

Common Interview Mistakes and Their Consequences

From the Interview Guide for Supervisors, 5th Edition

Mistake	Consequence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failing to establish rapport with the applicant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interview never gets off the ground.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not knowing what information is needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer does not know what questions to ask the applicant.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concentrating exclusively on the applicant as a person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer does not compare an applicant's demonstrated abilities and experience with the actual job requirements.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not remaining silent or listening long enough. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer talks too much and fails to obtain meaningful information from the applicant.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not allowing sufficient time to observe the applicant's responses and behavior. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interview is too short and superficial.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorrectly interpreting information obtained from the applicant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer draws the wrong conclusion about that applicant's ability to perform.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unawareness of or inability to deal directly with biases for or against certain types of applicants (stereotyping). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hiring decisions are made for reasons that may be indefensible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allowing one characteristic or trait of an applicant to be overly influential. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hiring decisions are made for reasons that may be indefensible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making a decision on the basis of intuition of first impression instead of on an analytical judgment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Candidates who perform well during the interview might be overlooked.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using stress techniques designed to trap or fluster the applicant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer might not collect relevant information.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting a poorly structured or an unstructured interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer fails to collect relevant or necessary information.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparing an applicant's life with one's own life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time that should be spent on obtaining information relevant to the job is wasted.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Failing to control or direct the interview. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer fails to collect all the job-related information.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asking questions answerable by a simple "yes" or "no". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer fails to draw the applicant out.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making judgmental or leading statements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interviewer telegraphs desired responses to the applicant.

Common Rating Errors

Name of Error	Description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Halo Effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tendency to rate a person high on all factors even though the person was outstanding on only one factor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horns Effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tendency to rate a person low on all factors even though the person was unsatisfactory on only one factor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central Tendency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The inability to rate all or most applicants anywhere but in the middle.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to Me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The tendency to rate higher those people who look, act, or have a background most like the interviewer.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Impression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making the hiring decision within the first few minutes of the interview, instead of evaluating all the information from the full interview.

Topics to Avoid During the Interview Process

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ arrest records ▪ less-than-honorable military discharges ▪ gender and marital status ▪ maiden name ▪ number of children ▪ ages of children ▪ number of preschool children ▪ spouse's name ▪ spouse's education ▪ spouse's income ▪ form of birth control ▪ family plans ▪ child care arrangements ▪ conviction record ▪ car accidents ▪ lawsuits or legal complaints | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ownership of home or rental status ▪ length of residence ▪ ownership of car ▪ form of transportation to work ▪ loans ▪ wage assignments or garnishments ▪ bankruptcy ▪ credit cards ▪ insurance claims ▪ judgments ▪ citizenship or national origin ▪ mother's maiden name ▪ citizenship ▪ place of birth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ other languages spoken ▪ religion ▪ proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing English (unless job-related) ▪ disabilities ▪ handicap ▪ prior illnesses or accidents ▪ hospitalizations ▪ current or prior medication or treatment ▪ workers' compensations claims ▪ weight ▪ age ▪ date of high school graduation ▪ social organizations |
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Questions Not to Ask

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of child-care arrangements do you have? • Does your spouse expect you to be home to cook dinner? • What will you do if your children get sick? • How do you get to work? • How many children do you have? • Does your spouse live with you or contribute to your support? • Do you own a home? • Do you own a car? • Do you have any debts? • Do you have any loans? • Do you plan to get married? • Do you plan to have children? • What sort of birth control do you use? • Are you likely to quit if you get married or have children? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is your spouse likely to be transferred? • Is your spouse from this area? • Would a white (or black) supervisor create any difficulties for you? • How do you feel about having to work with members of a different race? • Are you a militant? • Do you get along well with other women (or men)? • Will it bother you if others swear? • What language does your mother/father speak? • Were you born in this country? • Do you have people in the "old country?" • That's an unusual name-what nationality are you? • Can you provide a photograph of yourself? • How old are you? |
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Questions to Ask

Past work experience in general:

- Please describe your present responsibilities and duties.
- How do you spend an average day?
- How has your current position changed from the day you started until now?
- Describe the most complex problem you had to solve in your last/current position.
- Discuss some of the problems you have encountered in past positions.
- What do you consider to be your most important accomplishments in the last three positions you have held?
- What were some of the setbacks or disappointments you experienced in the last three positions you have held?
- Why did you leave your last employer/why would you consider leaving your current employer?
- What would you want in your next job that you are not getting now?
- Describe your involvement with committees, your role on the committees, and what you learned from each experience.
- In previous positions, how much of your work was accomplished alone and how much as part of a team effort?
- What was the most radical idea you ever introduced to an employer, and what was the result?
- Give me an example of a time when you questioned a policy or procedure when it might have been better or easier to go along with it.
- What kinds of policies and procedures have you created and to whom did you take them for approval?
- Describe the most difficult interpersonal challenge you have been faced with and what you did about it.
- Have you had public speaking experience? If so, who was the audience, and what was the purpose: selling, informing?
- Give an example of a potentially volatile situation or individual that you successfully calmed down and how you went about it.
- Describe a time when you went “beyond the call of duty” to accomplish a task.
- Describe the most difficult person you have ever worked with and how you handled him or her.
- Describe a situation in which it was necessary for you to mediate or negotiate a solution or compromise.
- What kinds of work pressures do you find the most difficult to deal with?
- Describe what you mean by “on-the-job stress.”
- Describe a time when you felt you “lost your cool” on the job and the result.
- Describe the best boss you ever had.
- Describe the worst boss you ever had.
- Tell me about a failure in your working life and why it occurred.
- What could your last employer have done to keep you?

Relevant Education and Training

- Why did you choose the particular college you attended?
- What determined your choice of major?
- How did you think college contributed to your overall development?
- In what way do you believe your education and training has prepared you for this position?
- What special training do you have that is relevant to this position?
- What licenses or certifications do you have that are relevant to this position?
- What professional affiliations do you have that are relevant to this position?
- Under federal wage and hour laws, describe “exempt” and “nonexempt” employees.

The Vacant Position

- In what way does this position meet your career goals and objectives?
- If you were hired for this job, in what areas could you contribute immediately, and in what areas would you need additional training?
- What changes and developments do you anticipate in your particular field that might be relevant to this position?
- What are your salary expectations if offered this position?
- Can you perform all the essential functions of this job with or without reasonable accommodation?
- Are you able to travel as required by this position?
- Are you able to relocate, if necessary?

Supervision

- Describe the positions in which you have had supervisory responsibility. How many people have you supervised and in what kinds of positions? Did you have hiring/firing authority?
- Give an example of a time when you were disappointed by an employee's lack of accomplishment and what you did about it.
- What are the generally accepted steps in progressive discipline?
- In your experience, what kinds of things motivate an employee?
- Describe what is meant by "problem employee."
- Describe a sticky situation with an employee and what you did about it.
- Describe an innovative way you handled a conflict involving two or more of your subordinates.
- What kinds of things can a supervisor do to create a positive working environment?
- What training and experience do you have in listening skills?
- Approximately how many people have you personally hired in your career?
- Describe an effective performance planning and review process.
- What methods of communicating with subordinates have you found most successful.
- What recognition and reward systems for subordinates have you found most successful?
- What is the role of a supervisor, in your opinion?
- What are the major responsibilities of a supervisor, in your opinion?
- What is an effective training and orientation program for a new employee?
- Describe the most serious complaint about an employee brought to your attention and what you did about it.
- Give an example of the most novel idea an employee presented to you and what you did about it.
- What is meant by the term "protected class" under civil rights laws?

Management

- What was the level of your decision-making authority in past positions?
- Describe a decision you made that had an unhappy result
- Give me an example of a decision you made that backfired and what you did about it.
- Give an example of a decision you made that turned out better than you believed possible.
- Describe a time when you made a decision in the absence of a clear policy regarding the issue.
- Have you experienced political pressure that interfered with your getting the job done?
- Describe your experience with setting goals and objectives.
- Describe your experience in developing and monitoring budgets.
- What fiscal authority have you had in past positions?
- Give an example of a situation in which a budget overrun was necessary to accomplish a goal.
- What is the most effective method for setting priorities, in your opinion?
- What would your current/past employer tell us about your ability to organize your work?
- Describe a time when your goals conflicted with the goals of the organization and what you did about it.
- What is your most innovative accomplishment?
- What is your most creative idea that was turned down?
- What experience do you have with writing?
- What have you done in the past five years to improve your writing skills?
- What have others said about your writing ability?
- What experience have you had with public presentations? What was their purpose, and what visual aids and kinds of notes did you use?

Clerical and Secretarial Work

- What word processing systems have you worked with, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- Describe the kinds of telephone and receptionist duties you have had, being specific about the number of calls and walk-ins you received in the typical day.
- Describe your past experiences with scheduling appointments.
- Give me an example of a task you performed that required attention to detail, and what you did to ensure accuracy.
- What are some of the more unusual assignments you have been given?
- What kinds of filing systems have you used and/or created?
- Which decisions could you make on your own, and which did you refer to your boss?
- What kinds of reports did you develop, create, or produce?
- What volume of mail did you typically process in a day?

Attendance and Punctuality

- How many days of work did you miss, other than for medical reasons, in the last year you worked?
- How many times were you tardy for work in the last year you worked?
- What do you consider to be good attendance?
- What do you consider a legitimate reason for missing work?
- Do you know of any reason why you would not be able to get to work on time on a regular basis?
- Are you able to work overtime?

Problem Solving

Briefly describe a difficult situation pertinent to the vacant position, doing so in a way that protects the privacy of individuals involved. Ask an open-ended question- one that does not require knowledge of institutional or departmental policies and procedures- about how the applicant would deal with this situation. Encourage the applicant to think out loud and explain the kinds of solutions he or she might try:

1. You are working at the front desk of a very busy office. You are answering a 10-line phone bank and have on average 15 walk-ins per hour to direct to appropriate offices and people. At 4pm, on a particularly busy day, and outside salesperson approaches your desk at the same time one of the clerks, who is a friend of yours, comes around the corner crying and headed toward your desk. Two outside lines light up at the same time, and the display on your phone tells you the third call coming in is the president's office. What are you going to do?
2. The supervisor or a small work unit that provides service to students is on vacation and, as a result, you are temporarily in charge of the department. One afternoon you overhear two unit members talking about an incident that occurred one week earlier. They are discussing a new employee in the department, someone you hired, and describe this employee's losing his temper with a student. You suspected that the employee in question had a nasty temper but had nothing concrete on which to base the suspicion. This is the first occasion on which you have heard of this incident. What would you do about it.

Sample Questions to Determine if the Applicant Can Perform Essential Job Functions:

The following questions can be asked about the performance of job functions without referring to a disability.

Clerical Position:

- Here is a job description for this position. Are you capable of performing each of the job duties on it?
- Our regular work hours are 8:30 to 5:00, but there may be requirements to work overtime during evenings and weekends, sometimes without much advance notice. Are you able to meet these requirements?
- New employees get one week of vacation and seven days sick leave and may take no more than five days unpaid leave a year. Can you meet this requirement?
- One of the managers you may be working for does a lot of dictation using a Dictaphone. Are you able to understand and transcribe dictation?
- Our minimum standard for all clerical personnel who will be doing word processing is 65 words a minute. Can you operate a word processor at that rate of speed?
- This position requires the answering of phone calls. There may be times when you are the only person available to answer incoming calls and take messages. Are you able to perform this function? Will you be able to respond to inquiries called into the office?
- This position frequently involves the review of incoming correspondence to determine its importance and/or destination. Are you able to perform this function?

Shipping and Receiving Clerk/Warehouse Worker

- The following is a job description listing the job duties for this position. Are you capable of performing each of these job duties?
- Our warehouse workers are required to load and unload and deliver supplies for eight hours a day with one half-hour off or lunch and two 15-minute breaks. Are you capable of doing that?
- Warehouse workers are required to lift and maneuver items weighing more than 50 pounds using fork lifts, hand trucks, and stack bed trucks. Are you capable of performing this function?
- Attendance is very important because of the way we staff warehouse workers. Warehouse workers are given up to 10 days sick leave and no unpaid leave during the first year, and 12 paid vacation days. Can you meet the requirement of taking no unpaid leave during the first year?
- During the past two year sat your last job, how many work days did you miss that were not covered by your employer's leave policies?
- Did your previous employer ever criticize your attendance?
- Our warehouse workers may be required to perform some of the duties of a laborer during slow periods. Here is a job description listing the normal duties of a laborer. Are you able to perform those duties for a full eight-hour shift on an occasional basis?