

# Conducting One-on-One Employment Interviews

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Employers commonly conduct one-on-one (or face-to-face) interviews with individual job candidates to select a new staff member.

When potential recruits interview with several company representatives, the multiple perspectives provide valuable input to the hiring decision process. However, sometimes in small businesses and start-up environments, only one manager will participate in that process. In this case, preparation and planning are especially critical to gain as much insight as possible from the interview.

This checklist discusses the advantages and practicalities of conducting one-on-one employment interviews, identifies some standard structures to follow, and describes common pitfalls to avoid.

## What You Need to Know

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### **In what ways are one-on-one interviews preferable to panel interviews?**

A one-on-one job interview does have some advantages over panel interviews, both for the business and for the candidate. These include:

- a less formal setting, enabling the candidate and interviewer to be more relaxed;
- the involvement of only one interviewer at a time, freeing other senior staff members to concentrate on running the business.

### **What should I be aware of?**

You must keep questions focused squarely on the job requirements and the applicant's experience. Take great care to avoid unlawful interview questions that could be perceived as discriminatory. These include questions concerning a candidate's racial background, religious views, marital status, and age. If you are at all unsure about these issues, investigate them thoroughly *before* speaking to candidates, and seek appropriate legal advice.

## What to Do

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### Think About How to Structure the Interview

The ideal structure of an interview will depend on the job opportunity in question as well as the information-gathering goals of the discussion. However, there are three main structures that most one-on-one employment interviews follow:

- *Behavioral.* This is a traditional technique for assessing a candidate's suitability for the position by reviewing past experience, personal attributes, and skills in relation to the job specification.
- *Competency-based.* This style of interview focuses specifically on the skills needed for the job, which comprise the criteria against which candidates are measured. The candidate's skills are discussed and reviewed against the core competencies required for the position. Additionally, candidates might be asked to produce a work-related assignment before (or during) the interview, to demonstrate their ability to complete a typical task associated with the position.
- *Situational.* This type of interview examines how candidates would react in a specified job situation. The interviewer describes a situation and asks candidates to explain how they would respond. Alternatively, a set of questions with multiple-choice answers might be utilized. This technique is less common and sometimes considered poor practice, as candidates may simply attempt to identify the "right" answer rather than supplying an honest response.

### Prepare

Appearing unprepared or under pressure during the interview is highly undesirable and sends a bad message to the candidate. As you want to recruit the top candidates, it is in your interests to carefully plan and prepare for each interview, to give the best impression you can. There are a number of things an interviewer can do to ensure a proper level of confidence and to become comfortable with the interview process.

First, ensure that you know the type of person and specific skills that the position requires. As the hiring manager, you can accomplish this by:

- writing a job specification describing what the job entails, the employee's responsibilities, and what can be considered to be part of their routine;
- creating a profile of the ideal candidate, detailing the critical skills, core competencies, and background sought.

This job specification and ideal candidate profile should form the basis of the interview questions. It is important to conduct fair interviews by asking all candidates the same key questions.

Prior to any interview, review the résumé, cover letter, and any other information you have about the candidate. Write a list of questions pertaining to their previous experience and refer to these in the course of the interview.

Secure a quiet, private room or office in which to conduct the interview. Turn off any cell phones, pagers, or other devices which could cause a distraction, and forward calls to voice mail or a colleague for the duration of the interview.

## Follow the Guidelines

After welcoming each candidate at the start of the interview, lead with a brief introduction to the job and the business. Providing background on the position and hiring need can help to relax the candidate as well as the interviewer. It also helps to get focused on the task at hand.

Active listening techniques, which involve listening carefully to someone and summarizing their key points, are helpful for gaining a better understanding of the candidate's remarks. Make notes of topics or points for further clarification, and ask these questions at an appropriate point in the interview. Also remember to ask all candidates the same questions. This is the only way to fairly compare their answers.

A classic mistake made by inexperienced interviewers is to do all the talking. While there is a need to explain the position and set the context about the company, let the candidates do most of the speaking. To encourage them, ask open questions; avoid yes/no questions. For example, try leading with:

- “Tell me more about...”
- “How do you find...”
- “What do you enjoy most/least...”

At the end of an interview, ask if the candidate has any questions about the job or company. Answer these questions and then conclude by informing the candidate of the next steps, and when they can expect to hear back from you.

## Write Up Your Interview Notes

After an interview is concluded, it is good practice to write some notes about the candidate, as well as your impressions, while the conversation is still fresh in your mind. These interview notes might include:

- the candidate's responses to key questions;
- your sense of the match between the candidate and the position;

- the candidate's most relevant experience and skills;
- the questions asked by the candidate.

The more information documented after each interview, the better. This will aid in making an objective decision when comparing the performance of several interviewees. It will also help you recall key discussions and points made in each interview, which is especially important if there are a number of candidates being interviewed over a length of time.

It is possible that candidates may, at some point, ask to see any notes you have made. Just as it is unlawful to ask potentially-discriminatory questions in an interview, writing any notes pertaining to the candidate's gender, race, sexual orientation, religious views, age, marital status, or family commitments is never appropriate and could also be viewed as discriminatory.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Ask the Wrong Type of Questions**

During a one-on-one interview, it is helpful to ask open questions that allow the candidate to cite examples from previous experience, discuss points in more detail, or explain how their abilities are suited to the position. Asking yes/no questions is not nearly as useful; they can hinder the flow of conversation and provide little scope for further discussion.

### **You Spend Too Much Time Talking**

One-on-one interviews can often be dominated by the interviewer's voice, with the job specification, business profile, and administrative issues accounting for too much of the interview. An interview is primarily an opportunity to learn more about the candidate. Thus, allow the candidate to do most of the talking. Get a good sense of the candidate's communication skills and their ability to speak under pressure. Use open questions and leave time at the end of the interview for the candidate's questions.

### **You Neglect to Minimize Disruptions**

Disruptions can jeopardize the success of an interview, causing both the interviewer and candidate to lose track of the discussion and key points. To ensure a successful interview free of disruption, conduct it in a private, quiet room and notify colleagues that an interview will be taking place. Turn

off cell phones, laptops, and other potentially-disruptive devices, and allow enough time so that other scheduled interviews do not overlap.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Web Site:**

Department of Labor Compliance Assistance Law Guide: [www.dol.gov/compliance/guide/index.htm](http://www.dol.gov/compliance/guide/index.htm)

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