Honest or not? 10 questions to spot ethical applicants

Ethical employees are vital to the productivity of any organization. But when managers interview job candidates, it's nearly impossible to get a good reading of a person's moral compass.

Still, it's important for hiring managers to know how to weed out candidates who will undercut the company's values and mission with dishonesty.

In fact, more than 80% of U.S. workers say they've been lied to, stolen from, cheated or treated dishonestly at work by a co-worker or supervisor, according to new research by Hogan Assessment Systems. *The result:* lower morale and higher turnover.

On the flip side, when people were asked about the most important qualities of their all-time favorite boss, the number one characteristic (cited by 81% of people) was trustworthiness. Conversely, 50% described their worst boss as manipulative.

So how do you identify candidates with a high ethical bar? Here, according to a survey of hiring experts, are some of the most effective "situational" or "behavioral" questions and scenarios that managers can pose:

1. **"Have you ever faced an ethics challenge on the job? Explain the situation."** Be suspicious of applicants who answer "No." Follow up with, "Why do you think you've never faced such an issue?" Describe a real-life ethical dilemma and ask, "How would you handle the situation?"
2. **"Were you ever aware of a co-worker who violated a company's ethics policy? What did you do?"** You want employees who would discuss concerns with a manager or co-worker, or find another way to address the issue according to company policy.
3. **"What's the difference between an ethical company and an ethical person?"** You are looking for candidates who believe there must be little or no difference for the company to succeed.
4. **"Why are ethics important in the workplace?"** You seek answers that clarify how the job-seeker would perform duties and seek advancement while honoring company values.
5. **"Describe your most important workplace ethics?"** The answer can illustrate whether the applicant takes personal responsibility for acting ethically.
6. **"Have you read our company's ethics policy? What do you think?"** The response can show whether the candidate values corporate ethics enough to include it in pre-interview research.
7. **"Did you ever see or do anything on the job that troubled your conscience?** How did you handle the situation?"
8. **"Did you ever see an employee steal anything from a workplace?** What did the person take and

how did you react?"

9. **"Has a manager, co-worker or customer ever asked you to do anything unethical?** What was your reaction?"
10. **"Did you ever have ethics training or education?** What did you learn?"

Quiz: How to tell if a decision is ethical

Anytime you face an ethical dilemma, ask yourself this question: "If I go through with this, would I mind seeing it reported in tomorrow's news?"

If you answer "I'd be fine with it," then go ahead. If you're not sure, ask yourself these questions:

1. *"Would this decision mesh well with the organization's mission, vision and core values?"*
2. *"Would it be good for the customer?"*
3. *"Would it be good for the organization?"*
4. *"Would it be good for me?"*

If you answer "Yes" to all four, do it. If you answer "No" or "Maybe" to any, ask your trusted mentors, advisers or friends (not co-workers or peers) what they would do.

Checking your ethical pulse: 4 indicators

Most people aren't conscious of how they make tough decisions. They often go with what feels most expedient at the moment—an approach that can get them into trouble. Instead, it's useful to be aware of these four common clues that can warn you if you're heading in the wrong direction ethically. Reconsider a decision if you're:

1. **Wondering if it's legal.** If you find yourself scrambling to learn whether an action is legal, chances are it isn't ethical. Decisions should never tiptoe up to the legal line; they shouldn't even come near it.
2. **Trying to keep it a secret.** If you're concerned what will happen if your decision becomes widely known, reconsider the choice you're making.
3. **Making rationalizations.** You shouldn't have to rationalize your decisions to yourself. Phrases like "I deserve this" or "They owe me" are signs of trouble.
4. **Feeling in your gut that it's wrong.** Most people instinctively know when they've crossed an ethical or moral line.