

STAFFING **ADVISORS**

HOW-TO GUIDE

Employer Guide to Interviewing



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How to Interview Effectively

Hiring involves some risk, but extensive research shows that a well-planned interview sequence based on knowledge, skills, and abilities (competencies) reduces the potential for bias and error and more reliably predicts success on the job than any other hiring practice.

The key to more effective interviewing is to look beyond the resume and superficial factors to determine whether someone can do the most important aspects of the job within your unique work environment.

That means setting performance expectations upfront, evaluating candidates on the key competencies needed to succeed in your role, creating a framework to assess cultural add through authentic conversations, and appropriately including others in the hiring decision.



Before The First Interview

What Should You Discuss?

To get more value from your interview time, first determine the business results you hope to achieve with this new hire, the competencies required to achieve them, and what working style and values might add to your organization's culture.

Rather than debate if a candidate is strategic, a team player, or a self-starter, evaluate if they are ready to handle specific business situations. You will more accurately predict a candidate's success on the job by focusing on demonstrated competencies instead of generic attributes.

Before the interview, think through these questions:

- What is the primary business problem you need this new hire to solve? What scenarios and situations will this person confront?
- What competencies will enable someone to drive that impact, given the resources and challenges in your organization today?
- What support will you offer your new hire (onboarding, mentorship, professional development)? Are there complementary competencies in the rest of the team or organization that will support this person's success?
- What about your work environment will enable this person to do their best work? What will challenge them?

How to Assess Cultural Add

Cultural add (often called cultural fit) refers to how a person's values and working style might complement and strengthen your team.

Cultural add is an important factor in the hiring decision, but you may leave the door open to unintentional bias and unexamined assumptions without a framework for evaluating it.

To fairly assess how a candidate will add to your organization's culture, you must clearly define it.

Take an objective look at your work environment. Identify norms related to how your team gets the work done, how you make decisions, and how much deference is given to others. These kinds of work-related factors are less prone to bias than asking a hiring manager to evaluate personality traits or attributes.

While interviewing, the hiring manager should listen for cues about these norms in the candidate's responses to questions about how they achieved results in their last few jobs. What did they enjoy or struggle with, and how does your environment compare? If other team members are involved in the interview process, make sure that everyone understands what elements of work culture they should be listening for. [Find more advice on what to evaluate here.](#)

Following the interviews, use precise and fact-based language to evaluate the candidate's responses. Go deeper than thinking about whether you or your team liked them. Consider how what you liked about them demonstrates their values and working style, how that reinforces their competencies, and how that could add to your defined work culture.



Who Should Be Involved in the Interview?

Before deciding which candidates you want to interview, decide who you will include in the hiring decision and their specific roles. Planning ahead results in a more structured sequence, includes input from all key people, and creates a fast, predictable experience for candidates.

Interviewers fall into two categories, veto voters and courtesy interviewers. Each has varying levels of influence in your decision-making.

Veto Voters

Veto voters can stop any hire, at any time, simply by declining to support them. Their opinion matters most in the hiring decision.

Veto voters are people who will work with the new employee regularly—this could be you, a peer-level colleague, a supervisor, or even an influential board member. Veto voters must:

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

If a veto voter is missing any of these key factors, perfectly well-qualified candidates could be derailed for the wrong reasons.

If a veto voter is going to have a one-on-one interview, be sure they are well prepared. Give them ample time before the interview to review the most current job description, performance expectations, competencies needed to succeed in the role, and cues to assess cultural add. Outline the type of feedback you'll be looking for following the interview.

Courtesy Interviewers

Courtesy interviewers are those who may be less skilled at interviewing, lack detailed knowledge of the job, or are junior team members. They will likely work with the new hire in some capacity and will appreciate the opportunity to get to know them. Their opinions are valuable but should not be given equal weight to a veto voter—they will not significantly affect the hiring decision.

The key to managing courtesy interviewers is establishing a framework for weighing their input and defining and communicating their role in the hiring process.

[Panel interviews are a great way to get the most value from courtesy interviewers.](#) If possible, include a hiring manager or experienced interviewer on the panel to moderate.

As with your veto voters, debrief courtesy interviewers ahead of time with your performance expectations and competency framework and set clear expectations about their interview role. Explain that they should embrace a collegial rather than critical mindset. Their job isn't to evaluate whether to hire this person. It's to get to know the candidate and consider how their competencies and working style might add to the team.

Reconciling Input

How will you move forward when there is no unanimity? Which criteria will matter most? Does one person cast the deciding vote, or will the majority rule? [Find guidance on reconciling differences here.](#)

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.

While you should expect input from stakeholders, you should not expect agreement. Unanimous agreement is great but rare. Before you interview anyone, decide how you will arrive at the final hiring decision and how you will reconcile inevitable differences.





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. Interviews are inherently uncomfortable for candidates. Although both parties will evaluate each other, you have more control over the situation. Use that as an opportunity to signal kindness and respect.

Setting the Scene

Make your office or virtual meeting space as welcoming and comfortable as possible.

- Be on time and prepared for the candidate to arrive. In person, that may include greeting and walking them to your office. Virtually, that may include checking technology and turning off distractions. In both situations, your pre-interview work is essential.
- Be calm, relaxed, polite, and smile. Top-performing employees want to work with employers who clearly want to engage with them.
- Start the conversation with a bit of warmth and small talk.

When in doubt, follow basic manners. This is a huge factor in demonstrating respect. The candidate will feel like an equal and that they hold an equivalent stake in creating this conversation. [Find more guidance on virtual interviews here.](#)

Creating Space

Make an effort to treat the candidate respectfully. Be careful not to disrespect their 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. Reveal one of your personal faults. You'd be surprised how even a small admission of your own encourages the candidate to be more authentic with you.

Candidates want to know the realities of working at your organization. Open up to some of the problems and challenges in the company or the job. The more you show what's behind the curtain, the more you will attract the type of employees who will succeed in your unique environment.

Question Prep

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

Unprepared managers sometimes wing it, 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 to determine someone's cultural add.

Without good preparation, 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. When you are unprepared, hurried, or come across as 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 the next interview, consider whether you're too focused on your own needs rather than 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. (Find more detailed advice in the links provided below.)

[“Where do you see yourself in five years?”](#)

With this question, you won't learn much more than 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 they are “a complete waste of time. They don't predict anything. They serve primarily to make the interviewer feel smart.”

[Asking a Candidate to Evaluate Their Own Abilities](#)

This is a surefire way to hire the most confident person, but not necessarily the most competent. You know the job, and you understand the work to be done. The people you are interviewing lack that context. Their opinions of their ability to do the job aren't well-informed and won't provide information to support a good hiring decision.

[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. Embrace these questions as an opportunity to learn more about how the candidate thinks about work. Being secretive or cagey is likely to scare them away.

The Post-Interview Debrief

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

Objectively look at each candidate's skillsets and their potential for cultural add to determine which have the highest upside potential and the lowest downside risk.

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

If you are hiring people who will be excited by the opportunity to grow into the role, expect that most candidates will 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 aspects of how you work that differ from their last organization. Generally, a small number of these are not disqualifying factors. But they are worth exploring more deeply during the second interview. Then, you can better determine whether the candidate could make a successful transition and better understand what types of support might be most useful if you hire them.

If you have internal candidates to consider, 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. [Find more thoughts on that structure here.](#)

What to Avoid

Evaluating for current capabilities, not growth.

You may instinctively prefer candidates who can hit the ground running with minimal training. But be sure to consider the tradeoff. A higher caliber candidate who can grow into the role might make a far greater long-term impact than someone 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 [competency-based interviewing practices](#) 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 presents 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

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. You rarely have the luxury of dwelling very long on any one area of evaluation. The second interview is a chance to dive deeper into the key factors outlined at the beginning of this process.

Reviewing Key Competencies

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

You won't ask the same questions from the first interview, but you will dive deeper into similar topics, gaining greater insight into how this person might succeed in the position.

The real value of a competency-based or skills-first approach is in the follow-up questions. Anyone can answer, "Tell me about your greatest achievement." But you'll gain much more insight by following up on the answer effectively. Quickly review your initial questions and think more intensely about your follow-ups.

- 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?

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.

Candidates who seem great in interviews but are less effective on the job tend to lose confidence with more in-depth follow-up questions.

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

Interviewing favors candidates who are good at talking about work. Work sample testing favors candidates who are good at working.

who are good at talking about work, while [work sample testing favors candidates who are good at working](#).

How you design a work sample 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 seem like a daunting challenge. [Find detailed advice here](#).)

Prepare your work sample test and ask candidates to complete it before the second interview. At this stage, they have demonstrated interest in your organization and the position—a work sample test is an appropriate way to introduce rigor into your evaluation. Offer candidates ample time to do what you request. Ask for no more than two hours of work and allow them at least a week to prepare.

Post-Interview Feedback

In the second round of interviews, you often include more people in the hiring decision—colleagues, peers, and sometimes board members—so there is more opportunity for the process to fall apart.

If you are the hiring manager, your job is to moderate the discussion and keep everyone

focused on performance expectations, key competencies, and cultural add. Rein in off-topic discussions before they derail your timeline or introduce factors that should not affect the hiring decision.

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.

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 interviewers look for passion but can be misled by instant-on enthusiasm and ready charm. Passion is better defined by grit—demonstrated resilience, persistence, and determination. These will be evident in the candidate's responses about how they achieved results in their previous positions.

When listening to interview feedback, be sure to ask follow-up questions of fellow interviewers. If one candidate is deemed passionate and another dull, be sure to ask questions that get past labels and opinions, revealing 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 superficial aspects of interviewing and more time understanding how someone will succeed in doing the work.

We know from experience that it is difficult to accurately assess another human being, especially someone you barely know. (And a vast body of emerging research on performance management shows that it's not necessarily easier to rate people you 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 you carefully guard against it, this can undermine your interview process and conceal the truth about someone's ability to perform in the role. Hiring with the right structure and preparation will reduce the natural human tendency to rely on gut feelings and unexamined assumptions.

In the rush of a busy workday, interviewing can appear deceptively familiar, like having an ordinary conversation with a colleague. However, as we have shown, competency-driven interviewing is anything but an ordinary conversation.



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