

# 12 Interview Questions That Will Reveal the Very Best Candidates

By **Dr. John Sullivan** April 2, 2013

If you're not getting exceptional hires, it may be because your traditional interview process is simply not designed to excite them.

Instead of dwelling on the past, a superior alternative is to ask them to solve real problems, and to demonstrate that they are forward-looking and that they have solutions for the future.

Top candidates **routinely dislike standard interviews** because they find them tedious and predictable. Most interviews are simply not designed to allow a top candidate to show off their capabilities, ideas, and innovation.

As a result, if you are recruiting for a mission-critical job that requires an exceptional hire, you simply cannot afford to bore top candidates with standard interview questions.

## The weakness in interview questions

Everyone who has done any reading about interview accuracy already knows that they are typically one of the weakest assessment devices for hiring. In fact my own research has uncovered no less than **30 different problems with standard interviews** (see **20 more problems here**), and more than **50 different alternatives to standard interviews**.

One of the weaknesses is that the interview questions that are typically used focus on historical situations that occurred at another firm. But what you need to know is how this individual will perform now at your firm. That requires getting them to demonstrate how they will solve the problems that they will face in your job.

Most typical questions have already been anticipated and practiced for by the interviewee to the point that their answers are not authentic. So if you're going to interview top professionals, here are 12 questions to select from that I have found will quickly reveal which one of your exceptional applicants is the very best.

The 12 questions I have provided here are broken into four distinct categories. In this article, they are presented as interview questions, but they can also be provided in a questionnaire format, which can give candidates more time to think, while simultaneously saving some of a hiring manager's valuable time.

## A – Questions relating to identifying, solving real problems

These questions are known as content questions, and they are usually determined to be valid because they actually reflect the content of the job. In addition, they allow the candidate to show off their skills in problems solving. If you agree that the best hires are those who can first identify problems accurately and then are able to solve them, these questions can be effective.

The following three questions work best if you pre-test them on a current top performer to ensure that they can quickly understand the problem and that they can in a short period of time outline a solution to it.

**1. How will you identify problems and opportunities on the job?** *“The best new hires rapidly seek to identify problems that must be quickly addressed in their new job. So, please walk us through the steps of the*

*process that you will actually use during your first weeks to identify the most important current issues/problems, as well as any possible positive opportunities in your new job.”*

**2. Can you identify the likely problems in this process?** *“Our employees should be able to quickly identify problems in our existing processes, systems, or products. So please look over this outline of one of our processes and identify the top three areas or points where you predict that serious problems are likely to occur?”* (Hand them a single page showing an existing process or system related to this job that you already know to have flaws).

**3. Solve a real problem that you will face.** *“Because we need to know your capability for solving the actual problems you will face in this job, we would like to see how you will go about solving a real problem. “Please walk us through the broad steps that you would take in order to solve this problem that will be on your desk on your first day.”* (Then hand them a half sheet with bullet points outlining the existing problem).

## B – Questions that show you are forward looking

If your firm operates in a fast-evolving environment, you will need employees who are forward looking and who anticipate and plan for the future. These questions can tell you if your candidate meets those requirements.

**4. Forecast the evolution of this job.** *“Because our jobs constantly change and evolve, being forward-looking is critical if you are to be successful. So please project or forecast at least five different ways that the job you are applying for will likely change and evolve over the next three years as a result of business changes, technology changes, and a faster, more innovative environment.”*

**5. Forecast the evolution of this industry.** *“Because we operate in a fast-changing industry, our employees should be forward-looking, and anticipate and plan ahead for those industry changes. So, please tell us how often you sit down and focus on the future of our industry? Next, please forecast and project five trends in our industry and forecast how the top firms will likely have to change over the next three to five years as a result of these business changes, new technology, and the need for increased speed and innovation.”*

## C – Questions about a candidate’s ability to innovate, adapt, learn

Many times our best hires are those who are rapid continuous learners, those who are adaptable, and those who can innovate. If you want to assess these factors, consider asking these questions.

**6. Show us how you would be a continuous learning expert.** *“Rapid learning is essential in our fast moving company and industry. So please select an important subject matter area in this job where you will need to continuously be on the bleeding edge of knowledge. Then show us in some detail how you will initially learn and then maintain your expert status.”* (Alternatively you can ask how they maintained their expert status in their current job).

**7. Show us your adaptability when dramatic change is required.** *“In the fast changing, chaotic, and volatile environment we operate under, everyone and every process should be adaptable. So please show us how you would adapt to this situation that may occur in this job (provide them with a possible major change that requires adaptivity in this job) by walking us through the steps of how you would adapt to it.”* (Alternatively you can ask, *“Please show us a situation in your current job during the last year that required you to change rapidly and adapt with a completely different approach. Tell us the name of the situation that required this significant adaptiveness and then walk us through the steps of how you and your team successfully adapted.”*)

**8. Show us how you will innovate.** *“Our firm is focused on innovation, so we need to know if each new hire has the capability of innovating. So please select a single important area in this job and walk us through the steps as to how you might innovate in that area during your first year?”* (As an alternative, you can ask them to select an area in their previous job and then to walk through the steps on how that innovation was created and implemented, and what their role was in each step.)

## D – Help us better understand you

Some interview questions that relate to individuals' competencies or preferences can be improved by requiring the candidate to rank their answers from most important to least important. In order to ensure that you successfully “sell” a top candidate, the most valuable question covers the decision factors that they will use to accept this job.

Other questions where ranked answers are superior in revealing their preferences involve their motivators, their strengths, and the best ways to manage them.

**9. List and rank your job acceptance factors.** *“We know that you have choices, so if we make you an offer, we obviously want it to meet your needs. And that requires knowing what factors that you will use (i.e. pay, job duties, fit with your manager, levels of responsibility, etc.) to determine if ‘our job’ is the right job for you. So if you had a choice between two offers for your next job, please list the top five factors that you would use to evaluate and accept the superior job opportunity. Please list them in their descending order of importance to you.”*

**10. List and rank your job motivators.** *“We want to ensure that we provide every employee with the right set of motivators. So please list the top five factors that you have found that best motivate you on the job. Please list them in their descending order of importance to you.”*

**11. Tell us the most effective approaches for managing you.** *“We want to ensure that every new employee has the best chance of succeeding. You can help us to reach that goal by highlighting the most effective ways to manage you. For each of these how to manage you factors (i.e. feedback, rewards, closeness of supervision, communications approach, and leadership style preference), please explain to us the most effective approach for optimizing your performance.”*

**12. List and rank the capabilities that you bring to this job.** *“It’s important to fully understand the strengths of each new hire and how they match the requirements for the job. So, given the four important categories of knowledge, experience, education, and skills, can you please list in descending order what you have found to be your strongest five capabilities that will make you a top performer in the job?”* (As an option, if you are concerned about weaknesses, you can also add this question: *“Based on past manager assessments, 360s, and appraisals, what is the top job-related area where you need to improve the most, and what actions are you taking to improve in that area?”*)

## Final thoughts

Hiring managers should be aware that thanks to social media, interview questions are now easily available to the public. That means that if you work for a major firm, candidates can now find the actual interview questions (and the best answers) that were previously asked by hiring managers in any job family at your firm on websites like Glassdoor.

So if you rely on typical interview questions, you will likely get fully rehearsed answers.

In contrast, the questions I have provided here are designed to make rehearsing more difficult. They work best on sophisticated professionals who know how to identify and solve problems. But don't be surprised that if you ask

these in-depth questions to an average candidate, they will respond with a blank look.

Obviously asking good questions is only the first part of the assessment equation; you must also prepare a range of answers from great to weak for each question, so that you know in advance when you hear a great answer. I have developed and used each of these questions professionally over several decades so I can vouch for their effectiveness.

If you use them, you will find like I have that top performers and professionals prefer these types of questions over the mundane “tell-me-about-yourself” questions that they normally get. Whether you use my questions or develop your own, these types of questions are superior because they are focused on 1) real problems, 2) this job, and 3) your firm.



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