

# How to be a good interviewer with Motivation Based Interviewing

Conducting a job interview is kinda like golf: it looks easy, but you'll waste a lot of time if you don't know the basics. Since the 1900s, the job interview process has undergone major changes, evolving from crude skill assessments into comprehensive personality exams aimed at finding the perfect long-term hire. When done correctly, a successful interview culminates in the hiring of employees with great skills, attitude and passion. Misuse interviews though, and you could miss out on creative, unconventional talent in favor of people pleasers.

It's not a new problem. Similar issues plague school placement exams, where bright minds scramble to fit into decades-old boxes that aren't all that relevant today. Many customs of interviewing obscure a candidate's strengths while applauding their weaknesses. If we want to get the best candidates for the job, something needs to change.

Interviewing offers more than just conversation; it's a chance for candidates to show you what drives them. As it turns out, the confidence they feel about making an impact at work is a far better predictor of performance than their best-crafted response about their greatest weakness. As an effective interviewer, your job is to ask the right questions and learn how they see themselves in your company.

In this blog, we're talking about how to engage with candidates to see how well they can succeed.

## Determining the right fit

Before we talk about *how* to interview, it's important to know what to look for. Philosophies abound when it comes to what purpose interviews serve. Should you prioritize skills or situational behavior? Should candidates show *what* they can do or *how* they'll do it? Are soft skills more important than industry experience?

According to Carol Quinn of [Hire Authority](#), we're asking the wrong questions. Instead, we should be examining motivation in our job candidates. Her approach, called motivation-based interviewing (MBI), values attitude over skill or behavioral thinking. The thinking goes that while skills and behavioral decisions can evolve through training, attitude doesn't—and her clients say the approach gets results.

## What Is Motivation-Based Interviewing?

Most people assume the best possible hiring outcome is to find someone with adequate skills and the problem-solving wisdom to use them. But there's another part too, something that influences both those qualities: the desire to get the job done. Take a plumber for example. Knowing how to fix a sewer pipe is important, but what good is it if they don't feel like doing it?

Attitude involves believing that tasks can be achieved, even when times are tough. Having team members like this can be a huge benefit to your company, as just one can-do attitude can light a contagious fire. In the same way that bad attitudes can result in lost production, employees with good attitudes make work better for everyone.

MBI offers interviewing techniques that help predict this attitude. While it's not the only way to interview candidates, MBI makes a strong case for reviewing your list of questions to better incorporate this strategy.

## Keeping Biases from Marring Your Decision

People have an innate bias for things to be a certain way. It's the reason we have strong reactions to someone's favorite band when it's too different from our own. It's why we shy away from politics and religion at dinner. If it can impact something as small and inconsequential as a favorite band, imagine how much it can affect a hiring decision.

Great interviewers eliminate bias from the hiring process, and yet the issue doesn't get all that much attention. Many companies mistake business-as-usual hiring practices for company culture, and that's only if their biases are detected at all. This unwillingness to change can undermine a company's chances for success. Keeping an open mind with interviewees will lead to better hiring outcomes.

### Here are some hiring biases worth looking out for:

- **Halo/horn bias.** Judging employability based on appearance, viewing them negatively or positively with factors unrelated to the job. For example, if they show up on time with a clean-pressed shirt and a bright smile, you're more likely to assume they have the right skills and attitude than if they look less presentable.
- **Heuristic bias.** They fit within a positive label (they *love* your favorite band!), encouraging you to choose them even though you know little about their actual qualifications. Social media and LinkedIn can play a role here, offering a tempting online persona to check for the makings of a good employee.
- **Spurious correlations.** If a candidate brags about their company growing by \$5 million while they worked there, it doesn't mean they had anything to do with it.
- **Affinity bias.** If your workplace has a "type", you may meet a candidate who matches the description and assume they'll fit without really getting to know them.
- **Conformity bias.** This is when other decision-makers think a person is a great fit but you don't. You may feel afraid to speak up, allowing an unqualified candidate to get hired anyway.

It's easy to get in your own way. If you're serious about becoming a better interviewer, record yourself in interviews and make adjustments. In any case, removing biases from the equation is critical if you want to find the best person for the job.

Interested in learning about your own biases? Try a Harvard [Implicit Association Test](#). These fun little quizzes provide insight into how your own biases affect the way you see others.

## Getting the Interview Underway

Having a good, honest conversation isn't easy, especially when the other person is preoccupied with avoiding mistakes and showing off their best self. For an interview to be effective, candidates have to be vulnerable. Some have an easier time with this than others, which is why relying on charm as an indicator of high performance is usually a bad idea.

Charisma is one of the more important communication skills to have. However, it can lead some interviewers into the trap of hiring based on likability, rather than on how well-suited someone is for the job. If you want honest, sincere answers, the best thing you can do is open a conversation and pay close attention to the candidates' answers.

## Get Them Talking

As the interviewer, you set the tone for whether things feel more casual or more direct, so open up a little bit. Did you hear some great tunes on Spotify today? Was your coffee better than usual? Little snippets like this can ease tension and open the doorway for a better interview. [In one study](#), small talk even foreshadowed happier people, plus it's a great chance to observe body language and eye contact.

There's a difference between *being* the right fit for the job versus *sounding* like it. Asking, "Why do you want to work here?" or "What did you like least at your last job?" is an invitation for word salad that might result in some great sound bites but won't get you much further in your search. Ditch those old questions and open a conversation about this specific role.

## Know the Job Description

Each interviewer throughout the hiring process will have a different role. Recruiters determine how a candidate fits within the company while hiring managers gauge expertise and certifications to ensure candidates don't make more work for them. Your interview template should include a checklist of the ideal person for the job, which means knowing a little about the job itself.



## You should have answers to questions like:

- How is acceptable performance measured?
- What does a regular day of work look like?
- How many projects do employees typically handle at this position?
- Do they need to interface with clients?
- What kind of training is available?

Knowing these answers helps you tailor questions to better suit each candidate's background, rather than riding the coattails of whatever work experience/cover letter they show you.

## Which Questions Should You Ask?

By now, you've established a good rapport with your candidate and are ready to dish out the important questions. This is where things get challenging. Interviewing should show how a candidate will (or won't) benefit your company. Using the MBI approach mentioned earlier, the most important trait for your interviewee to have is the right attitude.

What is a good attitude? Carol Quinn calls it the belief that one is in control of their life and the outcome of their work. These employees take initiative, not because they have great training, but because they see themselves as crucial actors in their own future. When things go wrong, they look inward rather than instinctively placing blame elsewhere. They have an "I can" attitude where control over their life resides within them.

Will a great attitude solve *all* of your company's problems? Of course not, but employees who believe in themselves are more likely to help out where they can. They're also more likely to find opportunities to do so. Remember, skills and decision-making can be taught. Attitude is a lot harder to point out on a candidate's resume.

### Writing Good Questions

Here it is, the section you've been waiting for: what makes a good interview question? Now that you know what to look for and how to open up a conversation, the next step is figuring out what to ask.

**If you're using the MBI approach, your questions should follow these three rules:**

1. Ask for specific examples
2. Include an obstacle
3. Leave it open-ended

First off, it's important to ask for specific details. Otherwise, you're just asking for an opinion. If you ask, "How would you deal with an angry customer?" over, "Tell me about a specific time you dealt with an angry customer," you'll end up with a customer service philosophy instead of useful info about your candidate. Their attitude shows up when talking about specific times they solved a problem, rather than in their general beliefs about the topic.

Next, include an obstacle in your questions to get the skill-based responses you need. Point out a problem for them to solve. Doing so lets you judge both their attitude as well as their job skills. You can also use this chance to create more industry-specific follow-up questions.

Finally, leave the outcome open-ended. Let your candidate tell you how things ended up instead of giving them a destination to arrive at. If you're asking about a time they dealt with an angry customer, don't ask what they did to make them happy. Relax your affinity for happy endings and let your candidate fill in the blanks.

**Below are some example questions. Ask about a specific time they:**

- Had to debug some code that they didn't write
- Dealt with an employee's poor performance
- Disagreed with a co-worker
- Met a tough project deadline
- Worked on a team where one of the members wasn't pulling their weight
- Encountered a problem they had no idea how to solve

Framing questions this way leads to responses that are easier to score. Since they aren't just opinions, you'll have better info about the attitude they bring to the company at hiring.



## The Attitude Scorecard

Scoring the interview seems easy enough; just talk for a while until you learn about their outlook, right? Not quite. It turns out people see themselves in complex ways that don't always fit nicely into your interview scorecard. For example, some obstacles simply aren't within a candidate's control. They shouldn't be viewed as indicators of a bad attitude, but it's easy to mistake them as such if you're not smart about the questions you ask.

In the MBI approach, responses are scored based on the level of responsibility they take in a situation, and the grades are as simple as I or E—internal or external locus of control. How do they see their involvement in a situation's outcome? When dealing with an upset customer, did they see the person as unreasonable and leave it at that? Or did they go out of their way to help? With more interview experience, you'll learn more about how their answers provide insight into their attitude. For now though, just focus on where they feel control lies in a situation.

As you work through your candidate pool, you should be able to see how attitudes stack up and how they compare to one another. You'll also see how better interview questions filter out nice-sounding but unproductive responses.

### Beware of False Positives

Storytime: during WWII, a mathematician named Abraham Wald was inspecting warplanes upon return from battle to find ways to make them stronger. Since bullet holes riddled the wings, his colleagues suggested reinforcing those areas with more armor. Wald, however, pointed out that all these planes survived—the damage they sustained wasn't bad enough to bring them down. Instead, he said, armor should reinforce areas with *no* visible damage, since no planes shot there ever returned. Interviewers would do well to learn from his example.

If there's one thing to watch for in an interview, it's bad questions eliciting great answers. When a candidate gets a softball question about going above and beyond to make a customer happy, they get to look exceptional—even if they aren't. Many variations of this problem exist, so make sure to review your interview questions from time to time. If you're receiving a lot of great answers, you may be asking a bad question.

## Trusting Your Gut

Interviewing takes practice. The more you do it, the better you get at seeing how questions affect the responses you receive. The best questions may not always be the most intuitive, and bias is stronger in interviews than almost anywhere else. This post has some helpful tips, but ultimately you'll have to adjust your process as you see fit. Stay open to new ideas, but don't get too skittish about seeing your interviews through. You've got this!