

Opening Effectively

Opening an interview properly is important because it sets the tone for the rest of the interview. You should build rapport with the candidate, explain the interview format – outlining what the candidate should expect, and then ask introductory questions before transitioning into the main part of the interview.

Build rapport

It's normal for a candidate to be nervous about an interview and this can make open communication difficult. You can make the candidate feel comfortable by building rapport. Taking the time to do this at the outset is likely to result in a more productive interview. It's also likely to leave the candidate with a more positive impression of your organization and of the position that's available.

To build rapport with a candidate, you should follow three steps:

1. **greet the candidate warmly** – First you should greet the candidate warmly and by name, introduce yourself, and briefly explain your role in the organization.
2. **help the candidate acclimatize** – To help the candidate relax into the interview environment, you should guide this person to a comfortable seat and, if relevant, assist by offering a place for this person's belongings.
3. **use open, positive body language** – You should maintain positive, open body language throughout an interview, but especially at the outset when candidates are likely to be nervous. Smile, maintain direct eye contact to indicate your interest, and be friendly. Also ensure your tone of voice is light, friendly, and warm.

At the start of an interview, you should encourage, not prohibit, small talk to break the ice. You should focus on a subject unrelated to the interview.

Acknowledging the stress involved in interviews and using humor – provided it's appropriate – can help dispel tension.

However, be careful to avoid subjects that could make candidates uncomfortable, force them to take sides, or lead to in-depth conversation.

Although it's essential to make the candidate feel at ease, bear in mind that this opening stage shouldn't take more than a few minutes. You might even complete it while walking the candidate from a reception area to the interview room.

Explain the interview format

After building rapport with the candidate, you should explain the interview's format so the candidate knows what to expect. This puts the candidate at ease and it establishes your control over the direction of the interview. Be open about the interview – what you'll cover and how long it will take.

By telling the candidate what to expect from the start, you establish control of the course an interview will take. Whatever format the interview will have, though, you should ensure the way you explain your approach does set a positive note and puts the candidate at ease. You should also give the candidate a chance to ask any questions.

Introductory questions

After building rapport and explaining what the interview will cover, you might ask a few introductory questions to ease the candidates into the interview – you want to get them talking and feeling at ease when doing so. This is particularly appropriate for candidates that seem overly nervous.

You should ask about subjects the candidate will be familiar with and find easy to talk about. Also, your questions should be open-ended to encourage the candidate to talk, but not so broad that the candidate doesn't know where to start.

You may be tempted to leave it up to candidates to talk about themselves, but this could make them even more tense at a time when you should be helping them relax.

Some classic mistakes are

- **"Tell me about yourself."** Asking candidates to tell you about themselves puts them on the spot – where should they start and what is it you want to hear about? The candidates might also give you irrelevant information or information you aren't entitled to obtain.
- **"I didn't read your resume – can you fill me in?"** Indicating that you didn't bother to prepare for an interview will give candidates a negative impression of you and your organization. The candidates also won't know where to start or how much detail to go into.

- **"I see you majored in computer science."** If you tell candidates something they've already made clear on their resumes, they may not know how to respond. Do you want that person to elaborate, explain their choices, or merely confirm the facts? Rather ask a more specific, open-ended questions.

It's important to set a candidate at ease at the opening of an interview. To do this, you should build rapport, explain what format the interview will follow, and then ask introductory questions that don't relate directly to the interview to get the candidate relaxed and talking.

Close an Interview Effectively

To close an interview effectively, you should first determine whether you've covered everything you need to know and backtrack if necessary. You should then tell the applicant what happens next.

To determine whether you've covered everything, you need to answer several questions:

- Do I know enough about the candidate's education and experience?
- Have I described the organization and the available position?
- Have I told the candidate about the salary, benefits, and growth opportunities associated with the available position?
- Did I give the candidate a chance to ask questions?

In addition to you finding out about a candidate, interviews are an opportunity for the candidates to learn more about your company. In this way, they can decide whether the available job will suit them. If you give candidates enough information about what to expect, you lower the risk that employees you hire will become disgruntled later.

Too often, an interviewer assumes candidates will have done their own background research on the company offering the position. But interviewers should take responsibility for giving candidates all the information they need to make informed decisions. You'll lower turnover if candidates are armed with this information before they decide whether to accept a job.

You might also briefly summarize the key issues you discussed during the interview. This can provide a sense of closure and enable you and the candidate to review any remaining action items required.

Once you've made sure you've covered everything, you can tell the candidate what happens next. What you say to candidates depends on the nature of the position and your level of interest in them. But you should be sure to tell candidates approximately when they'll hear from

you, whether additional interviews will be held, and what to do if they think of other questions they need to ask in the meantime.

After an interview is over, you may want to give the candidate your business card in case they do have further questions. Or you may prefer to let your assistant or receptionist handle any calls first.

Before you end the interview, you should ask one last time whether the candidate has any questions. And remember that no matter how you close the interview, you should be sure to do so on a positive note – whether you're likely to hire the candidate or not.

Although it doesn't take long, closing an interview properly is an important step. It's vital to make sure that you've covered everything you need to – and to backtrack if necessary. Once you've done this, you should tell the candidate what to expect next, including when this person will hear from you again.

[Skillport Course: Essentials of Interviewing and Hiring: Behavioral Interview Techniques](#)

Behavioral-based Interviewing

Too often, interviewers forget to consider whether a candidate can demonstrate the competencies for the job. This can result in poor hiring decisions. Interviewing against competencies is the backbone of behavioral-based interviewing. You focus on asking how the candidate dealt with specific, relevant situations in the past.

Behavioral-based interviewing has three key characteristics:

- it investigates candidates' past performance as a predictor of their future performance
- it focuses on identifying whether candidates have the required competencies for a position
- it minimizes bias by focusing on asking for facts about candidates' past performance

Benefits of behavioral-based interviewing

Because behavioral-based interviewing involves evaluating whether candidates have the competencies they need to do a job, it can lead to **more accurate candidate evaluations**. The emphasis is kept on who has what it takes to perform the job well in practice. This leads to

better hiring decisions, which in turn can mean increased productivity, lower turnover, higher morale, and better quality employees for your department and organization. It also means that the questions you ask **relate directly to job performance**. This helps ensure you ask only questions that are both appropriate and legal, rather than ones that stray from what is relevant or fair to ask job candidates.

What does behavioral-based interviewing involve?

When you carry out a behavioral-based interview, you ask questions to gather information about how candidates dealt with specific, real situations in the past.

Traditional interview questions like "What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?" tend to be weak, because candidates will have canned answers for them. Questions like "If you could be an animal, what would you choose to be?" leave things wide open for the candidates and make the selection process less objective.

Situational interview questions are similar to behavioral ones, but are hypothetical – they ask "What would you do if...?" These questions can provide useful information about how a candidate thinks, but people don't always do what they say they would.

So in a behavioral-based interview, it's important to get specific examples of how candidates behaved in the past. This ensures you're asking for facts, rather than candidates' impressions or opinions, and that your hiring decision will be based on these facts.

Determining competencies

Before holding behavioral-based interviews, you need to determine what competencies are required for the given job. There are four main categories of competencies:

- **Tangible or technical skills** are critical for success in many positions. These concrete skills – such as the ability to apply technical expertise to problem solving or understanding relevant technologies – are important and should be explored during an interview. But a person can bring more than measurable skills to a job, and that's why the other competency categories also need to be explored.
- **Knowledge competencies** are what a candidate knows and how this person thinks. These qualities are more difficult to measure than tangible skills, but are just as important. Those typically required of an IT technician, for example, include skills in identifying, interpreting, and solving problems, as well as having up-to-date knowledge about computer systems.

- **Behavioral competencies** can make a dramatic difference in how you perceive two candidates with similar technical abilities. This type of competency relates to a candidate's ability to behave appropriately in different situations. You can ask many types of questions to get an idea of a candidate's behaviors. If you're interviewing for a position that requires a high level of customer service, for example, you would focus on questions related to how the candidate communicated with customers in the past.
- **Interpersonal skills** are important in almost any job. Even if a candidate's technical and knowledge competencies are excellent, a lack of interpersonal skills will make it difficult for this person to interact with managers, coworkers, and clients. For example, an IT technician must be able to communicate effectively with clients to determine what's wrong with their computer systems. So this person has to ask the right questions and be able to listen actively.

Once you've determined the required competencies for a given position, you can find out whether the candidates demonstrate those competencies by asking the right questions.

Behavioral-based interview questions should always be job related. They should be designed to elicit examples of how candidates behaved in relevant work situations, what they learned, and whether their experience applies to the given job and work environment.

Minimizing bias

Because behavioral-based interviews focus on facts about a candidate's job-related situations, they tend to minimize bias. They help ensure candidates' responses are relevant and help prevent interviewers from drawing the wrong conclusions.

These are just some of the biases you should be aware of:

- **halo bias** – candidates' strength in one area causes interviewers to view other areas more favorably
- **first impression bias** – interviewers judge candidates before giving them a fair chance to respond to questions
- **stereotype bias** – interviewers believe that just because candidates fit into a certain category, they will or won't have the right abilities
- **similarity bias** – interviewers favor candidates that are similar to themselves, confusing personal similarity with ability
- **contrast bias** – interviewers' judgments of candidates are based on how well other candidates did in previous interviews
- **excessive harshness** – interviewers unfairly rate all candidates poorly and disregard their strengths

Using behavioral-based questions can't completely prevent bias – interviewers need to make a conscious effort to avoid jumping to conclusions about candidates. But these questions do help interviewers move away from stereotyping, gut feelings, and biases. You find out whether candidates can and will do the job, and whether they're a "fit" with the culture and values of the prospective organization.

Behavioral-based interviewing involves determining whether candidates have the required competencies for a given job and asking questions about past experience that relates to those competencies. Behavioral-based interviewing also helps minimize bias in the interviewing process.

Behavioral-based Questions

Developing behavioral-based questions

You want to make sure you make the right choice for your company. For your behavioral-based interviews to be effective, you need to know how to do two things:

- 1. Identify specific competencies** - You should draw these competencies from the job description, which details the responsibilities and duties associated with the job.
- 2. Formulate questions** - Once you know the competencies you need to look for in candidates, you can translate each of these into a relevant behavioral-based question. This type of question asks for a specific example of how a candidate behaved in the past, to test for a required competency.

Behavioral-based questions should have these characteristics:

- **Test for required competencies** – Behavioral-based questions that don't relate to relevant competencies won't provide you with the information you need to fill the position effectively.
- **Be open-ended** – Open-ended questions are designed to elicit detailed responses, rather than short or single-word answers. To gain insight into candidates' competencies based on their past behavior, you need to encourage them to elaborate.
- **Ask for specific examples** – Behavioral-based questions should be designed to elicit details of a specific situation or task, the actions the person took or didn't take in response, and the impact of these actions.

Candidates sometimes answer even specific questions in broad terms. So you may need to follow your questions up with additional probing questions. Sometimes it can help to include superlative adjectives in behavioral-based questions. These can help candidates focus on specific incidents, so that they can respond with relevant examples.

When considering the format of questions you'll ask during an interview, make sure you're familiar with the distinction between behavioral and situational interview questions:

- **situational questions** are based on hypothetical behavior and are used to gain insight into a candidate's anticipated behavior in a hypothetical situation
- **behavioral-based questions** are about a candidate's actual behavior in a past situation

You should develop behavioral-based interview questions by first identifying the competencies required for a job. These questions should be open-ended and designed to elicit specific examples of how candidates dealt with situations or tasks in the past.

Using Behavioral-based Questions

Even in response to good behavioral-based interview questions, it's rare that candidates will include enough – or the right – information. So to judge their level of competency in handling specific situations, you need to follow up with more questions.

When you ask behavior-based questions, you want to get an answer that has three elements:

- **details of a specific, real situation** or problem in which the candidate demonstrated a required skill or competency for the position
- **details of actions** taken by the candidate to deal with the situation
- **the results of the actions** taken

There are four strategies that can help ensure you get complete answers to behavioral-based questions.

Start with broad questions

If you start by asking candidates broad, open, behavioral-based questions, you give them enough scope to pick whatever example they feel is most appropriate. This helps get candidates speaking about their experiences, beyond what's in their resumes. It lays the foundation for successive questions, which you can use to obtain more specific information.

When candidates describe a particular situation, it's important that you establish when it occurred. This tells you how recently candidates put their skills into practice. You can ask candidates for a more recent example if you feel the one they've provided happened too long ago.

Sometimes, a candidate may not be able to think of an example. In such cases, you shouldn't just move on to the next question. Nervousness may be hindering the candidate from recalling a relevant example.

If this happens, tell the candidate it's fine to spend some time thinking about an example and give the person a bit of time for reflection. Or you can ask the question in a different way or ask a completely different question about the same skill area.

Ask about the candidate's role

Once a candidate has responded to a broad behavioral-based question by recalling a particular situation, it's time to ask a more specific question about the candidate's role in that situation.

Often candidates use the plural form in their answers. For instance, they may use phrases like "We thought that..." or "Our team decided that..." When candidates describe their actions using "we" language, you should probe to get candidates talking about their roles using "I" language. When candidates separate their role from that of others, you can find out more about their responsibilities and actions.

Discover what actions the candidate took

Once candidates have told you about a particular situation and their role in it, you have to find out more about the actions they took in that situation by using these methods:

- **probing questions** – Candidates normally choose to talk about situations that were successful. But you need to find out the extent to which the candidate was responsible for the success – was it because of other factors, like the hard work of other team members or luck, for example? This step is one of the most important – it can prevent you from assuming the candidate has competencies this person doesn't really have. If candidates talk in overly broad terms about the actions they took, you need to ask probing questions to get more information.
- **paraphrase questions** – A useful technique is to paraphrase what a candidate has said and then follow up with a question. Many follow-up questions relate specifically to what the candidate has said. This makes it hard to prepare a totally comprehensive list of probing questions before an interview. But to become a skilled interviewer, you

need to learn to think on your feet to come up with additional, relevant questions to ask about candidates' actions.

- **why questions** – It may not always be enough to know how candidates behaved in particular situations. In some cases, you may also need to understand why candidates acted in the way they did. Remember, a candidate could demonstrate the right behavior by chance rather than through careful thought and insight into a situation.
- **negative examples** – In some situations, you'll want to get negative – or "failed" – examples from a candidate. These can sometimes be of a value equal to or greater than a positive incident the candidate could relate. This type of question may be particularly useful for a competency of maintaining customer relationships effectively.

Discover the results of those actions

After you determine the outcome of the actions this person took in the given situation, you will have the end of the story, so to speak. And this allows the candidate to summarize what the achievements were in the given situation.

It's important to question the results candidates claim to have achieved, especially if they use vague terms that include comparators such as "fewer" or "better." Prompt them to quantify what they're saying. For example, you could ask "How exactly was the process better?" or "What do you mean by fewer?" You may also want to ask candidates what lessons they've learned from the situations or experiences they've described.

Remember, when using behavioral-based questions during an interview, it's important to avoid

- **loaded questions** – for example "So would you describe the results you achieve in most of your events as very successful – like this one – or moderately successful?" Such a question can inhibit applicants from providing their own, more accurate responses.
- **leading questions** – these imply that there's only one correct answer. They make it obvious what the interviewer wants or expects to hear in response.

Four main strategies can help you elicit complete answers to behavioral-based interview questions. First use a broad, open question to ask a candidate for a specific example of past behavior that relates to a required competency. Follow this with one or more specific questions about the applicant's role in the situation described. Then ask about the actions the applicant took. Finally, find out what the results of those actions were.

Illegal Job Interview Questions

The job interview is a powerful factor in the employee selection process. You can use behavioral-based job interview questions to help you select superior candidates. Ask interview questions that help you identify whether the candidate has the behaviors, skills, and experience needed for the job you are filling.

When you ask appropriate interview questions, you can ascertain whether your candidate is a good cultural fit and excellent job fit for the position you are filling. This heightens the probability that the candidate will succeed in your organization.

Ask legal interview questions that illuminate the candidate's strengths and weaknesses to determine job fit. Avoid illegal interview questions and interview practices that could make your company the target of a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) lawsuit.

Illegal Job Interview Questions

Illegal interview questions, while not illegal in the strictest sense of the word, have so much potential to make your company liable in a discrimination lawsuit, that they might as well be illegal. These include any interview questions that are related to a candidate's:

- Age
- Race, ethnicity, or color
- Gender or sex
- Country of national origin or birthplace
- Religion
- Disability
- Marital or family status or pregnancy

Especially in the course of a comfortable interview during which participants are relaxed, don't let the interview turn into a chat session. This easily happens especially when you take candidates out for lunch or dinner.

Seemingly innocuous interview questions such as the following are illegal, or might as well be illegal.

Sample Illegal Job Interview Questions

- What arrangements are you able to make for childcare while you work?
- How old are your children?
- When did you graduate from high school?
- Are you a U.S. citizen?
- What does your wife do for a living?
- Where did you live while you were growing up?

- Will you need personal time off for particular religious holidays?
 - Are you comfortable working for a female boss?
 - There is a large disparity between your age and that of the position's coworkers. Is this a problem for you?
 - How long do you plan to work until you retire?
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- Have you experienced any serious illnesses in the past year?

During an interview, you must take care to keep your interview questions focused on the behaviors, skills, and experience needed to perform the job. If you find your discussion straying off course or eliciting any information that you don't want about potential job discrimination topics, bring the discussion quickly back on topic by asking another job-related interview question.

What to Do When Candidates Offer Answers to Questions You Want to Avoid

If a candidate offers information, such as, "I will need a flexible schedule because I have four children in elementary school," you can answer the question about whether your company offers flexible hours and any qualifications that your policy requires for eligibility.

In these situations, do not pursue topics that may lead to illegal inquiry any further. Instead, steer the interview back to an appropriate course by asking your established questions.

Also, do not use such information to inform or make your hiring decision.