Interview Questions

Interview questions should be prepared in advance. Questions should all be position related and should be standard for all interviewees.

For example:

Tell me what you already know about this position. Why does this position interest you.

Describe a situation the candidate would encounter in the position and ask the candidate how he or she would handle the situation.

What qualities/skills make you the best person for this position. What qualities/skills would you need to improve in order to excel in this position.

Describe your previous (current) position. What have you learned in that position that would contribute to your success in this position.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Describe the ideal work-day for you. How would you spend your time?

    The activities a candidate describes first often indicate which they value the most and which make the job attractive. Generally, the activities described first, and with enthusiasm, will be those that the candidate performs best.

2. What are you looking for in a job that you haven't had before? What would make you want to stay in a job?

    Focus on the candidates past experiences and determine if they reflect realistic expectations.

3. Please describe how you set and measure your work goals.

    Is the candidate results-oriented? Determine if the goals seem realistic, measurable and specific. A goal-oriented candidate sets goals without waiting for outside instruction.

4. Give me an example of when you have "outgrown" previous jobs and knew it was time to move on. How did you know it was time?

    These questions can reveal the employment values of a candidate. Some candidates will talk about money, others about feeling "stuck." Still others will describe what their manager or co-workers didn't have or didn't supply.

5. Do you like to juggle a lot of activities at once or do them one at a time?

    People who juggle a lot of tasks at once usually like variety and diversity. They will not be comfortable in linear, routine jobs and vice versa.

6. Give me an example of a project you were responsible for starting. What did you do? How did it work out?

    Try to find out how the candidate understood the goals and obstacles involved in the project. What level of planning and organizing efforts were made at the project's inception. Did the candidate plunge right in or test the waters carefully first? Does he or she seem to enjoy initiating projects such as the one described?

7.   When have you had to produce results without sufficient guidelines or information? What did you do?

Faced with an ambiguous situation, the person with initiative collects available information and moves forward. He or she sets goals and objectives, enlists support from others, and begins the first step with a minimum of complaints.

8.   In your last job, when did you feel pressured? Why?
Notice whether the pressures were from external factors more than internal (psychological or emotional) pressures. Were the pressures possible to alleviate? To avoid? Probe to uncover how often these pressures surfaced. How do these pressures compare to those likely to be faced in the new position?

9.   In a past job, what was most likely to create stress for you? For example, a tough deadline? Juggling priorities? Meeting others' expectations? Why?

The items stated indicate an important aspect of the candidate's personality. Try to determine why the situation was stressful. For example, if "meeting deadlines" causes stress, this may indicate a tendency toward perfectionism or disorganization, or it may simply mean they were not receiving the needed help from others.

10.   Have you ever been held accountable for reaching a goal that you knew wasn't possible to attain? What did you do?

For the goal-oriented person, this situation will be almost intolerable. He or she will relate how hard they fought to overcome the situation and will speak about what he or she was able to accomplish anyway. Someone else may speak about being unfairly treated, but the primary regret will not be the inability to achieve a goal.

11.   What kinds of decisions did you have authority over? Which ones did you have to check with your manager before making?

Beware of the candidate who continually refers to what "we" did. This question clarifies how much leeway the candidate had or has to make decisions. Ask whether the candidate would like more authority. Then match the answers to the amount of authority allowed in the new position.

12.   Ideally, what would an organization provide for you in terms of income progression over the next 2-3 years?

The candidate's response reflects the confidence and drive to reach a salary level as well as the relative interest in money and raises. Avoid the "cat and mouse game" about money. Be firm that the candidate honestly tells you his or her expectations before you predict how much is possible.

13.   If you could acquire one skill or bit of job knowledge, what would it be? What do you need to do to acquire it? How can we help?

These answers will reveal how the candidate evaluates his/her own skills or knowledge. Also, you should hear how motivated he or she is to attend classes or learn through self-study. If the candidate asks for "training," make sure he or she understands the term the way you do. Does it mean outside classroom learning, self-study, on-the-job training, or in-house seminars?

14.   Has a policy or directive come down with which you really disagreed? What was it? What did you do?

If the candidate experienced this situation, he or she had many options. Among them: ask management for the reasons and defend the case; accept the directive and smolder silently; engage in sabotage, overtly or covertly; find co-workers who also disagree and organize a protest; leave the organization. How did the candidate react, and what does this tell you about his or her flexibility?

15.   How do you keep track of your own paperwork, schedules, etc.? Please be specific.

How the candidate keeps track is not as important as if the candidate has established their own workable approach. Of course, you'll have to judge if the candidate's system will add to or detract from the ones you presently have in place.

16.   Give me an example of the kind of co-worker with whom you find difficult to communicate. Why?

You will need to discuss typical personalities the candidate will have to deal with in the position and find out his or her reaction to them.

17.   When, in a past job, did you find it important to disagree with your boss? How did you approach your boss and what was the result?

Assertive people see disagreement as healthy, even vital to success. If the candidate seems open to disagreement, genuinely refuses to blame, and tries to solve the problem constructively, you can assume the candidate will take an appropriately assertive approach. If the candidate expresses dislike of open disagreement, he or she may be more passive. An approach which attempts to win (and make the boss lose) is not acceptable.

18.   What should a manager do to minimize conflict at work? How much should he or she get involved in solving it? What if you were involved in the conflict?

This question helps to determine a candidate's degree of maturity. A mature person generally doesn't need or want help solving conflicts. Someone else may look for a "dad" or "mom" to bail him or her out.

19.   Have you ever had a situation when you found it necessary to confront someone at work? How did you handle it?

Look for an assertive approach which emphasizes honesty, openness, listening, and a commitment to solving the problem rather than to attacking the person. If possible, get the candidate to demonstrate what he or she said.

20.   How do you get cooperation from other departments? Give me an example.

Some people are skilled at building and maintaining good working relationships. Does your candidate seem to have a conscious approach? Does the candidate speak positively of experiences in this regard? If so, it is a fair bet the candidate can obtain cooperation when necessary.

21.   Would you rather work on a team or on your own?

This classic question is often used to evaluate a candidate's willingness to work in team settings. Try to determine, however, if the "team-oriented" individual prefers teams for a positive reason (better creativity, more spirit, more fun, higher expertise, etc.) or for a more negative reason (dependency, more anonymity, inability to set and maintain individual standards or plans, etc.).

Questions for Administrative and Supervisory Positions

1. At which point do you find it necessary to bring others into your decision-making process? Why?

    Every successful supervisor knows when to consult or join others to arrive at a solution. Does the candidate understand the value of securing others' commitments? Of asking for expert advice? Does the candidate typically decide first and tell others about it, or consult with others before making decisions? Watch out for managers who try to reach every decision by consensus-building; they may not take charge nor be able to make quick or unpopular decisions when necessary.

2. Describe your approach to making decisions and solving problems. Why do you do it this way?

    Is the candidate a careful, step-by-step analytical decision maker? Or does he or she go by "gut feeling"? Some decisions require careful research, others creative brainstorming. Is the candidate aware of his or her own approach? Get examples of a few recent decisions and ask why the candidate used that approach.

3. When you recommend something to management, what approach do you usually use? Give a recent example.

    A manager will be unsuccessful if unable to sell ideas and decisions to upper management. Notice whether the candidate understands the "politics" of the situation such as awareness of proper timing. Were recommendations in writing or presented orally? Was the candidate sensitive to selling benefits and meeting potential objections? Did the candidate know when to back off and when to push? In short, does the candidate know when and how to "manage upward"?

4. Describe a recent time when you had to implement one of your decisions. What did you do?

    Look for a systematic implementation plan with timetables and checkpoints. Notice if others are assigned the details and held accountable for them. Assess if the candidate is skilled in following through with good ideas.

5. How much leeway do you give your employees to make decisions? How do you still maintain control?

   Good managers know how to pass decision-making to the lowest levels possible. Their egos allow them to empower employees to the extent that they can handle. Ask for specific examples of the kind of decisions allowed. Are they of major importance? Did the candidate truly support the employees while still overseeing factors such as time, budget, range of options, and others' participation?

6. What do you typically do when you hear of a problem in your area? Give a current example.

   This question is meant to unearth whether your candidate is a "student of" or a "leaper into" problems. As an administrator, the candidate must track current problems and spot trends, determining whether problems are temporary or indicative of a deeper issue. Can the candidate monitor an area of accountability and judge when and how to get involved?

7. Do you struggle to write a letter or report, or does it come easily? How many times do you usually edit your work? By what method?

   Very few writers can write without a bit of a struggle. If the candidate says writing comes easily, perhaps he or she sets low standards for it. The best writers are generally careful editors. They may edit a piece several times to hit the right tone.

8. What responsibility do you have for budgeting? What budgeting method do you use?

   This question establishes whether the candidate speaks knowledgeably and confidently about budgetary responsibility. Some supervisors view it as an annual headache and others are aware of it as an important management tool. Try to gauge the sophistication of the candidate's methods by asking follow-up questions.

9. How do you go about estimating expenses and budgets?

   Successful supervisors have worked out a sound method, which reflects the realities of their unique situation.

10. What recent decision have you made that had an impact on finances? How did you assess its impact?

This question will help you discover if the candidate is oriented to making decisions which save money -- or make it. A hesitation or inability to answer may be a tipoff that he or she doesn't have an orientation to the financial aspect of management.

11. How would you describe your management style? How would your employees describe your management style?

Follow-up questions are necessary to truly understand the candidate's management style. For example, you might ask about the candidate's style in dealing with conflict situations, running meetings, setting goals (how many, in what areas, how monitored), and structuring activities and staff assignments. Don't accept general terms used to describe the style, such as "participative" or "hard-driving." Ask for examples that illustrate the style.

12. What was the style of the best supervisor you have worked for? What did you learn and begin using from that person's approach?

This question will help determine what the candidate sets as a model for an effective approach to management. If you can get a clear picture of the model, it will help you learn areas in which the candidate is likely to be effective and areas in which he or she will want to become more effective.

13. What type of employees do you find hardest to manage? Why?

The types of employees the candidate finds hardest to supervise may indicate areas necessary for growth and development as a supervisor. For example, some candidates find it hardest to manage quiet, non-assertive employees. If so, perhaps the candidate needs to learn how to slow down, listen, coach and counsel subordinates. Other candidates indicate they have more trouble with loud, rebellious, power-seeking employees. This suggests a need to learn skills in discipline and conflict-resolution.

14. How have you evaluated your department's overall performance?

    This question will help determine the candidate's ability to plan, monitor, and assess his or her areas of responsibility. Look for an orientation to clear production standards and specific, measurable goals. Notice whether the candidate has developed a reporting system and whether he or she "has a handle" on the department's performance at various intervals (weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc.).

15. How often do you think it's necessary to meet with your employees? What do you talk about?

    Good supervisors usually meet frequently with their employees, whether formally or informally. Look for managers who talk freely and openly with their employees about a variety of topics without over-emphasizing regular, scheduled, "status-check" meetings.

16. Give an example of an employee you had to discipline. What was your strategy? How successful were you?

    The best discipline does not emphasize punishment. Is the candidate comfortable in setting early and clear limits for performance? What period of time is allotted for a change? Does the candidate seem comfortable setting tough boundaries without becoming vindictive?

17. What sort of training do you think is necessary to offer employees? What have you done in this regard?

    Consider whether the candidate enjoys training and seeing employees learn. Also, consider whether the candidate assesses training needs logically. Did the candidate simply ask employees, or did he or she undertake a formal training needs assessment? Creative supervisors know training doesn't always occur in the classroom. They continually look for opportunities to upgrade employees' skills without the easy method: "send them to a training class."

18. Have you had to manage a personnel situation that had a potential legal impact? Please describe what your role was and what you learned from it.

Assess whether your candidate has a working knowledge of the legal issues in management and has learned how to cooperate with others (i.e., the Human Resources Department, legal counsel, etc.) to take action confidently.

19. Describe a time when you had problems getting people to work together to solve a problem or complete an assignment. What did you do?

This question will help you determine how the candidate performs under pressure. Will the candidate become task-oriented, (more directive and goal-oriented) or more relationship oriented, (more communicative and supportive)? Did the candidate analyze the problem with the employees' help, or solve it alone? Is there an understanding of the root cause of the problem, or did the candidate simply apply a "band-aid" to the situation? Knowing the employees the candidate would supervise, do you think this approach would work?

20. Describe a time when you had to "sell" a decision or policy to your employees when you didn't agree with it.

Every supervisor must sell policies or decisions at times. Can the candidate put personal reservations aside and speak positively to his or her group? The effective supervisor voices disagreement behind closed doors, refuses to sabotage management decisions, and accurately reports the effectiveness of the policy or decision after it is implemented.

21. What would you describe as an effective staff meeting? Ineffective?

Notice whether the candidate talks about keeping control (i.e., setting time limits and agenda, having a purpose and objectives, alerting members to their expected contributions) while getting maximum involvement. Does the candidate understand the need for different types of meetings for different purposes? Follow-ups: "How do you handle someone who dominates the meeting?" "What do you do if your people won't participate in a meeting?"

Support Staff Questions

1. How have you minimized interruptions on the job?

   This question covers interruptions such as phone conversations that continue too long, social chitchat, and dealing with visitors. The candidate should volunteer specific interruptions he or she has had to curtail. (If the candidate claims this has never been a problem, this raises doubts.)

2. Give me an example of a complex assignment you have accomplished on your own. How did you get started on it? Why did you set it up that way?

   Find out what parameters were set by others and the complexity of the assignment. Notice whether the candidate seems to have enjoyed doing the assignment independently and if there is pride in the accomplishment. Does the candidate's expectations for independence fit what your position allows?

3. What system for prioritizing your work do you think works best?

   Priorities for most support staff can change very quickly; therefore, an elaborate system for prioritizing work may not be the best method. Look for a simple system that is easy to communicate to others. Look also for assertiveness; can the candidate effectively ask others (i.e., managers and users) to help set priorities?

4. Have you ever had a situation when several people gave you assignments -- all due very soon? How did you decide in what order to do them? Was that a successful approach to take?

   The most obvious answer is to go to one's supervisor and ask for clarification of priorities. However, support staff who are in a position to determine priorities should speak confidently about assessing due dates and confirming organizational needs.

5.   What are some of the positive things about working in the clerical field? What do you see as the drawbacks?

Look for a candidate who looks at the clerical field realistically and who feels the positives outweigh the negatives. Be wary of overqualified candidates who can do the job but cannot conceive of being challenged by it. Negatives may include low pay, low prestige, and frequent pressure. Positives should include the chance to serve others, the opportunity to organize others and their work assignments, and a liking for a busy job which usually has few major decisions or responsibilities in it.

6.   How are you keeping up with the changes in software, technology, etc.?

A person who wants to advance has an interest in learning new technologies, software programs, or new techniques and will ask for training and education. Look for a candidate who is willing, if not eager, to learn.

7.   What does "service" mean to you in this field?

Most support staff positions have direct opportunities for individual, group, and organizational service. It is important that the candidate understand his or her role as a service-provider and realizes that students and faculty are our work and not an interruption to our work.

Conflict Resolution Questions

1. Describe the worst disagreement/conflict that you had with a supervisor/co-worker. How was it resolved?

2. If the conflict was not resolved to your satisfaction, what do you think the company should have done?

3. How would you describe your relationship with your last supervisor? With previous bosses?

4. Describe how you got along with co-workers in you last job. Have co-workers ever hampered your productivity? How did you handle it?

5. Why did you leave your last job? If you left voluntarily, what could the company have done to keep you?