

Are You Asking Job Applicants the Right Questions?

For 500 years, Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa has confounded viewers attempting to "read" her expression. Like the Mona Lisa, every job applicant presents an enigmatic façade. The hiring manager must look at candidates from all angles to see them in their proper light.

By gathering information from the application, during the interview, and in background checks, managers can begin to see the true picture. More subtle hues are filled in by knowing what follow-up questions to ask candidates and how to read the responses.

But what should we, as security managers, be looking for beneath the surface when we screen job applicants? Sometimes it is easier to know what you don't want. Using that adage as a guide, I look for the red flags that can indicate who might not be a suitable candidate.

The application. The process begins with the written application. The information gathered in this document provides the basis for the interview and the background checks. For instance, are there gaps in the applicant's previous employment history or in time periods during which no residence is specified? If so, I jot these down as questions to be answered at an interview, should there be one.

An additional red flag is the omission of a supervisor's name from the employment history. This lapse could be inadvertent forgetfulness, or it could be an intentional attempt to conceal negative information the unnamed supervisor might have. In any event, it should be noted as another potential interview question.

Education is another section of the application that requires close reviewing. Many job applicants falsify some part of their educational background on applications. I have seen high school diplomas, associate degrees, bachelor degrees, and higher fabricated. Often the applicants who created these educational credentials did so with some basis in reality, but they materially misstated the facts. For instance, they may have attended the college they claim to have graduated from for one year without earning a degree.

A phone call to the school should resolve most questions. Any remaining discrepancies should be added to the list of potential interview questions. (It is a sad irony that many of these applicants would have met the job qualifications if they had honestly stated their level of education.)

Next on my list is to verify previous employment, and to talk with previous supervisors. Today, many companies have a policy of only confirming dates of employment, position held, and salary. However, many of the companies with restricted information policies, will nonetheless disclose their "rehiring" policy. That is, they will tell you if they would rehire this person, given the opportunity to do so. This information helps to fill in an important feature of the candidate's work profile. I always inquire if the previous employer would rehire my applicant.

For those companies that freely give out more information about previous employees, I always include questions about the applicant's integrity and character. In addition, I like to ask why the person left that job; if the answer differs from that given by the applicant, it signals another issue to be addressed in the interview.

It is important to contact personal references as well. (Many candidates, following the advice of endless books for job seekers, say that references are available on request. That approach can cause

annoying delays later. If possible, get candidates to give this information on the application, so that you do not have to recontact finalists for it during the checking process.)

When personal references are called, I recommend asking them one or two difficult questions that circumvent the usual laudatory response. Ask how well they know the candidate. Ask what some of his/her faults are. If the response is that the person has no faults, you know that you are not getting a candid answer.

To get the reference to be more forthcoming, you might explain that you want a balanced assessment of the candidate and that saying the applicant has no faults can actually work against him or her. When I take this approach, references usually then tell me of some minor flaw in the applicant's character. I pay close attention to those comments, and I look for any pattern that develops with responses from other references, or other sources. If a pattern emerges, it may be a sign of a more significant problem.

Interviews. Now it is time for the interview. Any red flag items uncovered in the background checks and verifications of information on the application must be addressed to your satisfaction in this meeting. For example, in asking why applicants why they left a particular job, I do not accept as sufficient the answer that they left to move to the next job. That answer is superficial. The question is why they chose to change jobs at that time.

Getting at that deeper explanation requires some probing. If they say they wanted to move on, it was time, or they needed a change, I usually respond by asking them why. I also ask them what was wrong with the previous job and what they are looking for in the next job.

If they answer, "I don't know," to any of these queries, an immediate red flag should go up. You may have some clueless applicants who just want to aimlessly fill their time while making a few dollars. But they would probably have no concept of integrity or security, nor any loyalty to your company.

If, on the other hand, applicants state that they left previous positions for better advancement opportunities, to reach their potential, to fully use their skills, or to grow and develop, you may have a winner. These answers are all good signs that your applicants are motivated and responsible. And these candidates are more likely to be responsible and security conscious too.

Tone. The tone of the interview is important. Putting most applicants at ease should be one of your goals, unless you are interviewing someone for a top echelon position. Then, I say, figuratively, chase them as far and as fast as you must throughout the interview. Chasing, in this context, means demanding detailed support for every position and principle the applicant espouses. But this article concerns itself, for the most part, with entry or mid level positions. There is no real need to intimidate these applicants during the interview.

To break the ice, ask the applicants to tell you about themselves. This usually puts them at ease by allowing them to start talking without worrying whether their answers are correct. Some people may be so nervous about the interview that you have to work harder at putting them at ease. If asking them to talk about themselves doesn't work, you may try asking them about their hobbies, the local sports team, local news, weather, or any topics you can think of to open them up.

If they start to smile, breathe deeper, and drop their shoulders a bit, you've probably connected a little with them and put them at ease. At that point, they are more likely to display their true feelings. You can then better judge their integrity and suitability for the position you have available.

Along similar lines, try asking a question that really has no right or wrong answer. This tactic will allow you to hear how the applicants talk, reason, and analyze issues. Maybe they will even give a little insight into themselves. You may start seeing shades and highlights forming in their self portrait.

It can also be useful to let applicants tell you about something they enjoy outside of work, something important to them, or something they cherish. This type of conversation can be revealing. For example, one time, a somewhat reticent job applicant metamorphosed in front of me when she supplied some information about her outside interest in orienteering. Orienteering is a sport in which an individual uses a map and a compass to find points in a wooded landscape. A standard orienteering course consists of a start, a series of control sites, and a finish. The route between control sites is not specified, and is entirely up to the orienteer. This element of route choice and the ability to navigate through the forest are the essence of orienteering.

Talking about this topic and the lessons she had learned in self-reliance and resourcefulness while roughing it in nature completely changed this applicant's demeanor. She literally took command of that interview, answering all further questions with a heightened confidence and energy that might have gone untapped and, therefore, unnoticed had the interview panel not asked about outside interests. The result was a much better picture of her integrity and security awareness.

Don't rush. One final recommendation. Don't be too quick to make your selection. If there is a clear winner, standing out from the competition, then go ahead and make your choice. But in many cases, the decision is not that easy to make.

You want to make sure from an ability standpoint and from a security perspective that you are choosing a qualified candidate with integrity. Therefore, you should review the application form, your notes about it, and your interview notes to see that all of your questions were answered to your satisfaction.

Hiring is probably the most important responsibility a manager has. One secret to success is to get the full picture before deciding which candidate would fit best into the corporate scene.

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