

# Questions to Ask Candidate's References



Never before has hiring the right person for your organization been so important. With such an emphasis on specialized skill sets and company culture, finding the perfect candidate is vital to the success of the entire company. While knowing what questions to ask and how to gauge responses during an interview is a necessary skill, there are other things you need to take into consideration as well. One facet that often goes overlooked is thoroughly vetting a candidate through their references. Sure, a person's references are most likely going to speak highly of them but if you ask the right questions, you'll glean some useful insight that you might have otherwise missed.

## What is Your Relationship to the Candidate?

If you ask this question at the outset of the conversation with a reference you gain context to process the information that is shared. Did the reference oversee the candidate in their previous job? If so, their insight might be especially valuable. Is the reference a co-worker that shared the same responsibilities? In this case, the information you get might be a little biased one way or another.

## Can You Verify A Candidate's Job Title and Dates of Employment?

While this question seems like a no-brainer, it's amazing how many hiring managers fail to ask it. Even this rudimentary information can tell you a lot about

a candidate. Were they in the same position with a company for a long time or do they show a history of never being in one spot for very long? Based on their job title, what were their responsibilities? Do these responsibilities align with what they would be doing in their new role with you?

## **Can You Tell Me About their Job Performance?**

It's easy for anyone applying for a job to beef up their resume with items like inflated sales numbers or claiming responsibility for managing a huge budget and large number of people. The only way to make sure the information on someone's resume is accurate is to ask. If a reference is able to verify the information, great! On the other hand, if there are gaps in the information, it's a sure sign you need to ask some tougher questions to get clarification.

## **What Are the Candidate's Strengths and Weaknesses?**

This question is worth its weight in gold. When you're considering hiring someone, you're going to want to know how they'll fit in culturally and if they have the skills needed to excel. Equally important however, is having an idea of what their weaknesses are. Weaknesses aren't a bad thing, everyone has them, but knowing what someone's shortcomings are will allow you to further deduce if they are a good fit. There's no more reliable source for this information than a previous employer who knows the candidate well, so make sure you don't let this question fall through the cracks.

## **What Was it Like to Work With the Candidate?**

When you ask a reference what it was like to spend a day working with the candidate you'll gain some critical insight into who they are as a person. Were they jovial and fun-loving? Or were they task-oriented preferring to keep to themselves? Did they get along well with others and demonstrate a willingness to work as a team? Or were they primarily concerned with fulfilling their own

duties? How well did this person take direction? Were they open to new ideas and ways of doing things?

## **Why Did the Candidate Leave Their Previous Job?**

While this question can reveal red flags like someone being let go from a previous job, it also gives you an idea of how long they might stay with your company should you end up hiring them. Does this person have a tendency to jump ship thinking the grass is always greener? Or have they demonstrated loyalty in their previous posts?

## **Would You Hire This Candidate Again, and Why or Why Not?**

If you only have time to ask one question, this should be it. A reference's response to this single question can sum up everything that might be revealed in a lengthier conversation. If the reference says they would hire the individual back in a heartbeat, you've probably got a quality candidate. However, if they say no or seem unsure, you might want to do a little digging.

Hiring the wrong person for the job can be costly. A 2017 survey conducted by Career Builder found that companies lost an average of \$14,900 for each bad hire they made. While there is no way to tell for certain how a candidate will perform until they're hired, consistently hiring the wrong people can be devastating for the bottom line. If you think it's difficult to manage with the position open, just imagine how difficult it will be to manage a bad hire.

If you ask the right questions in the interview and take the extra step to ask references some poignant questions, you'll arm yourself with all the information necessary to choose the right person for the job.

As a [Regulatory and Quality recruiter](#), I can help create a list of essential questions to send to candidate's references. I help life sciences employers in the [biotech, medical, and pharmaceutical industries in the Bay Area](#). Contact me, Jeff King, at [jkking@rqfocus.com](mailto:jkking@rqfocus.com) or (541) 639-3501.

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# Odd But Effective Interview Questions



Most candidates are prepared for the cliché questions.

*What are your strengths and weaknesses?*

*What do you enjoy most about your job?*

If you stick to predictable interview questions, it can be hard to find the right person for the job. Asking strange, and what might seem irrelevant questions, can show interviewers how candidates react to pressure, especially when there is no “right” answer.

Using effective interview questions can help you weed out the fakes and find candidates with not just the skill set but personality that you need to get the job done. As a specialized [Quality and Regulatory Recruiter](#), I have developed critical thinking questions that are appropriate for most businesses. Please use the comment box below to let me know other critical thinking questions that work well for your interviews.

## **Tell me about a risk that you took outside of work?**

This question is especially useful if you are looking for someone with an

entrepreneurial mindset. For example, a manager or team leader.

Investor, Steven Cohen, made money on risks and people. He asked candidates about risks they took during interviews. Doing so, helped Steven decipher if candidates could take a risk in a controlled way.

## **What didn't make it on your resume?**

Some of our best life accomplishments are not on our resumes. Candidates might answer in a variety of ways, include educational, personal, or volunteer accomplishments. This helps you understand what is important to your candidate outside of work.

## **How would your colleagues describe you?**

Great team members are self-aware. The skill improves communication and creates a higher sense of empathy. Asking how colleagues describe themselves is a great way to determine self-perception. Compare their thoughts to references.

## **Name as many uses for a brick in one minute.**

Almost every job requires you to think on your feet. If you use the cliché interview questions, it will be impossible to capture spontaneous, creative thinking. Naming the uses for a brick is similar to the “sell me a pen” technique.

## **Tell me a joke**

We all know at least one joke, right? Even if it's a knock, knock joke. This question is not to see how funny candidates are - unless you are hiring a comedian! Jokes help us determine if the candidate will fit into company culture. If the candidate tells a racist or sexist joke, politely smile and move onto the next candidate. Asking to tell a joke also shows how a candidate acts under pressure and problem solves.

# What type of animal are you?

If you are uncomfortable with having them tell a joke, or if they just can't come up with one, another option would be to ask them what type of animal most closely resembles their personality and why. You can get some pretty good insights as to their personality and if they might fit in with your group if they describe a very passive animal, a very aggressive animal, or a more "middle of the road" animal.

Finding the right employee requires interviewers to not ask traditional questions. Most candidates will be rehearsed for the typical interview questions. Instead, be creative and ask questions that show their personality. If you need help through the hiring process, contact me, Jeff King at [jeff@rqfocus.com](mailto:jeff@rqfocus.com) or (541) 639-350. I serve job seekers and employers in the [biotech, pharmaceutical, and medical device industries](#).