

The One-Question Interview

Summary - One question can elicit a lot of key information. But the follow-ups are just as important. It puts everyone on an even playing field.

Over the course of the past 20 years, I've been searching for the single best question to ask in an interview. I've sought after a one-question interview that would overcome generalizations and exaggerations, reduce typical candidate nervousness, minimize the impact of first impressions, and actually determine if the candidate is both competent and motivated.

Here's what I've come up with: Could you please think about your most significant accomplishment and tell me about it?

Now for the next 10 to 15 minutes, I'm going to make sure I get the following clarifying information:

- A complete description of the accomplishment and its impact.
- The actual results achieved and the process used to achieve them.
- When it took place, how long it took and whom it was with.
- Your title and role.
- Why you were chosen.
- The three to four biggest challenges you faced and how you dealt with them.
- Some of the major decisions made.
- The environment and resources available.
- The technical skills learned and used.
- The team involved, including titles and reporting relationships.
- Some of the biggest mistakes you made.
- How you changed and grew as a person.
- What you would do differently if you could do it again.
- What you liked and didn't like.
- The budget available and your role in preparing it and managing it.
- How you did on the project vs. the plan.
- How you motivated and influenced others, with specific examples to prove your claims.
- How you dealt with conflict with specific examples.

This type of information is extraordinarily revealing, but bear in mind that few candidates will give you all of this information on their own, so it's the digging in that matters. It's the interviewer's responsibility to extract this information from the candidate, not the candidate's responsibility to give it to the interviewer in a soliloquy about his greatest feat. This is what real interviewing is about -- getting the entire answer to this very simple but very powerful question. The key: Understand the accomplishment, the process used to achieve the accomplishment, the environment in which the accomplishment took place, the candidate's actual role, and why the candidate was motivated to do it.

Then pursue this same question in the same level of detail with the candidate for a variety of different accomplishments. Ask the candidate to describe two to three different individual and team accomplishments of the past five to 10 years. Put them in chronological order to see the person's growth and impact over time in different jobs and with different companies. Also ask about accomplishments that directly relate to job-specific needs. For example, "Describe your biggest accomplishment in setting up manufacturing scheduling systems."

With this approach to digging in and finding out about major accomplishments, you'll have what you need to make a reasoned evaluation of a person's ability to deliver similar results in a similar environment to your own.

By fact-finding in this way, you put all candidates on a level playing field. And when you can get all members of the interviewing team to conduct their interviews this way, you'll remove another key source of hiring errors -- the tendency of most interviewers to talk too much, listen too little and ask a bunch of irrelevant questions. Don't spend time learning a lot of clever questions to ask during the interview; spend time learning to get the answer to just this one question.

This one question, along with the requisite follow-ups, is all it takes.