues without all the facts, and often raise doubts in the minds of candidates.

The key to managing courtesy interviewers is to learn from their factual inputs and observations, but reduce the risk of distraction by their opinions. It’s best to avoid creating a situation where you need to weigh opinions like, “I did not like his handshake” alongside objective facts like, “He has a five-year track record managing projects similar to this one.”

Fortunately, you can get all the facts and still maintain control of your hiring sequence by scheduling all your courtesy interviewers into a panel interview format. They will still be involved, and you will still have the benefit of their observations, but you will diminish any adverse impact they may exert on the hiring decision, and more importantly, you do not risk damaging the candidate’s perception of your organization.

Avoid allowing inexperienced interviewers to conduct one-on-one interviews.
Reconciling Input

It's never wise to sacrifice a great hire for one that satisfies the lowest common denominator consensus. But not everyone sees the world the same way. It is rare to have unanimous agreement on which candidate to hire. So before you interview anyone, you need to decide how you will arrive at the final hiring decision, and how you will reconcile inevitable differences. How will you move forward when there is no unanimity? Which criteria will matter most? Does one person cast the deciding vote, or will majority rule?

Before you interview your first candidate, you need to decide how you will arrive at the final hiring decision.
THE FIRST INTERVIEW

The initial interview is not simply about the questions you plan to ask; it’s also influenced by the environment and atmosphere in which you have the conversation.

A conversation requires more than a list of prepared questions. Like a great dinner party, details matter. Many people intuitively know how to host a comfortable party, but forget that wisdom in arranging an interview. Interviews demand more effort than parties. Interviews are inherently uncomfortable for job seekers. They are set in unfamiliar surroundings with total strangers. Your invited guest is there solely to be judged, and with a very high likelihood of being rejected.

Setting the Scene

Make your office as welcoming and comfortable as possible. It’s simple stuff:

- Be on time.
- Be prepared for the candidate to arrive.
- Be calm, relaxed, polite, and smiling—look like you’re happy to be there.
- Offer a beverage (coffee, water, etc.).
- Start the conversation with a bit of warmth and small talk.

When in doubt, just remember basic manners: graceful handling of a situation to be almost invisible. This is a huge factor in demonstrating respect. If you mind your manners, the candidate will feel like an equal, and that he or she holds an equivalent stake in creating this conversation.

You can find our guidance for virtual interviews here.

Creating the Space

Remember the power dynamic—you are the one with more control over the situation, so you’re the one who must make a greater effort to treat the candidate respectfully. Be careful not to be disrespectful of the other person’s time by focusing on your own needs. Don’t mention how hard it was to make time in your busy schedule for the interview. Drop any tendency you may have to exert your managerial authority.

If you want people to be candid with you, be candid first. Show a bit of vulnerability. Open up to some of the problems and challenges in the company or the job. Reveal one of your own personal faults. You’d be surprised how even a small admission of your own encourages the candidate to be more authentic with you.
Question Prep

You also demonstrate your respect for the candidates and their position when you prepare substantive interview questions. Good candidates come prepared. They do their research. They prepare insightful questions. But they only prepare for their half of the conversation.

Unprepared managers sometimes wing it and cede control of the interview to the candidate, expecting the candidate to pick up the ball and run with it. If you did the pre-interview work outlined previously, this shouldn’t be a problem. You will have key competencies to explore, the questions to get at those abilities, and the understanding of your organization so that you can determine someone’s cultural fit.

If you just try to wing it, you may ruin your chances of hiring someone great. Interviews are a two-way street. Candidates are trying to find out if you’re a risky choice. They want to get a sense of how seriously you take them, and the respect you have for the job. They want to know if you can be a partner, not just an absentee boss. And when you are unprepared, self-centered, or rude, the best people will politely withdraw from consideration.

If you see a pattern of people saying they have chosen to take other jobs or declining a next interview, consider whether or not you’re too focused on your own needs, rather than considering what the candidate might find attractive about the role.

What to Avoid

There are a few common traps people encounter with the interview process. Some are bad interview questions; some are common but misguided ways of evaluating candidates. (You will find more detailed advice in each of the links provided.)

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

With this question, you won’t learn much, except how well someone provides a rehearsed answer to an obsolete question.

“Google” Brainteaser Questions

Google stopped asking these questions years ago. The company’s SVP of people operations has said that they are “a complete waste of time. They don’t predict anything. They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart.” No minced words there.

Asking Candidates to Evaluate Their Own Abilities

A surefire way to hire the most confident person, but not the most competent. You know the job, you understand the work to be done. The people you are interviewing lack that context, so their opinion of their ability to do this job is just about irrelevant.

Taking Candidates’ Questions Too Personally

Candidates who ask incisive, probing, deep-delving questions are doing so because they are thinking hard about your company. They are doing their own risk-management assessment—and being secretive or cagey is likely to scare them away.

If you just try to wing it, you may ruin your chances of hiring someone great.
Post-Interview Debrief

After completing the first interviews, don’t jump ahead to the hiring decision. And don’t waste time discussing the people who are not moving forward. Just decide who you would like to spend more time assessing.

Objectively look at each candidate, their skillsets, their potential for cultural fit, and determine which candidates have the highest upside potential and the lowest downside risk.

As you evaluate each candidate, decide what else you want to know. What deserves a deeper dive? What aspect of competency or cultural fit is still unclear? This will be the focus of your second interview.

If you are hiring people who will grow into the role and be excited by the opportunity, then most candidates will typically lack some type of experience. Maybe it’s a larger leadership role than they have held previously, or perhaps they have not worked in your field, or lack experience in a specific functional area. Undoubtedly there will be some unfamiliar areas or some aspect of how you work that differs from their last organization. Generally, a small number of these are not disqualifying factors. But they are worth exploring more deeply during the second interviews. Then, you can better determine whether candidates could make a successful transition, and you can better understand what types of support might be most useful if they are ultimately hired.

If you have internal candidates to consider, be sure to reserve their interview times for the end of each round of interviews. That will give you a sound basis for comparison once you have met with outside candidates. (More thoughts on that structure can be found in this article.)

What to Avoid

Evaluating for current capabilities, not growth: You may instinctively prefer candidates who can hit the ground running with a minimum of training. But be sure to consider the tradeoff you make. A higher caliber candidate who can grow into the role might make a far greater long-term impact than someone who is willing to take a lateral move. It may sound counterintuitive, but you often get more of what you want by first considering what the candidate wants.

Beware of opinions masquerading as facts: In hiring, opinions abound and facts are scarce. Our Evidence-Based Interviewing practices help you focus your discussions on facts, lessening the role of unsupported opinions in the hiring process. Be sure you ask the right questions to get at the facts. When someone has presented an opinion, such as, “The people who work at that organization are all bureaucrats,” consider asking “How would we learn if that’s true for this candidate?” Or “How can we better understand how that might relate to their performance in this role?”
THE SECOND INTERVIEW AND WORK SAMPLE TESTING

How to Prepare

First interviews are always constrained by time. Typically you ask quite a few questions that result in quick and relatively lightweight answers across a wide swath of key competencies, and you rarely have the luxury of dwelling very long on any one area of evaluation.

Not so with the second interview. This is the chance to take a deeper dive into the key factors outlined at the beginning of this process.

One way to do this is by asking the candidate to perform some real-life, job-relevant work (work sample testing). Research shows that work sample testing is more predictive of success on the job than the interview itself. That’s because interviewing favors candidates who are good at talking about work, while work sample testing favors candidates who are good at working. (We’ve often said that the worse you are at working, the better you should be at interviewing.)

How you design work sample testing will vary from position to position. What matters is that you ask the candidate to do actual work, which you can then use as an additional evaluation tool. It also gives the candidate a window into what will be expected of them in the role. (For senior executives, designing a work sample assignment can be a daunting challenge. We have provided some detailed advice in this article.)

We mention work sample testing at this stage of the hiring sequence because you need to prepare it ahead of the second interview. We recommend providing a homework assignment for the candidates to complete before their second interview. We’re all busy, so it’s simple courtesy to offer candidates ample time to do what you request. Ask for no more than three hours of work and allow candidates at least a week to prepare.

Interviewing favors candidates who are good at talking about work, while work sample testing favors candidates who are good at working.
**Reducing Key Competencies**

Your second interview plans should remain tightly focused on the three to five key competencies that will drive this person’s impact.

This does not mean asking the same questions as the first interview, but it does mean diving deeper into topics, gaining a greater insight into how this person might succeed in the position. It’s best to review your initial questions and think more intensely about your follow-up questions. The real value in behavioral interviewing is in the follow-up question. Anyone can answer “Tell me about your greatest achievement.” But you find the real gold by effectively following up on the answer:

- How did you achieve that success?
- What was your role on the team?
- What decisions did you make in the face of uncertainty?
- What mistakes did you make and what did you learn from them?
- How did you measure your success?

You will quickly see that great candidates are much more concrete and thoughtful in their answers. Their heads are full of the metrics they use to measure their progress. They give ample credit to their team and often sound quite humble about their own role.

But when the avalanche of follow-up questions arrives, the Empty Suits (those candidates who seem great in interviews, but are less effective on the job) lose all their false confidence. It’s almost painful to watch a succession of admissions that they do not really know how any of the results were achieved in their organization.

**Post-Interview Feedback**

In the second round of interviews, you often include far more people in the hiring decision—colleagues, peers, sometimes board members—so this is often when the hiring process goes off the rails.

If you are the hiring manager, your job is to moderate the discussion and keep everyone’s eye on the ball. Rein in off-topic discussions before they derail your timeline. To fill your organization successfully with top performers (and then retain them), you need to reduce the risk that any factors other than competence propel your hiring decision. Before you know it, tangents, off-topic conversations, and vague feedback (like “I didn’t like him”) will throw all your carefully laid plans out the window.

And a final check: Have you successfully interpreted each candidate’s past successes and failures in the context of their previous organizations? Just because one candidate worked for a prestigious organization, they are not inherently better than another candidate.

While you should expect input from stakeholders, you should not expect agreement. Ultimately, you want everyone to come together to understand and support the final decision, and you want to avoid different factions lobbying for one candidate.

Reduce the risk that any factors other than competence propel your hiring decision.
What to Avoid

When seeking input from multiple people, beware of vague, imprecise language. Words like “entrepreneurial,” “strategic,” and “proactive” are often attached to candidates, but the comments usually reveal more about the commenter than the candidate.

For example, many hiring managers look for passion. But many interviewers are fooled by the instant-on enthusiasm and fast-on-their-feet charm of extroverts. Interviews blatantly favor the charming. But that charm and enthusiasm can quickly fade. Research shows that, over time, team members often prefer the quiet low-key diligence of an introvert.

Passion is better defined by grit—demonstrating resilience, persistence, and determination. The most passionate candidates might be misfit toys. They might be a bit awkward during the interview. They may not invest much attention in their charm, but once you get them talking about projects and metrics and obstacles overcome, you will see them light up.

When listening to interview feedback, be sure to ask follow-up questions of your fellow interviewers. If one candidate is deemed passionate and another dull, be sure you ask questions that get beyond labels and opinions, revealing the underlying factors that will help a candidate succeed in the actual job.

Beware of Your Assumptions

This guide should help you spend less time on the irrelevant, superficial aspects of interviewing, and more time understanding the deeper elements of why someone will be successful doing the work.

We know from experience that it is profoundly difficult to assess another human being accurately, especially someone you barely know. (And a vast body of emerging research on performance management shows that it’s not necessarily any easier to rate people you do know.) On average, 61% of your rating of another person (about anything) is a reflection of you, rather than the person you are rating. Noted business consultant Marcus Buckingham has labeled this phenomenon the Idiosyncratic Rater Effect. Unless and until you carefully guard against it, this problem will bedevil your interview process and conceal truth about someone’s ability to perform in the role.

Hiring without the right structure and preparation will inevitably drift toward enshrining bias, relying on gut feelings and unexamined, outdated assumptions.

In the crush of a busy work day, interviewing can appear deceptively familiar, like having an ordinary conversation with a colleague, but as we have shown, astute interviewing is anything but an ordinary conversation.

Hiring is the riskiest and most important responsibility for most executives (and their Boards), but a wise process will yield the greatest reward.