

Questions You Should Ask When Hiring

Choosing the best candidate for your staff depends a lot on selecting the right interview questions.

Peter Cardinal, MD, MHA

Developing questions for job interviews is a critical part of your practice's hiring process. Crafting questions with the skills and personality of your ideal candidate in mind will help you make a wise hiring decision. To find the person best suited for your staff, you should formulate questions that will elicit both informative and useful responses from your interviewee. Here's how:

First things first

It's been said that "if you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there, but you won't know when you've arrived." Before you begin interviewing candidates, look carefully at your practice characteristics and the personalities and skills of your staff members to help determine what attributes you want your new hire to possess. Some of

A key concept to remember is to hire for values, attitude and aptitude first, and skills second.

these might include good work habits, friendly and efficient service to patients, stability, enthusiasm, good judgment, general intelligence and job skills.

A key concept to remember is to hire for values, attitude and aptitude first, and skills second. If you interview a person with a great attitude and reasonable aptitude, you

can always teach specific skills later. However, it is exceedingly difficult to change someone's approach to work or rapport with others once he or she is on the job. You should design interview questions that will enable you to assess these attributes in your applicants and to do it in a fairly brief verbal exchange, which is rather difficult.

Dr. Cardinal is the vice president of medical affairs at Gettysburg Hospital, a 100-bed community hospital in Gettysburg, Pa. Conflicts of interest: none reported.



Covered in FPM Quiz



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SPRONG

Getting down to business

Two general approaches to interviewing are to ask open-ended questions and to ask the person to describe how he or she actually dealt with a situation or performed a skill in the past. I also like to use a number of scenario-driven questions to try to determine how the applicant might respond in a realistic medical office environment. These approaches will provide much more useful information than questions requiring only a yes or no response. For example, rather than asking a potential nursing assistant, “Do you know how to take blood pressure readings?” have the candidate describe how he or she would take a patient’s blood pressure. Or even better, say, “Here is my arm and a blood pressure cuff. Please take my pressure and describe the procedure as you go.”

Since the interview process will be somewhat different for every practice, the questions I suggest below are only meant to help you generate your own ideas. Questions obviously will vary depending on the position you’re trying to fill. There are no right or wrong answers; your practice should set its own criteria for assessing candidates’ responses. This is also a great time to review and update the position job description, or create one if one doesn’t exist [see “Five Steps to a Performance Evaluation System,” *FPM*, March 2003, page 43].

Here are some sample questions to guide your evaluations of potential employees:

1. General knowledge: “Describe what

Your practice should set its own criteria for assessing candidates’ responses.

KEY POINTS

- Compose a wide variety of questions that will help you evaluate a candidate’s skills and personality.
- Ask open-ended or scenario-driven questions to encourage relevant, substantial and useful responses.
- To get a more complete view of your candidates’ strengths and weaknesses, contact their previous employers for references.

you think this type of job entails and what you might like and dislike about the work.”

2. Customer service attitude: “Consider the following scenario: An obviously annoyed patient calls to complain that he just waited more than half an hour in the pharmacy only to find out that his refill had not been called in. How would you respond?”

3. Conflict management: “Describe a conflict you’ve had with other staff members and how you resolved it.”

4. Respect for patient privacy: “A patient calls in and notes that his wife is there at the office seeing the doctor, and he asks how she is doing. How would you respond?”

5. Motivation: “Tell me about a time when you saw room for improvement in some area of your work environment or a process that could be more efficient. What did you do to change the status quo?”

SPEEDBAR®

◀ ▶
Choosing questions for interviews requires a thorough understanding of your practice’s characteristics and the skills and personalities of your staff.

◀ ▶
Questions addressing professional ability should be mixed with questions addressing attitude and values, the answers to which can be equally, if not more important to consider.

◀ ▶
It can be difficult to assess a candidate in a brief verbal exchange, so ask open-ended or scenario-driven questions to obtain the most detailed and useful responses.

◀ ▶
While some questions suggested in the article apply to candidates in any position, others are geared toward specific positions, like administrative staff or nursing staff.

BEFORE AND AFTER THE INTERVIEW

If you are in charge of setting up interviews, make sure to coordinate who will conduct the interviews and how they will be organized. The senior administrator or nurse should be involved in interviews for positions in their areas, and physicians should be included if they’re likely to have significant contact with a particular position. If more than one person will be interviewing each candidate, you’ll have to decide whether to do sequential or group interviews. Although sequential interviews may seem easier, interviewers often obtain more information by interviewing candidates together and observing their responses to all other questions and interpersonal interactions with other interviewers. Either way, the questions to be asked by each interviewer should be coordinated ahead of time.

You should write down specific answers and general impressions of each candidate immediately after the interview. It is amazing how quickly your memories of three or four candidates can run together. If you want to use a scoring system to evaluate your candidates, select and list a moderate number of desired attributes (six to 10), ask the interviewers to rate each candidate on a five-point scale, and then total the scores. A scoring system may help to simplify the interview process but should only be used to stratify the candidates. The final selection, which will be from the group of highest scoring candidates, should be based on subjective data as much or more than on objective data.



Because there are no right or wrong answers in an interview, each practice must choose its own criteria for evaluating candidates' responses.



Avoid questions that focus on personal attributes such as age, religion or marital status, which are illegal topics in an interview.



Always ask your candidates if you may contact their previous employers for references in order to get a broader picture of their qualifications.



Investing your time in creating quality questions will help you select the best candidate for the job, which will benefit your entire practice.

6. Priority management: "Describe an occasion when you had two doctors or bosses ask you to do conflicting tasks. How did you handle this dilemma?"

7. Work ethic: "Describe a time when your supervisor or a co-worker asked you to help out and doing so required extra work outside your established responsibilities or staying later than you anticipated. What did you do, and how did you feel?"

8. Problem-solving strategies: "Tell me about a time when your job required you to perform a task that you didn't know how to do. How did you respond?"

9. Response to office politics and gossip: "While at work, a co-worker complains to you about the office manager and some of the office policies and procedures, concluding with 'Don't you think so too?' How would you respond?"

10. Computer competence: "We have a program for [registration, billing, lab result retrieval, etc.] called _____. Tell me about your experience with that program or programs like it."

11. Questions for an administrative staff candidate:

- "Tell me about your experience handling charges and accounts receivable."
- "You are covering the front desk, and the doctor is backed up. A patient comes in without an appointment and begins describing his symptoms, which could be serious. He asks if he should make an appointment for another time or see the doctor today. What is your response?"

12. Questions for a nursing staff candidate:

- "With which procedures are you most comfortable assisting? If asked to assist with an unfamiliar procedure, how would you respond?"
- "Tell me about your patient education experiences and in what areas you are capable of educating patients."
- "In what areas are you most interested in receiving additional training?"
- To evaluate the candidate's ability to recognize potential errors: "A normal adult patient calls in with symptoms of a UTI, and the physician writes 'call in PCN 100 mg bid x 5d.' What would your next step be?"

What's off limits?

A number of personal attributes cannot be legally addressed in an employment inter-

view, including age, religion, national origin, marital status and whether the candidate has children, among others. However, candidates' answers to some of the questions listed in this article might help you to gauge the impact of certain personal attributes on job performance. For example, the "work ethic"

The last question should always be "May I contact your previous employers for a reference?"

question explores availability for extended hours. If you have questions about subjects that are off limits, your attorney or your hospital's human resources department can offer assistance.

Last but not least

The last question in any interview should always be "May I contact your previous employers for a reference?" If the candidate says his or her application is confidential and he or she doesn't want a current employer contacted, at least make any employment offer contingent on these contacts.

With the candidate's permission, contact two or three previous employers or co-workers, and ask the references about the attitudinal issues that are difficult to assess in an interview. These may include patient service, work habits, enthusiasm or any potential weaknesses that might hinder that person's performance. If the references say they cannot share any information, which might be a red flag itself, a good general question is, "If you had a position open, would you hire this person?" Although this task may be time-consuming, it will give you a much more complete picture of the candidate. In fact, discussions with references are often more beneficial than interviews.

Reaching your destination

The interview process is a very important navigating tool on your quest to find the perfect staff member. Taking time to define the attributes and skills desired, prepare questions and check references is an excellent long-term investment in the contentment and quality of your entire office. 

Send comments to fpm@afp.org.