

Hiring

Stop Eliminating Perfectly Good Candidates by Asking Them the Wrong Questions

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Summary. Assessing a job candidate is all about the questions you ask during the interview. But too often leaders ask the wrong things, focusing more on what the interviewee has done in the past rather than what they can do in the future. If you need to hire someone to work... [more](#)

I could tell right away from the tone of his voice that the VP of Engineering wasn't happy. He practically growled at me. He had just finished interviewing a job candidate named Anand, who I had directed his way, and was calling me to say he was going to pass.

Just a few minutes earlier, Anand had called and raved about how well the interview had gone. He had interviewed for nearly a full day, meeting with different leaders across the organization, including, at the end of the day, the VP of Engineering. I had helped this company build out a new "platform" strategy, which is why I was trying to identify the right candidates to work on it, and I thought Anand would be a great fit.

But the VP and Anand had strikingly different reports about their meeting. Anand said that he had asked far more questions than he usually did, asking for detailed and specific information on the strategy that helped him understand the complexity of the challenge the company was facing. He felt like he had engaging, insightful conversations with everyone he met. In contrast, the VP told me that he found Anand's questions "super annoying."

This isn't the first time I've heard a leader say that a perfectly qualified candidate is a "bad fit." Candidates are too often screened out because they don't fit a particular pattern – one survey found as many as 75% of resumes don't make it past Applicant Tracking Systems. As I discussed the issue further with the VP, I learned that he thought that Anand had the right skills and experience but that he found Anand's questions annoying. He said: "He asked us a ton of questions that the team didn't have the answers to." His assessment that Anand was a "bad fit" was really code for "I don't want to feel uncomfortable."

Innovation requires not knowing long enough to learn new things. How can you build something new, if you aren't okay with not already knowing the answer? The future is not created; it's co-created. Leaders need to build teams that can both *define* the right questions, and then *discover* new answers.

Instead of being annoyed by Anand's questions, the VP should've welcomed them — and asked Anand questions in return. That is, of course, the value of an interview. An employer seeks to learn about the candidate's skills and relevant experiences. And a good candidate uses questions to learn about the role, the boss, and the company to assess whether it's the right job. Here are some types of questions the VP might've asked — and the ones you should ask — to avoid screening out a perfectly good candidate based on the wrong criteria.

Questions that uncover capabilities, not just experience. Are you asking questions that get to someone's *capabilities* or are you seeking confirming data that someone has done exactly what you have already scoped? Several years ago, a colleague asked if I'd review their job description for a social media "expert." Twitter had been around for maybe a year at this point and when I looked at the description, I just started laughing. The first line read "10 years of experience." Quite often, we use useless metrics to scope a job to do what has already been done. The upside of asking for years of experience is we get someone who has done what we need. The downside is we risk limiting what we can create next by doing what has already worked. Instead of asking, "Have you done x or y or z?" you want to ask, "How *would you approach* doing x or y or z?" This shift in question lets you learn someone's capacity to think *with* you.

Unfortunately, right now, an estimated 77% of all jobs (60% in the U.S. and 80% worldwide) require little to no creativity, decision-making, or independent judgment. But if you are working on innovation, you need someone who can *think with you*. And by focusing on capability over experience, you increase the chances you find that person.

Questions that assess whether they can co-create on a team.

When I ask the teams I've worked with in the last 10 years why their last major strategic effort failed, they rarely mention that the team didn't get along. But they do say that there were cracks in the team — roles that weren't being filled — and no one was able to step in to fill them. Because the world changes quickly, the work does too and

teams can't stay in their predetermined roles. Teams need to figure out new terrain together. You might ask candidates, "How would you handle a situation where it's become clear that there is a gap on your team?" Interviewees are often told to use "I" to get credit for work done, but "we" is probably a more realistic depiction of how work gets done. Then follow up to learn how they felt about the situation: Were they proud of catching the gap? Concerned that it existed in the first place? This will help you see if you are dealing with a team player or a know-it-all. You want to find people who can play together, filling in the gaps between predefined roles to get the work done.

Questions that uncover the kinds of things they love to work on.

If you're hiring for innovation, you need to ask what this person authentically brings to work. Ideas, after all, are not invented and grown in a vacuum; they grow and evolve by connecting previously separate elements. Figuring out what people genuinely care about lets you put people together who don't have the same approaches but who want to reach the same goal. It's that connection where innovation happens. But people need to be united around a shared purpose and focused on something that has meaning to them. Ask candidates, "What did you find meaningful about that project? What does that particular success say about what matters to you?" People want to match their purpose to the organizations they work for. And it's your job as the leader to align that purpose so that seemingly disparate people can come together into an "us" headed in the same direction.

Too often, leaders screen out perfectly good candidates because they don't understand how to hire people for co-creative problem solving. It's easy to forget that the job of a leader isn't to know all the answers but to create the conditions by which the entire team gets to learn and innovate.

In the end, the VP did hire Anand, and together they've realized the goals they set out to achieve.

Nilofer Merchant has personally launched 100 products amounting to \$18 billion in revenue, and has served on both public and private boards. Today, she lectures at Stanford, gives talks around the world, and has been ranked one of the most influential management thinkers in the world by Thinkers50. Her latest book is *The Power of Onlyness: Make Your Wild Ideas Mighty Enough to Dent the World*.