

Top 10 Questions to Ask During Job Interviews

Knowing which questions to ask during interviews can often mean the difference between selecting the right or wrong person for a position.

Today's accounting candidates are usually well prepared for these meetings, having taken advantage of websites and books devoted to the job-

search process. As a result, hiring managers who adhere to standard questions such as "Where do you see yourself in five years?" often generate "safe" responses from applicants that yield little additional insight into their background or potential.

Eliciting candid, unrehearsed responses from candidates requires a little ingenuity and careful preparation. Here are 10 interview questions designed to help you better evaluate someone's likelihood of success in your organization:

1. What do you know about our company, and why do you want to work here?

Responses should go beyond simply repeating facts listed on your firm's website. The applicant should be able to explain how he or she can make a positive impact at your organization. This question allows you to assess someone's enthusiasm for the position and the company.

2. [If the candidate is currently unemployed] Why did you leave your last job, and what have you been doing since?

Many very qualified accounting professionals found themselves unemployed during the recent economic

downturn. Being out of work doesn't indicate someone is a poor employee. Take note of what the individual has been doing during the downtime. Look for signs the applicant has stayed active through involvement with professional trade associations or the pursuit of continuing education.

3. What would you have changed about your last job and why?

Everyone has at least one example of something they would improve if they could. The response to this question can give you a sense of the applicant's working style and interpersonal skills. Does he or she prefer predictabil-



ity and structure or a more entrepreneurial, fast-paced environment? How were the applicant's relationships with supervisors and coworkers?

4. What were your most significant contributions and accomplishments in your previous role?

Look for responses that focus on bottom-line results. This may serve as an indicator of how the interviewee can contribute to your firm's success. The answer may also demonstrate the candidate's understanding of the business goals of his or her former employer. How committed was the individual to helping the company reach its objectives?

5. How would you respond if you were put in a situation you felt presented a conflict of interest or was unethical?

Ethics should always be a key component of the screening process. Public and private businesses alike are focused on strengthening their internal controls over financial reporting and other corporate governance practices, and one misdeed

can greatly damage a company's reputation. How someone has dealt with suspicious activity, fraud, or wrongdoing in the past may provide insight into how he or she will behave in the future if faced with similar situations.

6. Can you tell me about an important business decision you made and how you arrived at it?

Consider the applicant's decision-making style and whether it's a suitable match to your corporate culture. A pattern of making choices without seeking input from others is a red flag in an environment where collaboration is a core value.

7. Tell me about your favorite/least favorite manager.

This question will provide you with an idea of the candidate's tact and diplomacy and provide a snapshot of past relationships with managers. The best applicants will be able to give an objective review of previous supervisors that's neither overly approving nor overly derisive.

8. How do you think your favorite manager would describe you? What about your previous coworkers?

Take note of whether candidates can see themselves from someone else's perspective. Evasive or insufficient answers—such as “I don't know”—could indicate a poor attitude toward supervision and collaboration.

9. What type of work environment is least appealing to you?

The answer typically yields greater insights than asking what is most

appealing. Pay attention to whether there is an obvious pattern in the responses. Do the applicant's concerns relate to company policies? How does the applicant characterize his or her interaction with coworkers and management? Knowing the candidate's pet peeves can give you an idea of what it will be like to work with him or her.

10. What is the most satisfying achievement of your career?

How does the candidate define success? Some people may equate success with receiving a promotion or special award, while the actual process of setting objectives and accomplishing goals motivates others. Compare the response to how your best employees might answer.

By challenging candidates with a wide range of interview questions, you increase the likelihood of generating unrehearsed responses that more accurately reflect their qualifications. Pay attention to how each individual answers, and probe for clarification or additional information. ■

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