

Interviewing with Finesse



Finding experienced, professional candidates is a challenging and often lengthy process. And even once you've found good candidates, the work has really only just begun. It's time for the interview process. Just how savvy are you when it comes to booking, conducting, and following-up on these interviews?

Below is an overview of questions and responses compiled from interviewing fifteen businesses in the Baltimore, Delaware, Washington areas.

Question: Where do you conduct your interviews?

Response: I conduct most interviews at the office, but try to be flexible to accommodate candidates' schedules.

Answer: You recognize that it's a competitive marketplace, so you accommodate a candidate's schedule and interview at a time that is mutually convenient. At the same time, you recognize that when you interview at your facility, you have the home court advantage. You'll have the privacy that's necessary for interviews, but you'll also be able to show the candidate various elements of your office that might be appealing, such as a technical library, convenient on-site services, cubicles/office space, and other areas used by your employees. If you have a great office, show it off!

Question : How are candidates for interview greeted?

Response: The secretary greets candidates, offer them a beverage, and asks them to wait.

Answer: This initial corporate greeting is often overlooked, but it's the first impact you'll make on a job applicant - so make a positive impression. Your secretary/receptionist should always know when you're expecting a candidate. Guests should be offered refreshment and have their coat and other belongings taken, if preferred. Rather than immediately ushering a candidate into an interviewing room, let him/her sit in the lobby and relax for a few minutes. Encourage your receptionist to initiate a dialogue with the candidate - a little bit of small talk can go a long way in easing a candidate's nerves. Have the receptionist notify you as soon as the guest has arrived, and - presuming that they are on time - don't keep them waiting too long.

Question: How do you make the candidate feel comfortable and put them at ease?

Response : I go out of my way to break the ice by making small talk.

Answer: It seems obvious, but this initial ice-breaking period is often overlooked. These first few minutes will set the tone for your meeting. Offer your candidate a beverage or a refill, comment on the weather, or share a company-related story. This kind of dialogue also provides you with an opportunity to see how the candidate handles small talk and how quickly they relax.

Question: Do you follow a set series of question for every candidate?

Response: I create an agenda for each interview.

Answer This is a business meeting, and you'll want to have a plan of action and time guidelines, so interview agenda simply makes sense. Your agenda should provide a general timeline for each step of the process, as well as the name and title for each person participating in the interview. Going over the agenda at the beginning of your interview is also a good icebreaker and can set the candidate at ease. You may even want to offer the candidate a copy of the agenda to which they can refer. This will help keep you, the candidate, and any other interview participants on schedule. Furthermore, an agenda emphasizes your company's organization and professionalism.

Question: Do you know exactly what you want to ask the candidate?

Response: I always have a series of questions written down to ask.

Answer: Having a series of questions written down is a great idea, regardless of your expertise as an interviewer. With prepared questions, you aren't likely to overlook important areas. You'll also be reminding yourself of the best (and legal) way to ask questions. This also impresses candidates, since it shows that you have taken time to prepare for the interview.

Question: What type of questions do you ask?

Response: I make a conscious effort to ask open-ended questions.

Answer: Open-ended questions will give you the best indication of your candidate's ability to think on their feet, provide important details, and communicate effectively. Without the easy option of answering with a simple "yes" or "no," the candidate must elaborate on each question. If you're consciously making an effort to phrase questions in an open-ended style, you are definitely exhibiting some interviewing finesse!

Question: Who does most of the talking during your interviews?

Response: I speak about 20% of the time during an interview.

Answer: We've all interviewed at least once for someone who barely gives us the chance to answer questions. It's extremely frustrating for candidates. Perhaps more importantly, you can't possibly conduct an effective interview if you're talking too much. Keep using these open-ended questions to naturally compel candidates to speak for the majority of your interview.

Question: How do you remember which candidate is which after the interview?

Response: I always take notes to review after the interview.

Answer: Before your interview, advise the candidate that you'll be taking notes. It isn't rude to take notes - but common courtesy dictates that you explain that you'll be doing so. If you find it hard to ask questions, listen, and takes notes all at once, consider asking another member of your HR staff to sit in with you and take the notes (or ask the questions.) Depending upon the volume of interviews you conduct, notes can be a very helpful means of distinguishing between candidates. Your interview notes can confirm or deny that an applicant is worth serious consideration. (You shouldn't ask any personal or illegal questions during the interview and if this kind of information is given to you, be sure not to add it to your interview notes.)

Question: Is the decision to hire based solely on your opinion of the candidate interview?

Response: We always include other staff or management in the interview process.

Answer: You're managing your time and the interview scheduling process exceptionally well! It's always a good idea to include at least one other participant who can offer his or her perspective on the candidate being interviewed. Consider exchanging comments and points of interest with each other immediately after the meeting, while your impressions are still strong. Candidates will appreciate the additional staff as well, since it shows a higher level of interest in them.

Question: Is the face to face contact the last step in your interviewing program?

Response: I send a follow up note or call within 2 business days.

Answer: If you send a follow-up or thank-you note within two business days, your company and the interview will still be fresh in the candidate's mind. Even if you haven't decided whether or not you'll conduct a second interview, sending a note or calling to thank the candidate for his time and keep him in the loop will set you apart from many of the other companies who are interviewing him.