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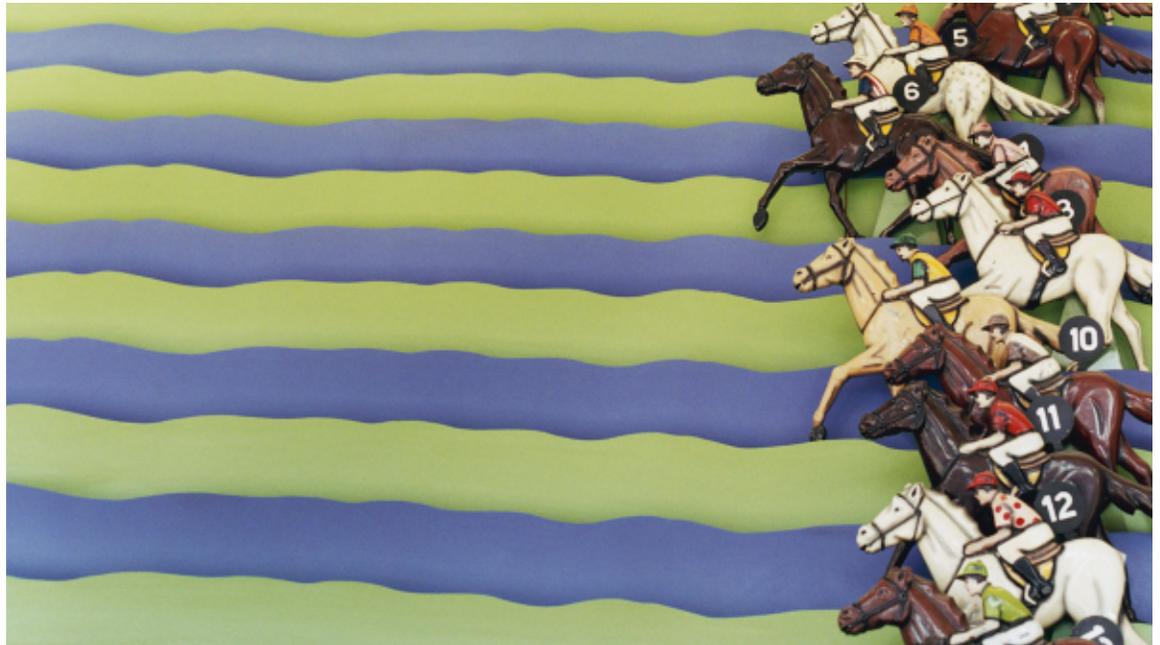
7 Rules for Job Interview Questions That Result in Great Hires

by John Sullivan

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Some of the long-held ideas about how to conduct interviews are no longer accurate. For example, there's no such thing as a surprise interview question anymore. With sites like [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com), candidates can identify each of your likely interview questions and expected answers ahead of time. With that information, candidates now routinely prepare and video their practice interviews to the point where their responses are universally impressive, if not genuine or accurate.

It's not just surprise questions that are a thing of the past. [Research at firms like Google](#) has proven that “brainteaser questions” can contribute to a costly miss-hire, that having a candidate meet any more than four interviewers doesn't increase new-hire quality, and that for many jobs, factors like grades, test scores, and schools attended don't predict success in the position.

So it's time to rethink your interview questions with a focus on work-related questions that are harder to prepare for and to fake an answer to.

Avoid easy-to-practice questions. If you work for a major corporation, most of the interview questions used by hiring managers at your firm are publicly posted on [Glassdoor.com](#) — along with recommended answers. So start with a clean slate of questions, and at the very least eliminate overused and easy-to-practice questions with a low predictive value, like “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?” and “Why are you the best candidate?” and “What's your dream job?” and “Where would you like to be in five years?”

Be wary of historical questions. Questions that require a candidate to describe how they performed in the past, also known as “behavioral interview questions” (e.g., “Tell me about a time when you led...”), are problematic in a fast-moving world where yesterday's approaches quickly become irrelevant. And according to [research by professors Frank Schmidt and John Hunter](#), those questions predict success only 12% better than a coin flip. Why? Because the way a candidate did years ago at another firm may be the wrong answer today at this firm with its unique culture. Historical questions also allow a good storyteller to passionately describe how a problem was solved even though they only played a minor role in the solution.

Assess their ability to solve a problem. If you were hiring a chef, you would ask them to cook a meal. Taking a “job content” approach, by having an applicant do some of the actual work, is the best way to separate top candidates from average ones. Consider asking them to:

- *Identify problems on the job.* Say something like: “Please walk me through the steps of the process that you'll use during your first weeks to identify the most important current problems or opportunities in your area.”
- *Solve a current problem.* The ability to solve current problems is often the number one predictive factor of job performance. Provide them with a description of an actual problem that they will face on their first day. Then ask them to walk you through the broad steps they would take in order to solve the problem. Prior to the interview, make a list of the essential steps. Deduct points if they omit important steps like gathering data, consulting with the team or customer, and identifying success metrics.
- *Identify the problems in our process.* Hand them a single-page description of a flawed existing process related to their job. Ask them to examine the process and identify the top three areas where they predict serious problems are likely to occur. Prior to the interview, make a list of those pain points and flaws.

Evaluate whether they're forward-looking. In fast-evolving environments, employees must anticipate the future. Consider asking these questions to assess how well a candidate can do that:

- *Outline your plan for this job.* The very best develop a plan before they begin a major project or new job. Ask them to outline the elements of their plan of action for their first 3–6 months. Have them highlight key components, including goals, who they'll consult with (by title), what data they'll analyze, how they'll communicate with their team, the metrics for assessing their plan's success, etc.
- *Forecast the evolution of the job/industry.* Anticipating major shifts is critical. Ask them to forecast at least five ways that their job will likely evolve over the next three years as a result of changes in the business environment. New hires must also be able to anticipate changes in your industry. So consider asking candidates to project 3–5 major trends in our industry, and then forecast how the top firms will need to change over the next few years to meet those trends.

Assess a candidate's ability to learn, adapt, and innovate. If the job requires any of those factors, consider these questions:

- *Learning:* “Outline the steps you'd take to continuously learn and maintain your expert status in one important technical area.”
- *Agility:* “Outline the steps you'd take to adapt when a dramatic unexpected change occurs in either technology or customer expectations.”
- *Innovation:* “Outline the steps you'd take to increase innovation among your team to respond to increased competition or new technologies.”

Avoid duplication. When selecting questions, avoid asking about factors like education and job responsibilities that were already covered in the resume or in the telephone screen.

Allocate time for selling. The bulk of the interview time should be allocated to assessing the candidate, but set aside time to excite and sell candidates on the job and your firm. Proactively ask, “What are the top factors that you'll use to assess a job offer?” Then be sure to provide compelling information covering each “job acceptance factor.”

Interviews are tough to get right. (Some firms, like the India-based e-commerce company Flipkart, are successfully hiring candidates [without a single interview](#)). But [research](#) has shown that carefully selecting questions and determining acceptable answers ahead of time greatly increases your chances of success. [Research](#) also shows that most hiring decisions are made within 15 seconds, so you must consciously avoid any judgments until the interview is at least 50% completed.

John Sullivan, Ph.D., is a professor of management at San Francisco State University and an internationally known HR thought-leader from the Silicon Valley. He's a prolific author with over 900 articles and 10 books covering all areas of talent management.
