

This document gathers many notes, ideas, and suggestions for preparing for an employment interview as the *hiring manager* – the person trying to staff their group with folks that will fit the culture of the team. There is a companion document for the interviewee – check out our web site for a copy.

You will note that it is slanted towards IT – sorry, that's my background / career direction. Still, the general approach is pretty good, and once you get into the flow, you'll be able to add industry-specific questions of your own.

**Note:** This is an aggregation from many sources (books, articles, web sites, etc.), and no attempt has been made to provide attributions for any of this material, although most of it has at least been edited to fit the context.

The document has also benefited with input from readers such as yourself. Please, if you have tips, suggestions, other observations you'd like to share, drop us a quick eMail!

As such, this is one of the more dynamic documents in the collection – be sure to check our web site for the most recent copy (your "version date" is in the upper right).

### In General

You should know the following:

- Who am I meeting? Do I have a copy of their resume?
- Where are we meeting? When are we meeting?
- Where is this person right before we meet, and where do I take them when we're done?

Before the interview:

- If possible, have the candidate bring in samples of their work (sample code, documentation). Should illustrate something specific you are looking for (clean code, user-oriented documentation vs. technical documentation, methodology).
- Review resume – highlight for questions on specifics.
- Review this list of questions – highlight the ones you want to ask.

You should have the following:

- A pen – to write notes on the backs of these sheets (why waste the paper!)
- An unobtrusive clock – preferably visible to you, but not necessarily to the candidate.
- A business card – to give at the end of the interview, if you are so inclined.
- If possible / practical, disable / turn off your phone, so you're not disturbed.

*Good Things to Think About* if you are *One in a Series* of interviews:

- ☆ If your portion of the interview has been delayed because others took too much time, it is considered Good Form to cut your section short, and get back on schedule.
- ☆ If you are not the person making the hiring decision, someone must want your opinion of this person. What specific attributes / areas are you expected to cover? Make sure you review this with the person making the hiring decision.

#### **Sample Questions:**

- ☺ What is this question trying to get at?
- ☺ A good way to answer this question – positive indications
- ☹ A bad way to answer this question – negative indications

### Ice Breakers

Sure these questions show little imagination, but when you are starting cold, it allows the person to start gabbing while you collect your thoughts.

- ❑ *How would you describe yourself? – or – Tell me about yourself*
  - ☺ If they can't tell you a nice, concise story in about 2 minutes, they weren't well prepared. You are looking ultimately for a concise synopsis of their career, leading right up to why they are great for this opportunity.
- ❑ *Do you have a geographical preference? How long is the commute? Have you tried it yet? Did you have any trouble finding the place? Were the directions all right?*
  - ☺ The second question is sort of the same as the first, yet less direct. Don't underestimate how de-motivating a long, painful commute, every day of the week, can be!
- ❑ *Have you been interviewing long? Who are some of the other types of companies you are speaking with?*
  - ☺ You can find out a lot with this one – do they have many prospects (will I have much competition in landing them?), have they been looking for a long time (why so long?), will they give up details (negotiating info, also a judge of how they might communicate re: business sensitive information). Also might give a hint towards the type of company they want to work for (big/small, business area) and expected job title / role.
  - ☺ Also might provide a little market / competitive intelligence!

### The Classics

Remember, keep questions open ended, wait for the answers, and believe the answers even if they aren't what you want to hear.

- ❑ *What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives, when and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?*
  - ☺ What are your future plans? Are you actively managing your career?
  - ☺ Are they willing to grow with the company?
- ❑ *Why should I hire you?*
  - ☺ Wide open question – a bit of a stress-tester.
- ❑ *What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?*
- ❑ *How do you think a friend, professor, co-worker (peer) who knows you would describe you?*
- ❑ *How do you think your current supervisor would describe you?*
  - ☺ People can be "naturally" humble. Asking what other people would say will liberate them, allow them to show a little ego, be more descriptive.
- ❑ *If your last boss could wave a magic wand over your head, what aspect of your performance would he or she fine-tune?*
  - ☺ A slightly less positive way to ask the same as above. You're looking for honesty here as well as a positive self-image.
- ❑ *Why do you think you might like to work for / What do you know about our company?*
  - ☺ Really interested in the second question – if they don't answer it when you ask the first, drill down to the second.
- ❑ *What are the significant, unique strengths you will bring to the position?*

- Two types of companies – extremes on a continuum; what type of organization will you be able to excel in?*
  1. *Structured, hierarchical, procedure oriented, well-defined (bureaucratic, inflexible, slow).*
  2. *Flat, unstructured, flexible, entrepreneurial, fast (lack of process, no direction, no focus).*
- ☺ *Everyone will say that they like a mixture of both, so you have to press for a preference. If they don't describe the work environment of your group, you should think twice before pursuing them – they'll just be miserable.*

**Motivation**

- What's the most useful criticism you've ever received?*
- Describe methods you have used to motivate a team.*
  - ☺ *Getting to know their leadership style*
- What motivates you to do a good job at work?*
  - ☺ *Do they enjoy their work? Are committed to doing a good job?*
- What management style provides you with the greatest opportunity to do your best work?*
  - ☺ *If they don't describe our department, don't think seriously about hiring them.*
- What are you seeking from this position that you are not receiving in your current position?*
  - ☺ *Enthusiasm for the new job, without negativity regarding the old job.*
- If you worked for me, how would I motivate you to do your best work?*
- How good are you – REALLY – at handling change*
  - ☺ *It is really tough to get people to answer a question like this honestly. Most people are uncomfortable with vchange. Try asking for examples.*
- How do you determine / evaluate / define success?*
- How do you react to being told "No"?*  
*Can you handle telling other people "No"?*
- What do you think determines a person's progress within a company?*
- How would you define stress in the work place? How do you choose to react to it?*
- How's your stamina? How hard have you been working lately?*

**Teamwork**

- Describe a recent team project and your responsibility for its success.*
  - ☺ *Basic question about their experience. Looking for someone to sound responsible, without overstating their involvement in the project. Honest evaluation of experience, responsibilities.*
- Describe a situation where you served as team leader. What did you look for when choosing team members?*
  - ☺ *Learning about their leadership skills and approach to team organization.*
- Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?*
- Are you a good scrounger?*

**Industry Specific**

- In your opinion, what are the significant trends in the \_\_\_\_\_ industry?*

**Organization**

- Describe your organizational skills. How have they helped you at work?
- Describe a situation in which you had to motivate yourself to complete a task. What resulted from your actions?
  - ☺ How do they react to an uninteresting project? Can they focus on positive qualities?

**Managing People**

Note: For these and other questions; when you ask a specific question, and the candidate can't quickly and/or confidently come up with a specific response, they probably do not have the basic personality trait you are drilling after.

- What's the unwritten contract between you and the people who report to you?
- Have you ever dealt with a difficult employee? Describe how you handled that situation.
- Tell me about a time when you overcame resistance to an idea.
- Explain the dynamics of your staff. Is your staff made up of professional or administrative-level employees? Do you supervise mostly part-time or full-time employees -- or is there a different structure?
  - ☺ Looking at managerial experience, size of the staff they have managed, responsibilities. You can turn a question like this into a opportunity to shine by pointing out strengths in your style of management.
  - ☺ Maybe they will talk about strengths, weaknesses in their style of management.
- Provide examples of how you changed the behavior or performance of an employee.
  - ☺ Want to learn about their people skills, especially when dealing with a difficult employee.
- What was you favorite supervisor like? What were their significant strengths and weaknesses?

**Career Change**

- What have the last couple of years taught you?
- Why are you seeking a new career?
  - ☺ They should feedback positive responses only – "moving for me".
  - ☹ Negative reasons for leaving are usually a red flag.
- What were your career goals in your previous position? How have they changed?
  - ☺ Should emphasize growth in old career and enthusiasm for the new career.
- Describe what skills you have gained in your previous career that would benefit this position.
  - ☺ How qualified are they for the industry?
- Describe your reasons for changing careers and why this profession appeals to you.
  - ☺ How committed are they to a new career?
- What additional training or education do you think is necessary for you to be successful in this position?
  - ☺ They should demonstrate confidence in their abilities, but acknowledge that they are open to learning new skills.

**Budgeting**

- Describe the type of budget you have been responsible for in the past. What was the size of a typical budget?

- ☺ Another question designed to measure level of management experience.
- ☐ *Have you been responsible for forecasting a budget? If so, how did you proceed in this process?*
  - ☺ Looking for information on their fiscal experience and methods.
- ☐ *Provide examples of how you controlled costs and improved efficiencies in the past.*

**Organizational Culture / Philosophy**

These are some dynamite ways to drill into how folks really think – there are simply no “right” answers, no “politically correct” ways to answer. You either come up with a response that matches the corporate / organizational culture, or you don’t. Note that organizational fit is a key determinant to the future success and happiness of the applicant.

- ☐ *What’s more important to you, truth or comfort?*
- ☐ *Is the customer always right?*
- ☐ *When is it better to ask forgiveness rather than permission?*
- ☐ *What do you want to hear first – good news or bad news – and why?*
- ☐ *On what occasions are you tempted to lie?*
- ☐ *How would you finish this sentence: “Most people are basically \_\_\_\_\_”*
- ☐ *If you could organize the world in one of three ways – no scarcity, no problems, or no rules – how would you do it?*

**Recent Graduate**

- ☐ *How has your education prepared you for this position? (-or-) What did you learn in school?*
  - ☺ They probably have little work experience, so we want to know they are qualified for the job.
  - ☺ They should emphasize any past accomplishments or skills that would be applicable to the job. Alternatively, someone who speaks of “learning how to learn” and takes a more philosophical view is showing vision and self-determination.
- ☐ *What specific classes do you think prepared you for this position?*
  - ☺ Measuring qualifications.
  - ☺ They should be specific.
- ☐ *Why did you select your college or university? What led you to choose your field of major study?*
- ☐ *What have you learned from participation in extra-curricular activities? -- or -- Do you think that your extracurricular activities were worth the time devoted to them? Why?*
  - ☺ Asks two things – did they participate at all, and what did they take away.
  - ☹ All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.
- ☐ *What percentage of your college expenses did you earn? How?*
- ☐ *How have you changed personally since starting college?*

Technical Questions

- ❑ *How do you keep abreast of new technologies?*
  - ☺ Looking for self-motivated, teach themselves type of person. Should be an active reader of trade publications (so many are free!); 'net surfing, newsgroups always a plus.
- ❑ *What development methodologies do you use now? In the past?*
  - ☺ Of prime importance here – do they appreciate the value and logic behind using a structured process to tackle a project? Also, might want to delve into when it is permissible to deviate from the process.
- ❑ *What is your concept of a professional programmer?*
- ❑ *What development tools / languages do you use now? In the past?*
- ❑ *How would you define client/server?*
  - ☺ Looking for a true understanding of distributed processing, architectural concerns, three-tier systems, etc.
- ❑ *How would you define objects / object oriented design / analysis?*
  - ☺ Looking for a true understanding of OOA/OOD, development / analysis implications, etc.
- ❑ *How would you respond if an executive / business person wanted to know the difference between the Ethernet and the Internet?*
  - ☺ Trick question – we want to know if they know what Ethernet is.
- ❑ *(Excel) How would you respond if a user asked what is a "pivot table" is used for?*
  - ☺ Testing whether they know, plus how they respond to a question from a user.
  - ☺ A good answer – if they don't know – is that they will get back to me, then go look it up.
- ❑ *Compare the architectures of mainframe/legacy systems, client/server systems, and internet/intranet?*
  - ☺ Tells me whether they have any experience with these areas, plus how they can translate technical concepts for a (presumably) non-technical listener. Also, may uncover preferences for certain types of systems.
- ❑ *What is the role of AS/400 in a client/server environment? How is the platform adapting?*
- ❑ *What is the biggest benefit / payback of 'net architecture? Why should anybody consider this platform?*
  - ☺ Looky/feely issues and "gee-whiz, what neat technology" (or, "It looks nice so people will use it") shows someone who does not understand the business side and/or the practical implications of system implementations. A better answer would be a discussion on thin clients and simplified app distribution, or maybe requirement(s) for WAN access, etc.
- ❑ *What is the UML?*
  - ☺ Unified Modeling Language – we're back to OO.
- ❑ *Is Windows95 a true 32-bit operating system?*
  - ☺ No
- ❑ *Compare the technical pros and cons of Windows95 and Windows NT*
  - ☺ Trap question – especially if they start going on about Windows NT. Then, you ask them ...
- ❑ *If Windows NT is technically superior, why do most people run Win95?*
  - ☺ Greater compatibility with 16-bit apps, more modest hardware requirements.

*The air-conditioning has gone off, and once the temperature reaches 88 degrees, the big red switch is going to shut off all the electricity. There are 300 people online, and all the computer support staff (except you) are in Las Vegas. Or Reno, I forget which. The phones start ringing. What do you do?*

☺ Put the phones on hold.

**Outside the Box**

1. Always ask questions like these with an absolutely straight face – especially the weird ones.
2. Sprinkle these into the interview at weird places, to throw them off guard. How do they react?
3. You don't have to tell them the right answer, you know.

*What specific goals, other than those related to your job, have you established for yourself for the next ten years?*

*How do organizations change? What or who makes change happen?*

*What was the last good book your read? (non-technical!)*

☺ Do they have any sort of life outside of work?

*If you could take back one career decision, what would it be?*

*What's the toughest thing you've had to do professionally?*

*Everybody has war stories. Tell me two: a particularly good experience, and a particularly horrible experience.*

☺ Ask the question and shut up. Note that we didn't say they necessarily have to be war stories about work experiences.

☺ Do they talk about non-work experience? Shows they have a bit of a life out of work.

☺ Don't specifically ask, but if they volunteer how they took something away from the experience – even the bad one – shows they can apply experience, have a good big picture view.

*Give me an example of an idea that has come to you and what you did with it?*

☺ Looking for both creativity and entrepreneurial tendencies.

*(Given what you know), what is it about this job that will make you fail?*

*Give me a situation in which you failed, and how you handled it?*

*If I asked the people who know you for one reason why I shouldn't hire you, what would they say?*

☺ Asking someone to describe themselves in negative terms leads to cognitive dissonance.

"Fail" is a very strong word! Looking for someone who can turn a negative around to be a positive.

*Why is a manhole cover round?*

☺ So it can't fall in. (Unfortunately, this has become a classic example of an "off the wall" question – you run the risk of appearing derivative / unimaginative.)

*How many cars are there in the USA? How many manhole covers are there in the USA?*

☺ Not given enough information to answer the question. What we want to know is – can they reason out an intelligent guess?

*How are M&Ms made?*

☺ Looking for creativity here – I haven't got the foggiest idea, myself!

**Look for “Warning Signs”**

Don’t concentrate on filling the opening as fast as possible – pick the wrong candidate, and your problems may just be compounded. Here are a few things to think about ...

**The candidate is big on adjectives but can’t back them up**

Listen to the way he forms his answer—you want to hear details of how he gets more done in a day than others do, not just that he stays late at the office night after night. Ask for concrete proof of results: early rollouts of software, fewer bug reports, or lower support call rates. The candidate may just be telling you what he thinks you want to hear.

**Your questions take the candidate by surprise.**

A well-prepared candidate should anticipate most of your questions. She should know how to describe her unique strengths, and, as before, be able to back up her descriptions with specific examples of how she used those qualities to create a better bottom line for her present company.

**The candidate won’t admit that there are areas he could stand to improve.**

Look for candidates who are willing to admit “flaws”—but who are actively working to correct them.

**The candidate can’t tell you the most crucial function of his current position.**

You’ll be amazed at how many of them have no sense of how their job fits into the greater corporate picture. They might give an answer that sounds good on the surface, like, “Well, I oversee all the product bug reports. It’s my job to make sure all the problems are being addressed.” You need to follow up with something like, “Why is that the most important part of your job?” The answer the interviewee gives will tell you a lot about how he sees himself in relation to his company.

An answer like, “Well, if I don’t catch the bugs, I could lose my job,” should throw up the biggest, reddest flag you can find. Much better answer - “Client satisfaction is crucial to our success in the market. There are dozens of companies that make similar products. If ours doesn’t meet client needs and perform flawlessly, we’ll lose market share. By identifying bugs and overseeing repairs before clients are affected, I help the company retain its competitive edge”.

**The interviewee says his present company “doesn’t offer enough room for growth.”**

Be very careful. This is often a euphemism for “I want to make more money, and they won’t give me a raise.” Ask the candidate to define precisely what kind of growth opportunities he’s looking for. Then listen to how he describes his current situation. Is he objective? Is he concentrating on what he can do for the company? Or is he fiercely opinionated and concerned only with what you can give him? “No one appreciates my contributions” is a bad answer. “I’d like to see my contributions have a more direct impact on the company’s success” is a better one—but make sure the interviewee has a real plan for how he’ll make a difference.

**The candidate “really wants to work for your company” but can’t articulate why.**

It’s inexcusable for a candidate to show up without knowing something about your company. Ideally, she should be able to identify the major players in your industry and what sets you apart from them. And a good answer will focus on those differences.

**None of the candidate’s references can offer specific details on job performance.**

This is a touchy subject. Some companies have policies—official or otherwise—that prevent supervisors from making specific comments.

Look closely at whom the candidate offers as references. It’s OK to include one peer, but most references should be one or more levels above him. If you can’t talk to anyone at the candidate’s current employer, it’s probably because they don’t know he’s shopping around.

Other questions / problems, not yet classified:

- Implement a linked-list. Why did you pick the method you did?
- Implement an algorithm to sort a linked-list.
- Implement an algorithm to count the number of set bits in a number. Now optimize for speed. Now optimize for size.
- Implement an algorithm to sort an array.
- Implement an algorithm to add numbers in base (not 10).
- You've got someone working for you for seven days and a gold bar to pay them. The gold bar is segmented into seven connected pieces. You must give them a piece of gold at the end of every day. If you are only allowed to make two breaks in the gold bar, how do you pay your worker?
- One train leaves Los Angeles at 15mph heading for New York. Another train leaves from New York at 15mph heading for Los Angeles on the same track. If a bird leaves from Los Angeles at the same time as the train and flies back and forth between the two trains until they collide, how far will the bird have traveled?
- Imagine a disk spinning like a record player turn table. Half of the disk is black and the other is white. Assume you have an unlimited number of color sensors. How many sensors would you have to place around the disk to determine the direction the disk is spinning? Where would they be placed?

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