

# **9II Hiring** 10 Steps To **Predicting Success**

by Sue Pivetta

**HIRING 911**  
**10 Steps to Predicting Success**

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## STEP 7

### DESIGNING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS AND QUESTIONS

**“I trust my gut instinct more than any testing process.”**

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*True story... She began to cry right there in the interview.  
“I’m sorry, I really need this job, my husband and son just went to prison.”*

#### *10 Steps to a Great Interview Format*

The format of an interview is one element of success. The interviewer(s) should plan in advance a general format about how the interview will proceed and could include the following elements:

1. **Greeting/Small Talk.** This step is to build rapport and put the applicant at ease to enhance the free exchange of information. Greet the applicant by name and handshake, introduce yourself, and engage in a bit of small talk on a non-controversial topic—the weather, parking. I know this sounds a waste, yet I have participated in interviews where the candidate felt they were facing the parole board. Introduce the board stating their name and position.
2. **Orientation.** Briefly describe for the applicant how the interview will proceed: questions from the interviewer, information on the position and the agency, and finally questions from the applicant. You may also tell the applicant approximately how long the interview will take if you have a time.
3. **Work Experience and Education.** Since past performance is the best predictor of future performance, ask for concrete examples of past successes and challenges. If the applicant has little or no work experience, focus on any positions held, whether it was volunteer, summer, or part-time employment. Education includes not only high school or college, but specialized or related training as well. Use this opportunity to clarify information on the application form.
4. **Outside Activities/Interests.** This is optional and should focus on skills or traits that are job related and would contribute to successful job performance. Caution should be exercised when asking questions so that answers don’t reveal an affiliation with an organization because of race, color, sex, national origin, age, disability, religion, or political opinions. Some women returning to the workplace may have good skills from volunteering. If your application does not include volunteering, you may ask—especially if you like a person, but their work experience just isn’t going to make them competitive. Outside activities and sports may also indicate a healthy lifestyle.
5. **Summary of Strengths/Weaknesses.** Ask the applicant to identify strengths and weaknesses as they relate to past employment experiences. How strengths would be applied on the job, how weaknesses have affected past work performance, and what is being done to improve.
6. **Selling the Position and the Organization.** Up to this point, the applicant has been selling self. Now it is time to tell the applicant about the position and the agency. Giving this information after the interviewers’ questions have been answered avoids the tendency of applicants to answer questions based on what they think you want to hear. Begin the transition into this part of the interview by asking what the applicant knows about the position and the organization. Present

the position and the agency positively. However, don't omit the negative aspects. Describe the duties and responsibilities, salary, benefits, hours, working conditions, etc. Be candid. You may ask the candidate if they have ever done work of a similar nature, or shift work.

7. **Scenarios.** These are often used to address the “common sense” issue. Questions that allow the applicant to think on their feet, prioritize, rationalize, consider workplace problems, and select responses. If an answer confuses you or concerns you, follow up by asking for the rationale.
8. **Questions from the Applicant.** Allow the applicant to ask some questions about the position, the agency, and the working conditions. Is it a bad thing if they don't have any questions? Is that something you are rating? If it is, then they should know you require questions.
9. **Close the Interview.** Explain the next step in the selection process. Express appreciation for the opportunity to meet and learn about the applicant. Give them some idea as to when a selection decision will be made. Be careful not to make any oral commitments or recommendations about the applicant's employment prospects.
10. **Document the Interview.** Take notes during the interview, recording key job-related points without interrupting the flow of information. As soon after the interview as possible and before beginning the next interview, completely document what was observed and heard in the interview. Documentation should reflect facts, observable behavior, and statements in context, not biases or instincts.

*Note:* Should you audio or video tape an interview? If you do, the tape can be used to either exonerate or crucify you. It can also be used to review the candidate. You must tape all candidates if you do one. You must tell the applicant what you are doing.

### *Ensuring a Legal Interview*

To help assure that interview questions are legal, determine how the answers given by applicants will be used in making the selection decision. If responses to questions disqualify or appear to disqualify from consideration for employment a disproportionate number of members of one group (e.g., women or minorities), those questions should be eliminated. If a question is not related to job duties, skills, or work behaviors, it should not be asked. Here are some questions I have heard—you decide if they are legal.

*Do you attend church so that working Sundays will be a problem?*

*Do you have a babysitter lined up?*

*What would happen if your husband objected to you coming to work at 3 a.m.?*

*How do you feel about working with people who are not like you?*

*Do you smoke?*

*Are you willing to reimburse us six months of training time if you decide to quit?*

*As a racial minority, have you ever been harassed by police officers?*

*How does your culture feel about showing up on time?*

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*I have yet to hear a man ask for advice on how to combine marriage and a career.*

—Gloria Steinem (b. 1934)

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## 6 LEGALITY DISCUSSIONS

1. Analyze the job to identify required performance factors (technical knowledge, skills, etc.) needed for successful job performance, if you haven't yet done so. Examine the job's specific characteristics such as working conditions, major duties and responsibilities, expected outcomes, etc. It is legal to ask if a person has ever worked shift work, or if they anticipate any problems working the 3 a.m. shift. It is questionable to ask a person if they have babysitters lined up.
2. For each performance factor requirement, develop questions designed to elicit information on an applicant's past accomplishments, activities, and job performance. Whenever possible, questions should focus on what the applicant has done, rather than what the applicant would or should do, or should have done (they probably regret spitting in that milkshake). Questions should be designed to help establish applicants' qualifications for the job and capabilities to do the work.
3. Develop questions that explore applicants' willingness to complete assigned responsibilities. Again, you can avoid yes or no answers. *"Are you willing to work shift work?" "Sure, why not."* Instead, ask, *"Shift work often is a problem for new employees, please tell us what you have done to prepare for shift work?"*
4. Prepare a list of things to look for in the applicants' responses. The list might include desired work behaviors or attributes, types of experience, achievements, or demonstrations of specific skills. The rating scale we talked about earlier can accomplish this. This list will help your interviewers.
5. Design a rating form that all interviewers use to record applicant responses and summarize observations and impressions. Interviewers' comments should be job-related and bias free because their worksheets should be kept and are admissible in court. Document that you trained your interviewers in using the form.
6. Pre-developed interview questions and a standard interview rating form ensures that all applicants are being considered and rated by the same criteria.

Skill, education, and experience are primary factors used to evaluate an applicant. Equally important is the individual's working behavior; i.e., working independently versus working in a group. To evaluate working behavior, ask questions that focus on likes or dislikes of previous jobs. You may also ask references for information on applicants' working behaviors. We know your feelings toward the person will affect your decision—we certainly want someone we like working with us. The way to keep from doing this is to remember all the people you "liked" that turned out to be royal pains, and those you felt so-so about who were dispatcher saints!

### What You May Ask in an Interview

- About ability to perform specific job functions with or without reasonable accommodation.
- About non-medical qualifications and skills; i.e., education, experience, certifications, etc.
- To describe or demonstrate how they would perform job tasks with or without reasonable accommodation.
- Whether they will need reasonable accommodation to perform the functions of the job, and what type of accommodation — *only* when the applicant voluntarily discloses the need for an accommodation or voluntarily discloses a hidden disability and you reasonably believe they need accommodation, or when the employer reasonably believes the applicant will need reasonable accommodation because of an obvious disability.
- About current illegal use of drugs.

### What Not to Ask in an Interview

- Direct or indirect questions relating to race, religion, color, sex, national origin, age, political opinion, or disabilities.
- Questions relating to illnesses, diseases, hospitalizations, physical defects, prescribed drugs, drug addiction or alcoholism, workers' compensation history. Questions about absence from work due to illness.
- Workers' compensation-related questions.
- Arrest records. Conviction records, unless job related.
- Garnishment records, credit or finance information.
- Personal topics (date of birth, marital status, physical characteristics, number and ages of dependents, child care issues, contraceptive practices, family plans, height and weight, birthplace, previous addresses, photographs.)
- Languages—unless such skills are required of the position.
- Memberships in clubs, societies, organizations, churches—unless job-related, such as professional societies.
- Grievances or discrimination claims filed.

Now, I know you don't like this, and feel we all have a right to probe more than most types of business — because of the nature of the work. These are common, accepted, and legal-free ways to avoid trouble. If you feel you must be able to ask any question in the list above, contact your attorney.

## *Role of Our Perceptions in Interviewing*

There are various factors that contribute to our perceptions of people. Our perceptions can be accurate or inaccurate. However, it is important that when conducting interviews and interview evaluations, we not allow false perceptions to influence our selection of employees. The following areas are some ways in which perceptions can influence the hiring decision, and things that we need to be mindful of when conducting interviews and interview evaluations:

**First impression**—The first impression is made based on how a person looks and acts compared to how we think they should look and act to work in the position or the organization. First impressions are made within a few seconds and without our even knowing we are forming a first impression. They don't ask permission, not unlike how you jump when something frightens you—when you see someone who has similar traits or movements to another, you automatically formulate a “perception.” The trouble with this is that it may be incorrect.

Therefore, first impressions can be the most common and probably the most damaging influence with respect to interviewing in two ways. A beautiful person just has it easier than someone who is unattractive. How do we look at thin people vs. heavy? Maybe we are the type of person who feels the need to overcompensate for a person if they have a disability. As long as the interviewers are aware they will form an opinion (and it's OK), but make every attempt to set it aside for facts and behavior related to the criteria—it's all that can be asked. Verify information that is giving you the first impression and determine its importance in the big picture.

**Statements**—Sometimes statements are made in an interview that rub us the wrong way. We might consider it inappropriate, or it just goes against what we believe. A good example is the Rush Limbaugh thing on page 55. Those statements, even if they are job related, should not affect judgment about the applicant's suitability for the position—as much as it bugs you. The statements should be weighed in relation to the requirements of the position. A good way of thinking about it is that there are all kinds of people who do this work and it would be a real drag if we were all the same. We're looking for a good employee with intelligence and skills, even if they like the things we don't.

**Nonverbal communication**—Nonverbal communication in the interview can give us valuable information about an applicant. There is an entire book on reading body language. But, I also have a book at home on reading head bumps and another on facial features (like big ears mean you are trustworthy). However, each one of us has our own pattern of nonverbal expression. Gestures, body position, facial expressions, etc. can often be read to mean more than one thing or have a cultural reason. Sometimes we can't control our expressions because of disabilities. Misinterpretation of non-verbal communication can get us in trouble. So don't draw conclusions too early based on non-verbal communication.

**Information we receive from others**—Our judgment about an applicant may be influenced because of the person we received information from. If an applicant comes highly recommended by someone we place in high regard, we may subconsciously give positive consideration to the applicant. On the other hand, if the applicant was recommended by someone whose opinions we don't value, we may subconsciously create a bias against the applicant. Especially in this profession, we seem to trust anyone who knows anyone or is recommended by anyone who knows anyone. Should it matter? I always told my students to throw names around, or tell them you grew up in a police family (if you did). I think that at times it does matter somewhat that candidates understand the “mentality” of the work.



## Questioning Techniques

The success of an interview depends heavily on interviewers' listening and using the right type of questioning at the appropriate time. The interviewer(s) should listen for the majority of the interview while maintaining control of the interview so the applicant doesn't take it over. A general standard is the 80/20 rule—the interviewer(s) should listen at least 80 percent of the time and talk only 20 percent of the time. Some people ramble in interviews, a way to redirect is to ask, "Could you tell us *BRIEFLY* \_\_\_\_\_."

Questions at the beginning should be ones that can be easily answered and help the applicant relax. Good questions to serve that purpose pertain to an applicant's previous education and work experience. Then move to progressively more thought-provoking questions. To get the applicant to talk so the interviewer can listen, the following two types of questions are recommended:

### OPEN-ENDED (OR NEUTRAL) QUESTIONS:

This type of question is the most effective for this line of work. Open-ended questions seek a direct response from the applicant, not "yes" or "no." At times a yes or no will work when you want a commitment from the person such as, "Are you willing to..." or "Do you understand you will be..." Open-ended questions enable the applicant to do the talking while the interviewer listens for information, observes behavior, and formulates follow-up or probing questions. Open-ended questions generally ask who, what, when, where, why, and how. Some examples of open-ended questions are:

*"Tell me about \_\_\_\_\_."*

*"How did you \_\_\_\_\_."*

*"What \_\_\_\_\_."*

An effective open-ended question that could start discussion of work experience, for example, is:

*"Describe your activities during a typical day at your present (or previous) job."*

This question alone may provide enough information to answer subsequent questions you had planned. More importantly, it triggers further questions:

*"You said you handle customer complaints. Tell us about an angry customer you had and how you handled it."*

### PROBING QUESTIONS:

Probing questions are used to clarify facts and attitudes, and delve more deeply for information. Examples might include:

*"I'm wondering why \_\_\_\_\_. Could you help me with that?"*

*"Can you tell me what caused that?"*

*"Why do you think that was?" (or is?)*

*"Could you clarify your answer about \_\_\_\_\_."*

*"You said \_\_\_\_\_. Could you talk a little more about that?"*

*"That's interesting, could you explain?"*

### *3 Ways to Encourage Talk*

For some applicants, talking about themselves is very difficult, especially if they are nervous or feel intimidated. Some techniques for encouraging an applicant to talk during the interview are:

1. **Repetition** Repeat the last few words of an applicant's statement and let your voice trail off as if to ask a question. This encourages the applicant to respond to the question or to clarify certain points, which may add valuable information. It's the Columbo thing, "*So, let me understand, you quit your last job, . . . uhhh.*"
2. **Summarization** This technique works especially well after there has been an exchange of information for a few minutes. Use about three or four statements to summarize what was just said. "*So you were saying that in your last position your supervisor was basically a chauvinist pig, your co-workers had body odor, and the pay was poor?*"
3. **Silence** When the applicant stops talking and you want more information, pause and silently count to five before speaking. Silence clearly conveys a message that more information is wanted. This compels the applicant to go on.

### AVOIDING LEADING QUESTIONS

A leading question rarely elicits any new or valuable information. Its primary value is to reinforce what the interviewer already knows, or thinks. Quite simply, you're telling the applicant what you want to hear:

*"Ours is a customer service-oriented agency. Do you regard customer service as important?"*

Of course they do! Although you have a confirmation, wouldn't you rather hear more from them? Better questions might be:

*"Tell us what you can about the skill of customer service?"*

*"What types of phrases or words do you use for customer service?"*

*"Can you explain how customer service would or would not be important to 911."*

Of course some leading questions are necessary and can be used to ensure compliance or understanding. "*Are you willing to work rotating shifts?*" It wouldn't be appropriate to ask how they feel about it. It may be appropriate to ask if they ever have worked shift work and how they felt about it.

Leading questions are also valid for dealing with sensitive areas when an applicant is hesitant to reveal feelings. For example, "*You must have been upset about being dismissed without notice.*" The answer you receive may give you valuable information for gauging feelings on the issue—and finding out what may have happened. Or they may break down and sob. And it will all be your fault.

# SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC CRITERIA

I have identified some workplace attitudes and behaviors that are important in this work. The following are suggestions for questions to assist in your forecast.

## Criteria: Interpersonal Skills

Good Question: *“What aspects of your last job appealed to you the most? Least?”*

## Criteria: Assertiveness

Good Question: *“Give examples of how you had to assert yourself in the work-place.”*

## Criteria: Teamwork

Good Question: *“Explain a time when you worked alone and a time when you had to use teamwork and how you felt about each.”*

Bad Question: *“Do you ever have the feeling you are the only one who knows anything at all, and everyone else is really tedious.”*

## Criteria: Communication Skills

Good Question: *“What do you think is the most important part of communicating in the workplace?”*

## Criteria: Persuasiveness

Good Question: *“Describe to me a situation in which you got people to change from the way they were doing something to the way you suggested.”*

## Criteria: Tact

Good Question: *“Tell me about a time someone was highly emotional or sensitive. How did you work with them?”*

Bad Question: *“Describe the last time you were totally uncivil and boorish?”*

## Criteria: Persistence

Good Question: *“Tell me about some long term goal you had that you reached.”*

## Criteria: Creativity

Good Question: *“Describe an incident where something wasn’t working or something new was needed and how you created a solution.”*

Bad Question: *“What do you do to keep your marriage stimulating?”*

## Criteria: Following Rules and Procedures

Good Question: *“What are some different important areas you had to consider when you made a major decision at work?”*

## Criteria: Obstacles

Good Question: *“What roadblocks have you encountered, and how did you overcome them?”*

## Criteria: Optimism

Good Question: *“What type of work attitude has helped you succeed, and what do you believe stands in people’s way of being happy on the job?”*

## Criteria: Stress

Good Question: *“Explain to us what types of things you do to be well.”*

Bad Question: *“You look stressed — have you had a medical check up lately?”*

## Criteria: View of Management

Good Question: *“What do you want from a supervisor or boss?”*

## Criteria: Motivation for Working Here

Question: *“What would you like to get out of this job if you were hired?”*

Bad Question: *“C’mon, really now, why would you ever want to work here!”*

## *Interview Evaluations*

An evaluation is the results of a MEASUREMENT. How high should they jump? What is it you are looking for? Evaluation must be a *process* that is pre-determined. Probably the highest form of scrutiny your agency will endure from the court system will be your “process,” and your ability to ensure that all parties follow that process.

- It is best to evaluate an applicant as soon after the interview as possible while observations and impressions are still fresh. The best process for this is to allow evaluators the time to compile their evaluation forms between candidates.
- The key to successful interview evaluation is to know the job, its requirements, and what you are looking for in advance of interviewing. The best process for this is an evaluation form that is researched, formulated by a team, and approved by several levels of administration. Next, the evaluators should be given training on how the form is to be used.
- Review notes and documentation can help or hinder the process, these must be used cautiously. Most evaluators will take notes for their own information so they can rate later. It is valuable to have evaluators clarify low or high scores with remarks. That way if one evaluator scores very high and another very low you can determine where their judgment is coming from. If this is happening, it's possible you have not explained that category.

*Example:* Evaluator A scores low on work experience, B very high. These two are looking at different perceptions of work experience. A is considering only 911 experience, B feels they have an excellent work history because they were with one company for ten years.

- Evaluation should reflect the applicant's skills, abilities, and performance factors measured against those required for the position. This is where the evaluation process comes in. (Step 2 -CONDUCTING A JOB ANALYSIS.) Know that if you end up in court, the question will come up, “*How did you devise this evaluation process? What was it based on, and how do you know it's valid?*”
- There are a variety of methods for evaluating an interview, or in fact the employment testing process as a whole. The most legally defensible method is one in which each applicant is evaluated on the same criteria as all others—such as the form we discussed earlier. This could be called the Golden Rule of Employment Testing.

When evaluating an applicant's responses to interview questions, keep in mind that evaluation means finding **past examples** and **present demonstration** of abilities in order to predict **future performance**. The reason you have more than one person interview is for balance, because it is difficult to measure a person in a short period of time.

*My thoughts on failing an interview: My personal bias on interviews is that they should never be pass/fail unless you discover information that eliminates a candidate, or they indicate they cannot or will not do the job. All others receive a rating.*

## 7 INTERVIEW EVALUATION TIPS

### 1. She's a 10!

Simplify your rating scale to eliminate calculations that are confusing to the raters. If you have many candidates and wish to have scores that provide a clear delineation, use 1-5. A low rating of 1 being not acceptable and a high rating of 5 being exceptional.

### 2. Just Because

Require raters to cite specific evidence to support 1 or 5 ratings. If they are exceptional, how do you figure? If they are not acceptable, why?

### 3. Just an Interview

Be as objective as possible when assessing an applicant's appearance in the meeting—this is just an interview. Being nervous in an interview does not necessarily indicate they will be nervous on the job, help them relax.

### 4. Fitting In

We can all fall into rating others based on how we think people of a given age, race, affiliations, perceived sexual orientation, etc. appear, think, feel, act, and respond—and who would or wouldn't fit in. Diversity is a good thing in any team.

### 5. "Halo" Effect

We find someone we like in an interview, and we tend to credit the applicant with too many positive attributes. This overall rating may be based on one strong point on which you place high value, while it underestimates the negative characteristics.

### 6. "A Person Like Me"

Most of us perceive traits similar to our own as more desirable. This is difficult. We all think we know what would make a good dispatcher, and at times your gut instincts are right; however let your process allow "fit for" information to come through. The interview is just a snapshot. Remember you are seeing what they want you to see.

### 7. "Devil's Horns"

The same goes for the person who reminds you of someone you cannot stand. You find a particular characteristic of the applicant unacceptable, so they are presumed to have no positive attributes. This results in a down-grade in all areas on the evaluation. First impressions are hard to shake, but it can be done.

### *What Now?*

You now have an interview process and questions that are legal, fair, and increase your ability to obtain good information from the candidate about their attitude, knowledge, and experiences. You have a process that clarifies any item on the application form that you had questions about. Your interviews were organized and presented well, the applicants were comfortable and shared with the group their true self. Because you took the time to develop questions that had a purpose, and scenarios that allowed the candidates to show their critical thinking skills, you now have a very good prediction tool for your employment testing toolbox.

Next you will be able to take the information gathered thus far to rate your candidates so you can come up with some valid selection criteria and a background check that is legal and effective for your purposes.