

# How to get the most out of pre-screening interviews



Recruiters and hiring managers know time is of the essence when filling open positions. The sooner a qualified candidate gets into the role, the sooner he or she can start making valuable contributions to the organization. At first glance, then, it might seem odd to add another step to the hiring process by conducting pre-screening interviews. Why not simply bring promising candidates in for “real” job interviews?

In the overall scheme of things, pre-screening interviews can actually save time. They reduce the talent pool to those individuals most likely to be a good match for the position and fit in with company culture. Pre-screening raises the confidence level that one of the applicants brought in for a formal job interview will work out. And with COVID-related safety restrictions still in place at many businesses, pre-screening interviews help limit the number of outsiders brought into the building.

A pre-screening process often benefits applicants, too. With fewer people moving on to the next round, the hiring process frequently moves faster, which makes for a better candidate experience. The interaction also provides job applicants with the chance to learn things that can help them judge whether or not they feel like the right candidate. A job seeker may not see the sense in moving forward if, for example, salary expectations differ greatly or the responsibilities presented do not align with his or her career goals.

## What is a pre-screening interview?

A pre-screening interview collects information and impressions that assist recruiters and human resources professionals in deciding who to move on to the first round of the formal interview process. If done via phone

call or video chat, the conversation typically takes between 15-30 minutes. Pre-screenings also can be done online in the form of a short survey or a basic skills test.

Employers should not feel they must pre-screen every person who answers their job posting. Only potential candidates who demonstrate the most promise — perhaps those ranked highest by the company's Applicant Tracking System (ATS) — warrant a phone screen or other pre-screening measure.

Besides narrowing the field, pre-screening provides a benefit when the actual interview occurs. Candidates often arrive feeling less nervous because the ice has been broken already. The conversation may flow more naturally, and they may come in with good questions formulated from thinking about what went on in the pre-screen.

## Examples of pre-screening interview questions

Don't look at a pre-screening interview as the chance to squeeze everything you would ask in a formal interview into a shorter time frame. Rather, think of it as an opportunity to form a clearer picture of the candidate beyond the resume.

For starters, you may want to verify credentials necessary for the job. For instance, if possession of a certain license is a must, confirm that the person holds the document and it is up-to-date. No sense in proceeding if the applicant lacks an essential requirement.

Likewise, address anything that is unclear on the resume. If work history is presented in a way that makes it difficult to figure out exactly how many years of relevant work experience a candidate has under his belt, ask outright. Or, perhaps the duties someone lists for her current job seem unusual for her job title. Ask about the discrepancy. You might discover either someone who exaggerated on the resume or a superstar who performs well beyond her basic job description.

For the most part, aim to ask things that require more than a simple yes-or-no answer. You'll learn more about a candidate by letting him express himself, including how well he communicates and thinks on his feet.

Employers can cover any subject they wish during the pre-interview based on what they would most like to find out before moving forward. Career accomplishments, hard skills, soft skills, and fit with company culture are some of the areas from which recruiters and hiring managers often select questions.

### A few specific questions to consider asking include:

- **Tell me about yourself.** Every good candidate prepares a response to this softball. Regardless of the interview type or location, it remains an effective way to start a conversation and let the nerves settle.
- **Why do you want to work here?** You'll get a glimpse as to whether your role is simply a paycheck or if they did some research to determine that they'd truly enjoy being at your company.
- **What is your ideal work environment?** See if their particulars match your offerings. Someone who wants to work from home may not be content in a fully on-site role. Or, they may state how much they like to collaborate with others, but the job opening really calls for mostly independent work.

- **What unique skills do you bring to this position?** This offers the person an opportunity to sell himself and draw interesting information to your attention.
- **What are you looking for in a manager?** Employees differ in how much direction and input they want from their leaders. If the role is in a department run by someone with a very hands-off management style, one type of worker may get frustrated by the lack of involvement whereas another may relish the independence.
- **What is the most frustrating part of your current job?** This question provides a peek at why the person may be trying to find a new job. It also presents the chance to see if someone can talk about negatives or problems respectfully rather than assign blame or trash the employer.
- **What do you consider your biggest career accomplishments?** Again, this type of question allows the candidate to highlight achievements. It also offers insight into what the person defines as an accomplishment. Some may talk about awards or promotions; others may mention overcoming obstacles or making connections with colleagues or clients. You receive valuable information on what motivates this particular individual.
- **What is your definition of a great place to work?** Answers can run the gamut. Some candidates may focus on money, benefits, and perks. Others may cite interesting work and professional development opportunities. Trust, pleasant colleagues, an important mission, respect, and flexibility also are common responses. While there's no right or wrong answer per se, you can get an idea of whether or not what this person values in a workplace jives with the reality of your company.



### **Touch on key logistical questions**

Posing a few questions requiring a short or one-word answer can be valuable to confirm understanding. For instance, stating “The salary range for this position is \$20-25 per hour based on experience. Are you comfortable with that?” gets at whether the two of you are on the same page. An employer can pose questions in a similar set-up to verify the person understands work schedule, location (especially if any remote work is involved), travel obligations, start date, or specific duties. At the end of the pre-interview, you might even want to ask “Now that you know a bit more about the role and the company, do you still want to proceed with your candidacy?”

Whatever you choose to ask, make certain to input information and impressions into your applicant tracking recruiting software. This action enables others on the hiring team to learn more about the candidate and refer back to the comments before conducting the formal interview.

### **Beyond phone interviews**

When pre-screening using an online form, make what you’re asking is as relevant as possible to the job at hand. Overwhelming job candidates with too many questions or things to fill out decreases the chance that they will do it carefully and completely. And while there’s something to be said for job seekers willing to go through many hoops, you run the risk of scaring people away.

### **A few possibilities for gathering information about hard skills, soft skills, competencies, personality, and culture fit include:**

- A skillset test, such as proofreading or job-related math.
- A writing sample based on a prompt (to judge both content and communication ability).
- Presenting scenarios common to the open role and asking how they would handle the situation.
- Asking job candidates to describe an example from their past of a certain action or behavior -- handling

conflict, demonstrating leadership skills, working with a diverse group, etc.

- A work style quiz.

## **Potential red flags**

Pre-screening interviews not only help a recruiter or hiring manager distinguish between qualified and unqualified candidates, the interaction may yield some warning signs. While a pre-screening is not as formal as a full face-to-face interview, it still makes an impression. Be leery of job seekers who treat it too casually and do not put forth their best.

Think twice before moving along with anyone who seems unprepared. Company websites, social media, and the like make basic information easy to come by, so there's no excuse for being clueless. Likewise, if someone can't formulate a few good questions to ask you, it likely means he did not do his research or he doesn't really care about knowing more.

When pre-screening candidates do pose questions, watch the nature of the subject. Someone who focuses on salary range and benefits but asks nothing about the actual job opening may be more concerned with a paycheck than with whether or not he's the right candidate.

Finally, use the pre-screen to gain subtle information that could affect whether to move the person on in the hiring process. Is written material filled out completely and thoughtfully or thrown together haphazardly? If conducting a video interview, does the candidate appear poised and professional? Does the interviewee sound appropriately excited and engaged during the phone screen or like she can't wait for the conversation to end? Make the pre-screening process worth the effort by utilizing all the insight possible!