

The Nine-Question, Twenty-Minute Interview

by Lion Goodman
Executive Coach and Trainer

We have limited time to dedicate to any activity. When hiring employees, you must be ruthlessly efficient in determining whether or not an individual might be a potential candidate for the job you have open.

Most hiring managers spend an hour or more interviewing individuals who could have been rejected in twenty minutes or less. Enormous amounts of time are wasted interviewing inappropriate or unqualified people.

It is easy to look at a individual's resume and determine whether they have the technical know-how or the right background for a specific job, but how do you determine the deeper issues of personality, cultural fit, and style? These are important factors that determine whether a person is really right for your company or not. These "gut feel" factors constitute approximately 50% of the hiring decision. How can you determine these factors quickly and efficiently?

After you have sorted through numerous resumes, you should have a rough cut of the people worth talking to. The next step should be an initial screening conversation, which should be conducted by phone and take no more than ten minutes. The purpose of this brief conversation is simply to verify whether the person has represented themselves accurately on their resume. You can also determine by careful listening whether the person can communicate clearly, uses correct language, and has a grasp of the important aspects of the job they have been doing. This conversation should focus on verifying the facts on their resume.

If an individual has passed these two initial screens, the next step is a brief interview consisting of nine basic questions. This can be done either by phone or in person. These questions will allow you to gain a clear picture of whether or not the candidate is suitable for a particular position. Indications of a person's character, drive, and competence can be gleaned from listening carefully to the candidate's answers to these nine questions. If you do this step as a phone screen, you will then conduct a more in-depth interview in person. If you are doing this step face-to-face, you will be getting many visual clues in addition such as body language, physical presence, eye contact, and even smell.

When you put the answers to these questions together with your impressions of their personality, their ability to express themselves, and their social skills, your odds of a successful hire will increase dramatically. Let the candidate know that this interview will last only twenty minutes, setting their expectations appropriately. You will know at the end of twenty minutes whether it is worth your time to schedule an in-depth interview with them.

Here are the nine questions:

1. Of The Jobs You Have Held, Which One Did You Like Best?

The answer to this question suggests specific areas in which the candidate can be of the most

value to your client. If he or she is noncommittal, or liked all of them, this may indicate a lack of direction or planning for future growth. It is normal to have preferences, but if their preference is for a job in no way related to the one you have to offer, you may have a discontented newly hired employee after only a short time.

2. How Did You Get Each Of Your Positions?

If your candidate sought out and achieved a position he or she wanted, this indicates a strong "go getter." If they were recruited into the position, find out what their dissatisfaction was with their previous position. This will indicate their level of loyalty, or "stick-to-it-iveness" when the going gets tough. Generally, the response to this question is an indication of resourcefulness. Was it through their personal contacts or influential friends? Was it merely a means to an end? Will your job, also, be such a means? These answers, together with the short and long term goals questions, will give you an overall impression of their career direction and their ability to get what they want.

3. What Are Your Short Range Goals For The Coming Two Years??

Every person should have definite plans for where they want to be and what they hope to be doing one and two years from now. Failure to verbalize these goals indicates that the candidate has not assessed his potential or relationship with his chosen work. A definite plan will not only give the interviewer a chance to see if their goals coincide with the position, but will also give the candidate a plus just for having specific goals, because many people don't. A person who doesn't know where he or she is going will probably end up someplace else.

4. If You Could Do Anything In The World, What Would You Choose To Do?

The answer to this question can give you deep insight into the candidate, if they answer truthfully. You may need to ask it a second time, as many people will first tell you what they think you want to hear. I often add, "Really, let your imagination go, and think about it as if you didn't have to worry about money or what other people think." I have found that when you get past the expected answers about immediate gratification of spending a year on a sunny beach, what all people want at their deepest core is to make a contribution to others, to make a difference. The answer you get, however, will indicate where a person fits in the organization you are representing. Look for some creative imagination meshed with both reality and the individual's capabilities. Check to see whether what the person "really" wants to do matches the job responsibilities you can offer them.

5. Why Are You Interested In My Client's Company?

Alternatively ask, "Why are you interested in leaving your present job?" These responses will give you two sides of the coin: the positive desires and negative dissatisfactions. If the answer is "money," and this is the sole motivation, then caution should be exercised because another company will tempt this person away from your client's organization with a little more money later on. If an applicant has done research on your client and knows why he feels that working for them would be beneficial to his career, knows how the company relates to the industry as a whole, or how he would be stimulated by the working environment, these are positive signs of a mature decision making process. This question is an attitude indicator, and the answer can go a long way in developing your evaluation of the individual.

6. What Are Your Hobbies? What Do You Do In Your Spare Time?

When an individual talks about life outside the workplace, the answers to these questions give

you a view into the individual's outlook on life and his or her aptitudes and attitudes. A person who is involved in competitive sports will be competitive in their job and a team player – an excellent characteristic for a salesperson, although perhaps not for a secretary. Individual sports such as running or body-building are an indication of a person's dedication and concern for their personal image and health, or possibly their preference to work alone rather than on a team. Chess or bridge players or those who engage in other activities requiring mental challenges make excellent problem solvers or engineers. A person who spends every spare hour with his or her children will often make a good long-term employee because of their care for their family. Salespeople tend to enjoy activities where they can meet others, which can be reflected in their off-hour activities and hobbies.

7. What Are Your Long Range Goals? Where Do You Want To Be In Ten Years?

Taken with the individual's short-range goals, this answer can give you great insight into the potential to be tapped and the degree of investment your client may wish to make in this individual. The response will also assist you in assessing his or her ability to plan in order to achieve specific long-range objectives.

8. What Are Your Major Assets And Your Major Weaknesses?

While you can't expect a person to reveal their deepest, darkest secrets, you can expect the person to be able to recognize his or her obvious faults or deficiencies, whatever they may be. The more honest a person is while being self critical will indicate their ability to handle criticism or correction from a manager (although this is not always so). One who can identify and correct their behavior has shown insight and thought in evaluating and improving their own progress. Well thought out assets indicate a person's level of self confidence and can help you assess whether their strengths can be fully utilized in the position you are offering.

9. How Have You Changed Over The Last Five Years?

The answer to this question will indicate a person's progress, both in their career and in their personal life. Follow up with the question, "How would you like to change in the next five years?" to see whether their own assessment matches what you can offer them. This will also indicate what kind of management style will work best once they are on the job. If a person has been making progress in their life, it is a good bet that they will continue to do so. Other facts such as their job progression, salary progression, and increasing levels of responsibilities will give you a clear picture of how the person will fit into your client's organization. Also look for signs of personal growth, maturity, and positive feelings about those changes.

Conclusion

While no single question can give you the magic answer as to whether a person will fit the particular position you are recruiting for, the Nine Question, Twenty Minute Interview will bring out the essence of the individual's attitudes and character. The individual's attitudes toward life and work, and the substance of their character, are usually better predictors of success than any amount of technical competence or previous experience. At the minimum, it will serve to identify the few individuals who have the potential for the position for more thorough interviewing or testing. Finally, the degree to which the applicant is comfortable answering questions in general, and the level of preparation shown by their responses, will provide additional information about their self-awareness and maturity.

Once the basic screening has been done, a personal interview conducted, and in-depth references properly checked, the ultimate decision-making factor is the chemistry – a mysterious alchemical brew – between the hiring manager and the prospective employee. Our “gut feel” is a combination of objective knowledge and subjective intuition, subtle clues and extrasensory perception. How can you know if this is the right person for the job? Ask good questions, listen carefully, and trust your instincts. Your inner voice isn’t always right – we are human, and we make mistakes. Don’t rely on your intuition completely, but don’t deny it. It has important and powerful messages for you. Your intuition is one more factor to consider, helping you to be right more often.

Lion Goodman is a business and life coach specializing in helping entrepreneurs and corporate executives accomplish their business goals and achieve work/life balance. With more than 20 years experience in executive search, recruitment and coaching, he offers powerful advice and guidance to individuals who are seeking to bring their dreams into reality. He can be reached at 415-472-6500 or by email: lion@everydayawakening.com.

To subscribe to Lion’s free monthly newsletter, *Everyday Awakening*, filled with helpful hints and practical exercises for expanding awareness and living more authentically, send an email with “Subscribe” in the Subject line to: lion@everydayawakening.com.

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