



Getting Ready to Hire? Make Sure You're Asking the Right Questions

BY ROBYN KELTON

Making a hiring decision can be nerve-wracking. Whether you have several strong candidates or a less-than-ideal applicant pool, you still have to determine the best fit based on very limited information. Applications, resumes, and references are essential parts of the evaluation process because they provide important background and can help narrow the field. But many candidates look impressive on paper...

For that reason, the interview is arguably your best opportunity to determine whom to hire. Yet many of us were never formally trained in best practices for interviewing a potential employee; instead, we are left to figure out which questions will offer the clearest glimpse into a candidate's competency, personality, and commitment. This can result in asking questions that are not relevant, or that have obvious, socially desirable answers about what a candidate *would do* in a situation, but that don't actually reveal what they *did do* in similar circumstances.

A few years ago, I developed the training *Recruitment and Hiring: Finding the Needle in the Haystack* (see the description and link in the Session Spotlight box). While creating that session, I spent a lot of time reading research in organizational psychology and human resources, and in the process discovered a great deal about the science behind effective interview questions. Below, I describe two of my biggest takeaways about interview questions.

Session Spotlight: [Recruitment and Hiring: Finding the Needle in the Haystack](#)

Recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified staff is hard! In fact, trying to find a good teacher can feel a lot like searching for a needle in a haystack. During the session, participants will focus on creating a skills audit, crafting a job description, interviewing, and candidate selection. Together, these strategies will help equip leaders in recruiting and hiring passionate and committed staff. To inquire about this training, click [here](#)

DETERMINING WHAT QUESTIONS MATTER

One of the first steps in writing effective interview questions is to determine what you *really* want to learn about the candidate. This should be information that you cannot gather from the application materials. The goal is for interview questions to move beyond more formal qualification questions, such as education and years of experience, and instead focus on whether the candidate will be a good fit for the role and the program.

Start by reviewing the job description and pinpointing the most critical knowledge, skills, and traits you want in an ideal hire. Here are a few examples to get you started:

- Are they collaborative and a team player?
- What do they value about early childhood education?
- How reliable are they?
- Can they regulate their emotions?

- How flexible and creative are they?

Narrowing down these priorities first helps you align questions with the information you truly need.

CRAFTING QUESTIONS THAT GET REAL ANSWERS

Research in human resources has demonstrated that **behavioral interviewing or competency-based interview** questions are powerful techniques for evaluating candidates. This method is grounded in the idea that the best way to predict what someone will do in the future is to look at what they did in the past. Therefore, behavioral questions ask the interviewee to give examples of how they have handled situations or tasks in the past (e.g., “*Can you tell me about a time when you ...?*” “*How did you respond when...?*”). These require the candidate to respond in a way that demonstrates particular competency.

Conversely, **situational questions** pose hypothetical scenarios and ask the interviewee how they would respond (e.g., “*What would you do if...?*” “*How would you handle...?*”). These types of questions are common, but limiting because they typically have a clear desirable response—they demonstrate that a candidate *knows* the right answer, but they don’t demonstrate that they will *do* the right thing.

“Talking isn't doing. It is a kind of good deed to say well; and yet words are not deeds.”
~ William Shakespeare

Transforming a situational question into a behavioral question takes a little bit of effort, but the results are often well worth it. Take a look at the examples in Table 1. The first column contains situational questions, while the second column presents questions that elicit similar information but require the candidate to describe an actual lived experience. When responding to a question about how a person has behaved, they are far more likely to offer a concrete window into their typical practices than to provide a hypothetical or idealized answer.

Another benefit of behavioral questions is that they can be written to reveal soft skills, or the tendencies and traits that influence how well a candidate will fit within your program. The last example in Table 1 illustrates this well. The ability to receive and grow from feedback is an important trait for an early childhood professional. It is easy to say you are open to feedback, but much more revealing to describe a time when you received feedback you did not fully agree with and explain how you responded.

You will notice that some of the questions in the behavioral column have a second question that follows. Adding a second probing question after a behavioral question, such as “What did you learn from the situation?” or “What might you do differently if that happened again?” helps the interviewer better understand how the person approaches feedback and continuous improvement. It also communicates to potential hires that the program values learning, reflection, and growth.

Table 1. | Transforming Situational Questions into Behavioral Questions

Situational Question		Behavioral Question
What would you do if outside time was over, but children were not lining up to come in when called?	→	Can you provide an example of a time when you had difficulty getting children to follow instructions?
If children showed an interest in insects, how would you incorporate that into a lesson plan?	→	Can you share a time when you noticed children showing interest in something and adjusted your planned learning activities to meet their interests?
What would you consider when preparing a new lesson plan?		Can you share a time when you implemented a new lesson plan? What steps did you take to prepare? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What would you do the same or differently in the future?
How would you deal with a situation where your co-teacher and you disagree on how best to handle challenging behavior in the classroom?	→	Can you give an example of a time when you and a coworker disagreed about how to tackle a problem? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How did the situation resolve?
How do you respond to feedback?	→	Can you provide a time when you received feedback you didn't necessarily agree with? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What did you do?

The best interview questions help to reveal what you can't learn from an application or resume alone, when they're aligned with the knowledge, skills, and qualities that matter most for the role and they provide concrete examples of how the candidate has behaved in the past. Taking time to ask better questions leads to smarter hiring decisions, stronger teams, and better program matches.

Activity

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: REVIEW AND REFLECT

Take a few minutes to review the questions you currently ask during job interviews. Do they effectively gather the information you need? Are they mostly situational or behavioral? How well have they worked in the past? Were there candidates that you hired who turned out to be poor fits, even though they had good interviews?

First, identify the most important information you want to learn. Then, determine if your current questions are effectively gathering the information that matters most.

Most important information to learn:	How well do current interview questions gather this information (Very well / Okay / Not at all)?	What might you change?

Next, reflect on the type of questions you are asking. If the majority are situational, use the space below to identify a few that you would be interested in transforming into behavioral questions. Use the space below to brainstorm new ways to ask an old question.

Situational Question		Behavioral Question
	→	
	→	
	→	
	→	

Robyn Kelton, M.A., is the Director of Data and Evaluation for the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University (NLU). In this role, Robyn oversees the McCormick Institute's research interests regarding evaluation and quality support tools, including *Program Administration Scale (PAS)* and *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care (BAS)*, the Early Childhood Work Environment Survey (ECWES), and the Administrator Role Perception Survey (ARPS). Robyn also oversees research related to the evaluation needs of the professional learning initiatives at the Institute as well as the relationship between evaluation tools and program quality, workforce retention, and leadership development. Other research interests include cognitive and developmental psychology, memory development, and learning. Robyn holds a Baccalaureate degree in psychology from the University of Kansas (KU) and a Masters of Arts degree in psychology with an advanced certificate of study in organizational psychology from NLU. Robyn is currently a doctoral candidate in the brain, behavior, and quantitative science Ph.D. psychology program at KU. Prior to joining the McCormick Institute in 2006, Robyn worked as lead teacher in a kindergarten classroom for an after-school program and lead teacher of a 4-5 year old classroom at a child care center.