

Questions and Topics to Avoid

Employment law prohibits making employment decisions based on the following:

Age, sex, sexual orientation, disability, pregnancy, gender identity, genetic information, religion, race, color, national origin, and/or veteran status

Any questions relating to these areas should **never** be used. Some examples are “Where are you from originally?” (national origin), “Where do you go to church?” (religion), “How old are you?” (age), or “Do you intend to have children?” (pregnancy). You also want to avoid how you phrase things: “We are looking for a recent college graduate” (age) or “young and energetic” (age) or “Man’s work” (gender). Questions like this should be avoided even during small talk.

Other areas to avoid:

Marital status
Number of children
Arrest record
Military discharge
Economic status
Mode of transportation
Medical problems
Attendance at previous jobs

The bottom line is that these areas are not job-related. Anyone can be arrested but that doesn’t mean s/he was guilty; the background check provides us with any information we should know. How a person gets to work is irrelevant, as long as they indicate that they **can** get to work. Therefore, instead of asking if s/he has children or has a car- something that may concern you about his/her ability to get to work reliably- you should ask instead if s/he can meet the work schedule. Also, asking questions about attendance issues at previous jobs can be tricky as it may reveal medical conditions, something you shouldn’t ask about or discriminate against. Your questions should stick to if the candidate is able and willing to perform the duties of this position.

However, even if you don’t ask, it is possible that the person might offer the information on his/her own. If this occurs:

- Do not write the information down.
- Do not pursue the subject with the applicant.
- Do not discuss amongst the committee members.
- Do not base your decision on that information.
- Get help from University Human Resources.

Use care in crafting your questions sticking closely to the criteria you’ve established.

Types of Questions

Open-Ended

- Allows candidate to open up and respond freely.
- Generally begins with “explain how,” “tell me about,” etc.
- Use open ended questions to
 - Collect Information
 - “Why did you choose Human Resources for a career?”
 - “How do you go about setting goals?”
 - Promote discussion and expand on ideas
 - “Tell me about ...”
 - “What do you mean by ...”
 - Personality insight
 - “Why do you consider yourself a good leader?”
 - “What has been your greatest accomplishment?”

Closed

- Allows interviewer to receive a specific response.
- “Yes” or “No” or limited response (such as “five years”)
- Generally begins with “have you,” “do you,” “how much,” etc.
- Use closed questions to
 - Gain clear understanding of remarks
 - “Were you ultimately responsible for...”
 - “How much time did you spend on that project?”
 - Substantiate understanding
 - “How much autonomy were you given by your manager?”
 - “Are you looking for a nightshift position?”

Behavioral-Interviewing

- Based on the premise that the best predictor of future performance is past performance.
- Questions are formulated based on the criteria established for the position (as defined by the interview evaluation)
- Use behavioral-interview questions to surmise experience, or lack of
 - Was the candidate able to give an example that demonstrates experience?
 - Did s/he handle the described situation well?
 - Is his/her experience relatable to our environment?
 - Was s/he able to give multiple examples to reaffirm experience level?
- Traditional interview question: “What is your leadership style?”
vs.
Behavioral interview question: “Tell me about a time when you successfully coached an underperforming employee.”
- Requires the candidate to demonstrate his/her experience and decision making as opposed to telling you what s/he thinks is the right answer.