

Sample Interview Questions

The overarching key to each category is to listen carefully, to probe to get beneath the surface, and to focus the questions or activities around the key traits that you are most interested in.

Probing prior experiences

- Of your prior jobs, which do you think was the most significant?
- What was the part of your role you spent the most time doing (or what was the most significant project)?
- What were you trying to achieve?
- How did you approach it?
- Walk me through your process: What did you do first? Why? What did you do next? What happened after that? What was the result?
- What was the biggest challenge there?
- What was your biggest achievement? What was something you accomplished that you think someone else in your role might not have gotten done (or where you approached it differently from how others might have, or where you went above and beyond)?
- It must have been hard to do Y. How did you approach that?
- On your resume you mentioned that you accomplished ABC. How did that come about? What was your specific role in it?
- Why did you leave X job?
- Tell me about Z job. What led you to work there? What was your role?

Direct questions about specific qualities

Tell me about a time at X when _____. What did you do? What did you do next? What happened after that? What was the result? Would you do anything differently? Did you ever face another similar situation? How did you handle that one?

- | | |
|--|---|
| - you were faced with a really difficult challenge | - you came up with a new approach for tackling a problem |
| - you went above and beyond to get a result | - you had to come up with a strategy for how to get to a particular outcome |
| - you persisted despite obstacles | - you had to move a group to action (within or outside the organization) |
| - you gave up or almost gave up | - you had to stay on top of a large volume of work/had to multi-task |
| - you had to put your ideas into writing | - you had to explain complex ideas in a simple way |
| - you had to deliver an important speech | |
| - you had to motivate someone to do something | |

Personal goals/general fit

- What makes you want to work here?
- What leads to your interest in X issue?
- Where does that desire to improve things come from?
- What do you think is the most important problem facing our society today?
- Where do you see X (our issue) fitting in?
- What are you looking for in your next job? If you could design the perfect job, what would it look like? Why?
- Some people are at a point in their career where work is their top priority and they're dying to immerse themselves fully in their work. Others are at a point where they want to do interesting work but it may not be the most important thing for them. Both are legitimate – where would you put yourself on that spectrum right now?
- What was your favorite job and why? What was your least favorite and why? How do those things compare to what you're looking for now?
- *A number of the following can be followed-up by probing prior specific experiences. You can ask, "So tell me about a time when that happened/when you demonstrated that/when that came up? What did you do next/how did you handle that?"*
 - What really frustrates you at work?
 - What do you think it is that makes you outstanding at what you do? What do you think you need to get better at?
 - If I were to talk to your colleagues – or your managers – what would they say are the things you're best at? What would they say you need to improve in?
 - What works for you in a manager? What doesn't work for you?

Note: Be careful not to ask about marital status, family, etc. here, though the interviewee might bring those things up. You are trying to figure out whether the person is looking for a job that might require going above and beyond, or whether they are looking for a 9-5 job, regardless of their external circumstances.

Sample Interview Outline

Interview for State Policy Director

Candidate: Susan Smith Date/location 9/18/2010, DC office

Interviewed by: Tracy Brown, ED Interview round # 1

Key Must-Haves:

Relationship-building, results-orientation, project management skills
(Joe from NGA)

Nice-to-haves: Knowledge/experience related to our issue or legislative environment, writing, strategic thinking, belief in social issues

Not-haves: Public speaking, research skills

I. Introduction

I thought we'd start by having you share a bit more about your interest in the position and then dig into your background by discussing some of your past experiences. I'll then share with you more about where we're headed as an organization and what we're looking for in this role. At the end, we'll talk next steps. Sound good?

II. Warm-up questions

1. What led you to apply for this position?
2. What kind of role are you looking for at this point in your career?

Start off with one or two quick questions as a warm-up; then dive into the meat of the interview – probing prior experiences.

III. Prior experiences

General (seeking useful information keeping in mind all the must-have qualities)

1. I see from your resume that you worked with Neighbors in Action. Tell me more about that.
 - What was the project on which you spent the most time?
(Candidate answers “Neighborhood Safety Campaign”)
 - What were you trying to achieve?
 - How did you approach the development of the campaign? Walk me through your process: What did you do first? Why? What did you do next? What other options did you consider? Why did you end up pursuing that route? What happened after that? What was the result?
 - Who else was directly involved with you in designing that campaign? What were some of the challenges in working together? How did you approach them?
 - What other challenges did you face during the course of this campaign? How did you deal with them?
 - What were the major victories? Would you say you met your original goals?
 - How did the campaign conclude? Lesson learned?

Delve deeply into three or more prior experiences. Don't be shy about pressing for details and concrete evidence.

2. What other job or project has been significant in your prior professional experience? Tell me about that.

Direct (probing for evidence of specific must-have qualities)

1. **Relationship building:** More than anything else, this position involves a lot of relationship-building. You mentioned partnering with a couple other organizations when you worked on the Neighborhood Safety Campaign. Can we talk about another time when you had to build relationships with other actors?
 - How did you go about pursuing that relationship?
 - How did you gain access to their top level of management? Who else in that organization did you speak to? How often would you meet?
 - What were the major outcomes of that partnership? Is there a particular success in this area we could discuss? A challenge?
2. **Project management:** As the State Policy Director, you would be managing several projects at the same time, from our advocacy campaigns to monitoring legislation to building the state-wide coalition.
 - Can you tell me about a project you managed that went well? What do you think made it successful? How did you plan it and how did you manage to the plan?
 - What about a time when things didn't go so well? Was there ever a "dropped ball" on a project you were managing? What happened and how did you handle it?
 - Have you ever had to manage multiple projects at once? How did you keep track of what was on your plate and what other people were doing?
 - In general, how do you stay on top of so many details? When you get into work in the morning, how do you decide what to do that day and where to begin?

Stick to real examples and avoid the hypothetical.

IV. Exercises

1. We sent you a project plan before this meeting and would love to turn to that now.
 - What did you think of the plan? Anything you would change or add to it?
 - What do you think the likelihood of success is for this project, as it's currently laid out?
 - How would you manage to this plan if you were the owner of the project? What about if you were managing the owner of the project to this plan? How would you know things are on track?

V. General information/fit

General information on organization and role

- Outgoing director moving to Iowa to oversee an expansion of our operations.
- Time of growth for us and this position is key to our success: building alliances among a range of state players, conceiving and managing campaigns and other projects that move our issue forward, valuing results over process (public speaking nice-to-have but relationship building is key).
- Would work with national team and communications team and be part of the organization's leadership, reporting directly to me.

- Perhaps biggest selling point for our organization = our core values—continuous learning, excellence, integrity—means good people who like their work and are very good at it.

Questions about personal goals/fit

1. If you could design the position, how would you prioritize each of the areas of responsibility? What would be your favorite part of the job? Least favorite?
2. At the beginning of this interview, you said your next position would ideally help you to develop “grasstops” advocacy skills. How do you see our organization and this particular position fitting into that goal?
3. What are your concerns about this position? What questions do you have for me?

VI. Next steps

Assuming the interview went well and you are interested in continuing the process, you might assign homework.

We find it useful to simulate part of the job in the interview process so that you get a taste of the role and we get to see you in action a bit. Assuming you’re interested in continuing in the process, I’d like to start by giving you a “homework” assignment.

Homework assignment: Create a project plan for our spring advocacy day. Ideally, it would include goals as well as a timeline and key steps along the way. Here’s a description of the campaign, the actors involved and what we’re aiming to achieve (hand-out memo). Ideally, you’d create a plan that would specify the path we’d take to get to April 15. Major constraints are a budget of \$10,000 and a commitment to include all major stakeholders in key roles (see the overview for more detail). Would it be possible to send me a draft by next Tuesday? Also, if you have a project plan you’ve used for a past project I’d love to see that as well.

----- Exercises can take place during and/or outside of the actual interview. Starting with a “homework” assignment is a good first step if you know you want to advance the person to the next round and/or if you want more information.

I’ll look forward to reviewing your project plan next week. Next round interviews (and exercises) with me and our COO will be held the last week in September. I’ll let you know about next steps either way by next Friday.

----- Specify by when you’ll follow-up whether or not you’re advancing the candidate to the next round.

If the homework assignment goes well, you might bring the candidate back for a second round interview and have them conduct additional on- or off-site exercises.

On-site exercise (testing for relationship building skills): Participate in a meeting between our outgoing director and the advocacy officer from Small Business Owners’ Health Forum. Give input/feedback on how/whether to partner with them.