

## Preliminary Considerations

Before developing an interviewing strategy, the interviewer needs to be aware of some fundamental guidelines. These involve basic considerations such as the interviewing environment, the interviewer's position in the chair, and note taking.

The interviewing room should afford a **sense of privacy**. Privacy is the single most important psychological factor contributing to an applicant's truthfulness during a pre-employment interview. If multiple interviewers are present, or the applicant is concerned that a third person may be able to overhear his answers, the quality and quantity of information from the interview will be greatly reduced. Therefore, the interview should be conducted behind a closed door with only the interviewer and job applicant present.



The interviewer should position herself to **eliminate or minimize barriers**. An interviewing barrier is any object that separates the interviewer from the applicant, such as a desk or table. Barriers serve as a psychological shield which the deceptive applicant can hide behind. In addition, they decrease the interviewer's ability to communicate effectively.

The interviewer should position herself squarely in front of the applicant. This **frontally aligned posture** sends a message of interest and attention. If an interviewer orients her body at an angle away from the applicant, it creates a psychological impression of distance.

Let the applicant do most of the talking. The interviewer's questions should be short and to the point, taking up only about 20% of the interview time. The remaining 80% should consist of the applicant revealing information about himself. The interviewer should not rush through the interview questions, but rather allow the applicant sufficient time to respond to each question. Many times an applicant will break a period of silence following his initial response to add additional important information.

**Taking notes** during the pre-employment interview serves several important functions. First, notes permanently record the applicant's responses, which may become important to document a decision not to hire. In addition, note taking slows down the pace of an interview and creates silence following each response. A truthful applicant feels comfortable with the silence occurring during the time the interviewer writes. However, a deceptive applicant may experience a need to fill the silence, perhaps volunteering significant information.



It is important to establish a pattern of making a brief written note following most of the applicant's responses. Before writing, the interviewer should wait until the applicant has completely responded to the question, so the applicant will not attach undue significance to what the interviewer is writing. Taking notes while the applicant is talking sends the message that the interviewer is not interested in further information. In addition:

- Do not exaggerate attempts to hide or cover what you are writing.
- Maintain eye contact with the applicant during his response. Following the response, jot down only key aspects of the applicant's response. Most responses to interview questions can be summarized in a few words. Avoid trying to write down a lengthy answer word for word.

## Developing a List of Direct Questions

### Asking Direct Questions

A direct question is a specific inquiry, designed to elicit a definitive response. An indirect question may be ambiguous or call for the applicant's opinion. Compare these examples of an indirect question followed by a proper direct question:

*Indirect:* "Did you leave that job on good terms?"

**Direct:** "Why did you leave that job?"

*Indirect:* "In the last five years did you experience any sort of difficulties with any employer?"

**Direct:** "Were you suspended by any employer at any time in the last five years?"

*Indirect:* "Is the employment section of your application complete?"

**Direct:** "Are there any employers that you worked for in the last five years that you did not list on your application?"



Indirect questions may provide misleading behavior from an applicant who is trying to be completely truthful. Because the question is ambiguous and calls for speculation, the honest applicant may have difficulty expressing himself. A deceptive applicant, on the other hand, can offer a response to an indirect question that sounds very truthful and sincere because he is merely expressing an opinion. To illustrate this, consider the following two responses to the same indirect question:

**Q:** "In the last five years did you experience any sort of difficulties with an employer?"

**Honest Applicant:**

"Well, gee... I guess there were times when maybe I didn't work as hard as I should have or took a few extra minutes at break. Um.. .I didn't always get along perfectly with all of my co-workers."

(This applicant has not had any significant past problems with employers but is trying to be 100% honest).

**Dishonest Applicant:**

"I always completed my work tasks on time and did them properly. I've never been fired or anything. All of the employers that I have listed there will give me a favorable recommendation."

(This applicant was suspended on two occasions for physical confrontations with co-workers. The applicant did not list this employer on his application).

## Guidelines for Asking Direct Questions

### 1. Do not refer to the employment application when asking a direct question.

If an application is falsified, the interviewer may be reinforcing the applicant's lie by basing the question on the false information. This makes it much easier for the deceptive applicant to withhold information.

**Improper:** "I see you are presently working at King's Jewelers.  
Why are you looking for another job?"

**Proper:** "Are you presently employed?"

**Improper:** "You left the First National Bank to return to college.  
Is that right?"

**Proper:** "Why did you leave the First National Bank?"

## 2. Limit each direct question to one area of inquiry.

If two or more areas of inquiry are included in the same question, the applicant may be telling the truth in one but not the other. The applicant's response will focus on the truthful area so this makes it difficult to identify deception.

**Improper:** "Were you suspended or written up for any violation of policies at a job in the last five years?"

*Response:* "No, I was not."

This question should have been broken down into two different inquiries, for example:

**Proper:** "Have you been suspended by an employer in the last five years?"

*Response:* "Not at all."

"In the last five years, did you receive any written reprimands?"

*Response:* "Well, I did receive one written warning."

## 3. Direct questions should address specific events or situations and not elicit opinions or beliefs.

Notice that the examples of indirect questions listed at the beginning of this section elicited the applicant's opinion, e.g., "good terms," "experience difficulty." Opinions represent subjective beliefs, and so are not meaningful information to a prospective employer. Thus an individual offering an opinion may not appear to be deceptive, because an applicant cannot "lie" when expressing one.

**Improper:** "Do you think the National Bank was satisfied with your performance?"

**Proper:** "When you received your last performance review at the National Bank, what areas of improvement did they discuss with you?"

#### 4. Do not ask negative questions.

A negative question is one that expects agreement with a premise within the question - whether that premise is negative or positive.

"So you've never been fired or let go by an employer?"

"I assume you gave them some notice before leaving, right?"

"You haven't recently tried any illegal drugs, have you?"

"I imagine you're quite competent with word processing."

Most negative questions are asked because the interviewer feels a need to summarize the applicant's position in a positive manner:

**I:** "In the last five years, have you been suspended from work at any of the jobs you held?"

**A:** "Not formally suspended, no."

**I:** "Were you informally suspended from a job?"

**A:** "Well, I was kind of laid off once about 3 years ago."

**I:** "But besides being laid off, you weren't suspended?"

[negative question]

**A:** "That's right."

What this interviewer should have asked in place of the negative question is, "What happened? Why were you laid off?" or "Was this an official layoff, or did you do something that upset the employer so he asked you not to come in for a few days?"