



Top 10 Interview Questions (and Answers) To Hire Good Staff



HRwisdom

Top 10 Interview Questions To Hire Good Staff

HRwisdom recently asked one of its contributors, **Robert Watson**, what were his Top 10 Interview Questions to help him hire good staff or, more specifically, the right person for the right role?

In the following notes taken directly from our discussion, we will take a look at Robert's preferred interview questions for hiring good staff and some of his thinking behind the selection.

What is the thinking behind these questions?

"Over the years, I must have seen thousand of recruitment questions that people have designed. But the overwhelming majority of those are very simple questions where the candidate can answer simply yes or no, and then of course we complain about younger candidates who can't string a sentence together.

Each of the questions that I've selected here require the candidate to actually put an answer together and, probably, a paragraph answer. They're not just simply one-sentence answers. You're trying to get some discussion going and when they start discussing these things, what you're looking for in all of these questions is what's underlying or what's the attitude that the person has.

The attitude is something that's internal to the candidate. So if they have the right attitude then you don't have to spend a lot of time training them to try and correct their attitude. So I guess it's fairly obvious to me and hopefully it's convincing to you that the sort of candidate that you really want in your business is someone who already brings with them the attitudes which match what you want out of your employees."



How do these questions fit into the overall structure of the interview?

“Most candidates coming along are going to be nervous so you need to start out with a question that is non-threatening and allows them to talk a little bit about them in their territory.

So a typical question like the “Tell us about the current job that you have and the products that you make, and the company”, and just allow them to talk for two to three minutes.

The answers that they give may reveal some of their attitudes towards management or customers or suppliers. Those attitudes might be positive attitudes or they might be negative attitudes. But by and large that opening question is just designed to put them at ease.

Then you’ll move in to the technical questions where you ask them about specific software or specific machinery or specific experience that they’ve had. You may have asked the sales person, for instance, to bring along examples of sales presentations they’ve done or graphs showing improved sales or something like that. So you spend as much time as you like on the technical side.

The top ten questions that I’ve put here are ones which reveal more about the underlying attitude that the person has in their behavior.

Pick out some of those that you think are particularly relevant to the role that you want this person to fulfill and add those into the interview.

You can design up your own questions if you like. If you do that, you will need to make sure that the answers that people give you are not yes and no answers. They will need to be answers where people speak for a while.”

Robert’s Top 10 Interview Questions

1. Tell us about the previous job that you had, and how you fitted in with the business.
2. How did you know how well the business was going?
3. Describe a time when you worked on a team. What were some of the difficulties that this team had?

4. We all make mistakes. Tell us about a time when you made a mistake – what did you do about it and what did you learn from that?
5. Tell us about some training you've done recently.
6. Have you ever lost your job and, if so, what did you learn from that experience?
7. Tell us about a time you had to break a safety rule. What were the circumstances, and the consequences and what would you do differently next time?
8. Customers can be very demanding. Tell us about a time when you went the extra mile to satisfy a customer.
9. Tell us about a time when a customer's deadline couldn't be met. How did you break the news to the customer?
10. Why do you want to work in our business?

The Answers You Want To Hear

Q1. Tell us about the previous job that you had, and how you fitted in with the business.

This question has two parts to it. The first part, which asks them about their previous job, is really designed just to relax the candidate it gets them talking about themselves and what they did so it's familiar territory and helps to settle their nerves. But it's really the second part which will help you to identify the candidates who have a little bit more edge to them in terms of business acumen.

So, when you ask this question, I'm suggesting that you ask it just a full question, not in two parts and just listen to what they say. Some candidates will tell you about their current job and you'll hear in the answer that they give how they relate to the business as a whole and customers in particular.



If they have a sense of business, they will just sort of weave in to their answer how they connected in with the person up the line who was giving them information that they needed to use, how they may have interacted face to face with the customer, or over the telephone for instance or if they're a bit more remote and they're just filling an order, they might talk to you about

products and how people might use those products in their daily lives and again, if they're in a production-type situation or supply-chain situation, they might also talk about the next person down the chain.

Candidates or employees who have that sense of who comes before me, where do I fit in the organisation and who's the next person along, they have a much better sense of business so an advantage to you is when you come along to announce major plans or cut backs because of difficult times or a new strategy or something like that, these types of people will fit in easily because they understand the connection between one part of the business and the other. And I don't mean that they have to give you university-type answers. I just

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mean that they need to pepper their answer with things like customer in need of this or they needed this urgently or they need it tomorrow or there was a particular problem when they returned such and such to me. So keep your ears open for those sorts of things.

Q2. How did you know how well the business was going?

For the average employee, they really don't know how the business is going and they really don't care. Most people are just focused on their job. They turn up everyday. They do what they have to do and they are eager to leave at the end of the day and they look forward to weekend and that's the average sort of employee out there. But it's in your interest to look out for candidates or try and put new employees on who have a little bit more a sense of how the business is going.

So, when you ask this question, I would reckon that half of the candidates will just shrug their shoulders and most of the rest of them will go "Once a year or every six months, the boss used to tell us how the business is going" something like that but there'll be a low number of candidates, probably one in

twenty who will say things like “Well, I looked at how the price was going on the stock exchange” for instance, or “Every six months, the boss sits down with us and shows his graphs on how sales have been going and I notice that within the last quarter, the sales have been going down as has the general economy” and things like that. So you need to keep an ear open for those candidates who express some interest in how the business is going and how it might connect in with the community.

Q3. Describe a time when you worked on a team. What were some of the difficulties that this team had?

When asking someone to describe the time when they worked on a team, what you’re trying to do is find out what their attitude was to the team and how they got on with other people. As you can imagine, most teams of people will have mostly average people like a couple of really good people and perhaps a couple that aren’t pulling their weight. So when you get them to talk about the time when they worked on a team, that’s fine. But the difficulties that they had, you need to listen carefully to the answer to find out whether they are describing difficulties that the team had almost from an external perspective or whether they’re describing difficulties that the candidate had with some other person on the team. So listen for things where they’re blaming somebody else or pointing the finger or something like that.



So as an example, a good answer a candidate might give you might be “Well, we we’re a mixed bunch of people. If one had their strengths and weaknesses, so and so always used to do the minutes so they didn’t really contribute anything to the meeting but that was okay. Someone else had some good ideas and someone else always helped us to speed along our decision making process.” So an answer like that helps you to understand that the person can identify the different roles and accept that different roles are important in a team.

A poor answer would be if the candidate says “Well we had this team and, you know, Joe is always sounding off and whinnying and moaning about the boss and that this wasn’t right and that wasn’t right and in the end, I just told him to shut up and sit down and get off the team.” An answer like that, the candidate might genuinely give you an answer so that you will cheer them because they helped to get rid of an obnoxious member of the team. That

might be fine. However, they're also giving away part of the game which is that they might not have a level of patience and tolerance.

At the end of the day, teams are made up of different people and they're not all going to be perfect. But everyone on the team does need to have an appreciation that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and hopefully everyone has strengths and weaknesses, not simply weaknesses.

Q4. We all make mistakes. Tell us about a time when you made a mistake - what did you do about it and what did you learn from that?

Asking people about mistakes they made is very good to tease out people who are resilient and interested in continually improving things. It's pretty true to say that everyone makes mistakes, but the person who makes mistakes and



covers it up or won't admit it or keeps making the same mistakes over and over really isn't the sort of person that you want in your business.

So in this one, we are asking them to tell us about a mistake that they made and, in particular, we want to find out how they recognize that they made a mistake and what they did to learn from that so that it wouldn't happen again. If they give you an example from their home life, that's okay. A work example would be better. Sometimes I call this *future proofing* so the person that has the attitude that "it's okay if I stop that once, it's okay because I'm going to fool-proof the system so that it never happens again. Someone like that is the sort of person you want. I don't think you'll ever find a candidate who will say "Well, I never make mistakes," but it's possible they might claim that.

Q5. Tell us about some training you've done recently.

When you ask the question about training, what you're trying to find out is the attitude that the person has towards training and improvement in general. I wouldn't expect that any candidate would ever say to you "We did some training and it was great to have a day away from the work place." However, some people might say that and if they do tell you that then you can easily see what their attitude is no matter how jovially they might present it.

But a really good answer that a candidate would give you would be "Yes, we regularly undergo training. The equipment at the work place changed and so we were sent away for four hours of training and it's really good of the

company to make sure that we know exactly how to operate the equipment, the peak of its efficiency.” Something like that so there’s a connection between what the person learned in the business, some sort of a connection.

Then the question that has equal relevance to someone who might have been out of the work force for a period of time. Most of us might think that people out of the work force just sit around with him doing nothing or they might be applying for jobs and things like that. But it’s always good to hear that someone has used their time gainfully even if it’s not necessarily work related.

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For instance, I do recall a candidate that I interviewed once who had been out of the work force for six months and he went along to do a homebrewing course. But the way that he went about that was he went around to two or three regional shows in his area where people had submitted homebrew samples and won prizes and he asked the winners how they have learned how to brew and so he gathered data and worked out the best equipment to get and the best course to do. You can imagine that when we employed that guy, he was just fully on about training. You know, ‘Let’s go out there. Let’s learn something. Let’s learn something new. Let’s improve the process.’ So with people like that, you don’t have to force them to go along to training. They expect training to happen all of the time and for all of the right reasons.

Q6. Have you ever lost your job and, if so, what did you learn from that experience?

When you ask people about how they lost their job, listen carefully for the answers. A simple answer of I was made redundant, perhaps with a shrug of the shoulders doesn’t really tell you much about the person at all. But some people will say, “I was made redundant because they were competing products and we just couldn’t cope as a business” or “We lost a few big orders”

something like that. At least that reveals to you that they understand the reasons behind their retrenchment and of course at the other end of the scale, you might have someone who is really bitter about the company sacking them and they will start to give their answer through gritted teeth.

Now, you need to be careful to other people who are holding a grudge for a long time. I'm not saying that that's necessarily bad. I mean people get affected by emotions and they can have a very big impact on their lives. However, the candidate who picks themselves up quickly and says, "Well I know what happened and why it happened and I'm getting on with my life." That's the sort of candidate that will make the better employee for you.

Q7. Tell us about a time you had to break a safety rule. What were the circumstances and consequences and what would you do differently next time?

On first reading, you might think that this question is designed to trap candidates but it isn't. You don't really need to write down answers that are incriminating or anything like that. What you're really trying to do is find out if they have a sense of what safety is all about and if they come in to a situation where a rule needs to have been broken, then what did they do about it? Did they go back to their safety committee or their supervisor and bring about changes in the way that the work was being done? That's what you're listening for. This is an internal attitude to safety and a bias towards trying to improve systems so that they're safe for other people.

Q8. Customers can be very demanding. Tell us about a time when you went the extra mile to satisfy a customer.

People who are in customer service roles go home at the end of the day absolutely exhausted because they spent the whole day trying to be nice to people and it's a demanding job.

So when people give you an answer to this question about going the extra mile, some people will talk about it with a smile on their face about how they stamped the back of a child's hand or they offered a seat to an elderly customer or helped someone out with a large package to their car, something like that and they'll tell you automatically how they went the extra mile.

But a lot of people in customer service won't do that and they don't do that. So if you employ someone that can't give you some stories about how they went the extra mile, when you'll employ them, you'll going to have to send them along to courses about how to be pleasant to customers, how to be nice

on the telephone and things like that so they become an expense to your business.

So given a choice between two candidates, always go for the one who can tell you how they went the extra mile and they tell you that cheerfully and it's just naturally. It's something they do that it comes from the heart.

Q9. Tell us about a time when a customer's deadline couldn't be met. How did you break the news to the customer?

Delivering bad news to a customer is a very difficult thing to do. So listen carefully to the applicant's answer to this question. It will give you insight into their attitude towards customers.

For instance, a good answer would be if they said that they had to deliver this bad news and they decided to drive out and tell the customer face to face. That's obviously a better way to deliver bad news than just send an email for instance. So listen behind the question to the attitude that the applicant has towards the customer and also, see if they were able to come up with some creative ways of delivering the bad news.

For instance, did they look for the previous ten orders and see that they've delivered nine orders ahead of schedule and this was the first one that was going to be behind schedule or something like that. If they've got some sense of being able to balance the bad news with some good news, something like that.

Q10. Why do you want to work in our Business?

Why do you want to work in our business is a deceptively simple question, but the answers that candidates give you will tell you something about their attitude towards learning in particular. The better candidates are the ones who are curious about the world and try to dig out information and research things. So when you ask the question "Why do you want to work in our business?" most people will probably give you an answer which guesses what your products or perhaps they do know what your products are. But a better answer would be something where the candidate might reveal a bit about the history of your company or how many sites you've got around the country or where you're located or head office or something like that. It's only a little thing but my estimate is that about one in ten candidates will do that research and if they're already researching and finding out information about your company before they're employed with you, chances are that after you employ them, they will always be on the look out for information about how they fit in

to the business and what opportunities are out there for them and if you invite them to come along to some training, they'll invariably say yes because they have this thirst for knowledge. So always listen behind the question to the underlying attitude.

Are these Top 10 Questions Enough?

"These top ten questions are very effective. However, you'll probably realise that an interview can't be made up of just these top ten questions.

So, don't forget that in a typical interview, what you'll need is a couple of opening questions that relax the candidate and the most obvious opening question is "Tell us about your current job." That's always a good one.

You will also need to ask your technical questions because for most jobs, you want to know if they do have the experience or the particular qualification that you're after and then these top ten questions, you need to handpick the ones of those that are relevant to the job vacancy that you have and use questions like those.

If you go and design up your own question, always test them out on someone, perhaps an existing employee and see what sort of answers they will give. If they give you a paragraph-type answer then you'll know that's a fairly good question. If they give you a one-word answer, you'll know that your question needs to be redesigned."

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This HRwisdom article comes from regular expert contributor, [Robert Watson](#).

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