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Unpacking Interview Questions:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Each day this week I'll be sharing one of the questions I use when I interview for technical roles. I'll unpack the question, when to ask it, and how to evaluate answers. [You can see all articles in this series here.](#)

Background

Who this is for: I ask this question of everyone I interview.

What it measures: a candidate's alignment with our values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Our industry suffers from a staggering lack of diversity. It has a long history of treating underrepresented candidates terribly. I could truly write for days why it's important to push back on this trend in hiring practices, but that's not the purpose of this post. I'll make three quick points about why this is important to me:

1. We know from decades of research that more diverse teams are more successful. I like success.
2. I enjoy working on diverse teams (this is not unrelated to #1). The teams I've liked the most have been the most diverse; the teams I've felt the most uncomfortable on are the ones where everyone looks like me.
3. I prefer to work for mission-driven organizations with goals that align to social justice. Working for social justice outside the organization while ignoring it within is rank hypocrisy.

In that context, this question serves two purposes:

1. It selects for candidates who share these values. Candidates don't need to be experts in DEI – or even really that conversant – to pass this question. But, if they believe that this is all just political correctness gone wrong, or that white people are *really* the oppressed ones, they aren't going to be able to work well with me and my teams. (Remember: you have two jobs: do the work, and be easy to work with. If a candidate doesn't share the team's core values, they'll fail at job #2.)
2. It sets a tone about these values from before someone even starts. Culture comes from the top; if we're serious about valuing DEI we need to send that message clearly and often. Indicating in the job interview itself that DEI is important is the first step in setting a tone that persists once the person starts.

(If you don't think that interviews set the groundwork for someone's work on the team, you're not taking interviews seriously enough.)

The question

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are important to us. We know that diverse teams are more successful, and we work hard to ensure everyone is treated fairly and respectfully. That's a bit about what these values mean to us; what do diversity, equity, and inclusion mean to you?

Follow-ups:

- What are some tactics you've [used / seen used] to improve diversity at an organization?
- What are some tactics you've [used / seen used] that build inclusive and equitable teams?
- For executives: how have you built teams that live up to these values in the past?
- For executives: how might you work with a report who isn't living up these values?

(Not all of these follow-ups are appropriate for all candidates; see the discussion below for notes on when to use them.)

What behaviors to look for:

- Are they able to engage with the topic, even if just at a basic level? Some discomfort when discussing this topic is natural, but hostility or defensiveness isn't.
- Do they start from the premise that DEI are important, or push back?

Positive signs

- 👍 Answers include multiple representations of diversity (e.g. gender, race, neurodiversity, disability, etc.)
- 👍 Demonstrates a wide intersectional concept of diversity
- 👍 Gives specific examples of the value of diversity on teams
- 👍 Gives specific examples of supporting or advocating for equity and/or inclusion on past teams
- 👍 Describes effective tactics they've used or seen that improve DEI

Red flags

- 🚩 **Indicates a reluctance to work on diverse teams**
- 🚩 Only focuses on a single group (e.g. women) to the exclusion of other forms of diversity
- 🚩 Only focuses on diversity in hiring (and doesn't engage with equity and inclusion)
- 🚩 Indicates distrust of workplace inclusivity measures like codes of conduct, anti-harassment training, etc.

Discussion

This question can be as uncomfortable to ask as it is to get; these are topics that can be difficult to talk about. If you're uncomfortable, candidates can pick that up and it can make the whole conversation awkward. If you're going to use this question, practice until you can ask it neutrally.

In my experience, most candidates answer this question well. This isn't a question where an exceptional answer is important. Most candidates are able to explain the basics of the value of diverse teams and talk about the importance of making sure everyone's included at work – and that's good enough.

The exception is roles that will have substantial organizational power. The more role power someone will have, the more they'll be responsible for promoting these values at the organization. Remember, culture comes from the top. So, the higher up someone will be, the more I'm going to look for specific experience building diverse, equitable, and inclusive teams. At the highest levels (e.g. if I'm interviewing an executive) I'm going to expect someone with a proven track record who can explain the detailed tactics that got them there.

This can be a complex question to ask an underrepresented candidate. There's a tendency to see diversity as something underrepresented people are responsible for; asking this question in the wrong way can make it seem as if that's what you're asking them to do. (This is one reason why the question is "what does DEI mean to you?" and not "what have you done...") So, when I ask this question of an underrepresented candidate, I won't dig for work *they've personally* done around DEI, nor count it as a bad sign if they haven't done work here personally. Instead, I'll ask for examples of positive work they've seen on teams they've been on.

Asking this question can open the door for candidates to ask *you* about what your organization is doing around DEI, so you better have an answer ready! (Some candidates will ask this, unprompted, but many more will if you open the door. For me this is a good thing, because I work for organizations that do fairly well. I'm happy to talk about it, and quite willing to own the areas where we need to improve. But if your org sucks at DEI, maybe don't open the door. Better yet: fix it, then open the door.)

Alternate versions of this question

The particular wording is one that I've refined carefully over many years. I've heavily tested it, as have many other hiring managers at 18F (it's part of the [hiring guide](#) I created there, and the question is still in use). If you use this question, I don't recommend changing the wording without testing.

In discussing a draft of this post with [Sumana Harihareswara](#), she pointed out that *asking* this question might be different for people from underrepresented backgrounds, and asked

if and how it might need to change for those hiring managers.

I don't know! If you're someone from one of those backgrounds and you have ideas about how it might need to change, [tweet or DM me](#) – I'd really love to know more.

Other values questions

More broadly though, this is a good example of a class of questions: “values alignment” questions. There's a class of organizational values that you might consider non-negotiable – everything from DEI to agile development, use of CI/CD, “everyone wears the pager” – style help rotations, etc. In these cases, **you may not need prior experience, but you need to be sure that everyone understands the value and is aligned with it.** A question like this, where you state a value and ask the candidate to react, can give you the signal you need about the candidate's alignment with that value.

Questions?

Next week, I'll publish a series wrap-up, summarizing the series as a whole and addressing a few big-picture topics. If you have questions [tweet at me](#) (DMs are fine too). I'll address common questions in the wrap-up.

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Table of Contents:

- [Background](#)
- [The question](#)
 - [What behaviors to look for:](#)
- [Discussion](#)
 - [Alternate versions of this question](#)
- [Questions?](#)

Tags: [hiring](#) [interviewing](#) [interviews](#) [management](#) [dei](#) [diversity](#) [equity](#) [inclusion](#)

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1. [“Explain a Topic At Multiple Levels...”](#)
2. [“Tell Me About a Project You Led...”](#)
3. [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion](#)
4. [“Tell Me About a Disagreement...”](#)
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