

Learn to interview more effectively

By Kristie Campana

In behavioral interviews, the point of the questions is to learn about what your applicants have done in the past and what they are likely to do in the future when faced with tricky situations. You have to think about what an applicant's response is really saying about their decision-making and behaviors.

Question: Tell me about a time you made a mistake at work.

Poor Response: At my last job, I was responsible for putting together displays at work based on instructions we get from headquarters. We were having a slow night, so I started putting them together early, based on the last set of instructions, since they are usually very similar. After an hour of work, my supervisor saw what I was doing. It turns out that because of an upcoming holiday, the displays were going to be different, so we had to undo what I had started and begin over again.

Why this is a poor response:

The applicant demonstrated poor critical thinking skills by not following directions, especially when it would be reasonable to expect a holiday might affect the displays. She might make impulsive decisions often.

The applicant did not check in with her supervisor. This applicant seems apt to rush into action without getting permission first.

What has the applicant learned from this situation? From the way she presents it, nothing. If an applicant never thinks she needs to change her behavior, that can be a red flag.

Strong Response: I was responsible for putting together advertisements for our local newspaper. Once when it was printed, I found an embarrassing typo on one of our longtime clients' ads. I immediately let my supervisor know, and I called the client to let them know my mistake, apologize, and make it right. Ultimately, we gave them a few weeks of free advertising. Now, I proofread all the ads twice; once right away, and again before they go to print.

Why this is a strong response:

The applicant identified and admitted her mistake on her own. This suggests she has integrity and will not cover up mistakes.

She took responsibility and worked with the client to fix the problem. She is likely to demonstrate good customer service and go the extra mile.

She learned something from her mistake. She employs actions to keep it from happening again.

What's legal in an interview?

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Civil rights acts have identified characteristics that cannot be targeted in hiring, such as race. Minnesota also has passed a number of acts that prohibit hiring or firing based on additional demographics, such as sexual orientation.

Illegal or inadvisable interview questions:

Are you planning on having children? or Are you married? It is not legal to ask about their children or familial status. One reason: these questions are often directed at women, but not at men.

Where are you from? Although you can ask whether applicants have the right to work in the country, you cannot ask them whether they were born in the U.S.

When did you graduate high school? Applicants over the age of 40 are protected from discrimination; asking a question like this can lead to age disclosure.

Do you go to church on Sundays? Religious institutions can require an applicant to be of a certain religion, but most jobs cannot. This question can discriminate against people of certain religions.

Have you ever been arrested? In some circumstances, it may be okay to ask about convictions, it is never acceptable to ask about arrests, as certain racial groups are often more likely to be arrested, but not necessarily convicted.

Do you have any physical impairments? In some positions, being able-bodied may be a requirement. However, asking about this in an interview setting is not legal. This includes mental health conditions, such as depression or alcoholism.

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