

# INTERVIEWING:

*A Practical Guide for Selecting Officials*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Hiring an employee is one of the most important decisions' you as a supervisor must make. Filling your vacancy with the right person may not be a "life or death matter", but it does impact the ability of the Agency to fulfill its mission. **A good hiring decision is not made by accident and it deserves your best effort.** The information in this booklet is intended to help you plan and direct the employment interview and conduct reference checks in order to assess candidates you are considering for employment. Given the dynamics of today's work environment, supervisors are encouraged to include team leaders/technical supervisors as well as customers in the interviewing and hiring process. Final authority rests with you, the supervisor. If you find this information useful or if there is other information you need to make good hiring decisions, please contact the REE Employment Officer at 301-504-1398.

## **II. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

### **1. PLANNING**

Time spent planning will ensure the interview process proceeds smoothly and that you obtain the information needed to assess the candidates. You should:

- Review the position description and qualification requirements (refer to the vacancy announcement)
- Thoroughly review all candidate applications. For example, ask yourself:
  - What are the strengths/weaknesses of this candidate?
  - What are the candidate's relevant skills/experience?
  - Does the education fit the job requirements?
  - Is there evidence of the ability to communicate with individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds in a variety of situations?
  - Is there evidence of the ability to lead and accomplish work through others?
- Decide who you will interview. Although you are not required to interview all candidates, think about the perception of other candidates if you interview only one person
- Formulate questions and write them down. This will help ensure consistency that all candidates are asked the same questions.
- Allow 1-2 hours for the interview

### **2. CONFIRMING/SCHEDULING INTERVIEW**

Selecting officials are encouraged to confirm scheduled interviews with applicants in writing. Please note candidates on DEU and DEMO certificates can only be removed from consideration for Failure to Report for an interview when (1) confirmation of the interview was given to the applicant in writing and (2) the confirmation stated that failure to appear for the interview would eliminate them for further consideration. You can find a sample letter to send the applicant at: [http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/staffing\\_recruit/files/Sample%20Interview%20Confirmation.doc](http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/staffing_recruit/files/Sample%20Interview%20Confirmation.doc).

### **3. CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW**

After welcoming the candidate, spend a few minutes chatting informally. It will help you both relax.

Give a **brief overview** of the job and mission of the Agency

- Ask questions and listen
- Probe for additional information. Ask the candidate to elaborate on or clarify what was just said. (Although it is important that you write down a list of questions before you begin the interviews, you are not prohibited from asking additional questions)

Indirect probing is also an effective way to elicit more information. If you are silent for a few seconds after the candidate responds, that may allow him/her time to think of additional things to say; or you may use neutral phrases, such as: I see, or, oh? That may prompt the candidate to elaborate further. **The point is that in this phase of the interview, it is the candidate who should be doing most of the talking**

- Take notes, but don't try to capture every word. It's distracting to you and the candidate
- Allow the candidate time to ask questions. This is where you can elaborate on the Agency, your lab, and/or the specific job
- Inform the candidate about the many benefits in working for the Agency such as maxiflex work schedules, leave, benefits, holidays, transit subsidy or free parking, etc., or refer them to the ARS website at [www.ars.usda.gov](http://www.ars.usda.gov).

Some suggested interview questions can be found in Section III, TIPS ON INTERVIEWING.

#### **4. CLOSING**

If the candidate won't be considered further, close the interview diplomatically. If you are interested in the candidate, you may:

- Ask if the candidate is still interested in the position
- If so, inform the candidate of the next step. Be prepared to advise on the timeframe for selection and how the selectee will be notified
- Inform the candidate that references will be checked

- Thank the candidate for coming for the interview, applying for the position, and/or having an interest in the Agency and position
- Write up your notes

## 5. FOLLOW-UP

A good customer service practice is to write all candidates acknowledging the interview and thanking the person for showing an interest in the Agency. You may wish to do so after a selection has been made.

# III. TIPS ON INTERVIEWING

## 1. QUESTIONS/ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Careful thought should be given to constructing the interview.

Together with the KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities) and SPFs (selective placement factors) you used in the vacancy announcement, the kind of questions asked will determine the type of person you select for your position. There are various assessment tools available to evaluate candidates including:

**A. The Behavioral Event Interview (BEI).** The candidate **describes, in detail, a past experience that demonstrates the KSA or competency to a panel.** The panel is facilitated by a person trained in the method. The phases of the process include planning, orientation, interviewing, debriefing, and follow-up documentation. Additional information can be obtained from the AFM SMART Center.

**B. The Traditional Interview.** Questions are developed prior to the interview. The same basic questions are asked of each candidate. Additionally the interviewer can,

- **Encourage the candidate to give an example of a real situation, activity, or problem** that includes: a description of the context, or environment; evidence or characteristics of the audience; the action taken; and the outcome.

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Asking yes and no questions will severely limit the kind of information you obtain from the interview. The only yes or no question you should ask is, “Are you still interested in this position?”

## **2. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED**

- What interests you most about our position?
- What role do you take in a group situation? Give an example
- Why do you want to work for our Agency?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?
- What are the two biggest accomplishments in your life?
- What has been your greatest technical achievement in your current position?  
Your career?
- Describe your participation in professional associations
- What planning processes have you found useful? In what way do you feel you have improved in your planning abilities/methods?
- How does your past experience impact your qualifications for this position?

## **3. SUPERVISOR & MANAGER COMPETENCIES**

When preparing for supervisory or managerial interviews (whether using traditional or BEI), all candidates must be evaluated using the following two competencies:

**A. Leading People.** This competency includes conflict management, cultural awareness, team building, mentoring, and integrity/honesty (either work-related or outside experience). Ask each candidate to describe a situation, problem, or event that demonstrates:

- Ability to work with a diverse group.

- Ability to prevent or mediate a conflict or disagreement or overcome dissension in a group
- Ability to instill trust and confidence in others
- Use of skills and abilities as a leader under stressful conditions

**B. Building Coalitions/Communications.** This competency includes oral and/or written communication, influencing/negotiating, partnering, interpersonal skills, and political savvy. Ask each candidate to describe a situation, problem, or event that demonstrates:

- Ability to express ideas or give instructions not easily or readily understood by their audience
- Ability to make presentations to groups in order to gain acceptance of an idea by the group
- Negotiating skills to gain approval for change or modification to programs, procedures, etc.

#### **4. INTERVIEWING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Concentrate on the candidate's technical and professional knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences and interests, not on the disability. Remember, you cannot interview a disability, hire a disability or supervise a disability. You can interview a person, hire a person, and supervise a person.

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) separates the hiring process into three stages: **pre-offer**, **post-offer** and **employment**. At each stage, the rules differ regarding the permissibility of disability-related questions and medical examinations. Definition of a "Disability-Related Question" means a question that is likely to elicit information about the disability. Definition of "Medical Examination" is a procedure or test that seeks information about an individual's physical or mental impairments or health.

Therefore, the two most important questions for supervisors to address are:

- Is the question disability-related or is the examination medical?



- Where are we (i.e., at which stage - pre-offer, post-offer, or employment) in the employment process?

At the first stage (the pre-offer stage), the ADA prohibits all disability-related questions and medical examinations, even if the questions or examinations are related to the job. At the second stage (after the candidate is given a conditional job offer), the law allows all disability-related questions and medical examinations, as long as all entering employees in the job category are asked the questions or given the examinations. At the third stage (after the employee starts work), the law permits disability-related questions and medical examinations only if they are job-related and consistent with business necessity.

**The law requires that medical information collected at any stage must be kept confidential.**

For examples of some commonly asked questions on “Pre-employment Disability - Related Questions and Medical Examination Questions,” please refer to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission website at <http://www.eeoc.gov/policy/docs/medfin5.pdf>.

## **5. ACCOMMODATING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES FOR AN INTERVIEW:**

- Agencies application and interviewing procedures should comply with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA prohibits disability-related questions or medical exams before a job offer is made.
- Agencies employment offices and interviewing location(s) are to be accessible to candidates with mobility, visual, hearing, or cognitive disabilities.
- Be willing to make appropriate and reasonable accommodations to enable job candidates with a disability to present themselves in the best possible light. When setting up the interview explain what the hiring process involves and ask the individual if he or she will need reasonable accommodations for any part of the interview process. For example, if a person who is blind states he or she will need help filling out forms, provide the assistance; provide an interpreter for a candidate who is deaf, if he or she requests one; provide details or specific instructions to candidate with cognitive disabilities, if this type of accommodation is required.

- Do not let a rehabilitation counselor, social worker or other third party take an active part in or sit in on an interview unless the candidate requests it.
- Make sure that all questions asked during the interview are job-related. Speak to essential job functions regarding the position for which the candidate is applying, as well as why, how, where, when, and by whom each task or operation is performed. Do not ask whether or not the individual needs an accommodation to perform these functions, because such information is likely to reveal whether or not the individual has a disability. This is an ADA requirement to ensure that a candidate with a disability is not excluded before a real job offer is made.

## **6. INTERVIEW DO's & DON'Ts**

### **DO...**

- Be friendly to establish rapport, help the candidate feel at ease
- Practice active listening
- Keep the interview under control. If the interviewee becomes verbose or drifts off the subject, it's your job to get back on track
- Use professional terminology to evaluate the candidate's knowledge
- Consider potential as well as current ability
- Note the kinds of questions the candidate asks. Do they concern opportunities for self-improvement and increased responsibilities, or only pay and fringe benefits?
- Be objective. Know yourself and your stereotypes.
- Be honest, even if it means saying something negative (e.g., the facility is old and there is not much office space). Just don't overemphasize it.
- Observe the candidate
- Relax and enjoy the interview

## **DON'T...**

- Talk too much
- Use a rigid or overly standardized approach. If you've prepared your questions, you can be flexible during the interview, knowing that you can easily get back on track
- Try to impress the candidate with your knowledge
- Hide demands of the job. A good candidate reacts favorably to these
- Make commitments you may regret or are not authorized to make
- Be satisfied with surface facts. Look for reasons, and probe
- Take detailed notes. It may keep you from observing nonverbal responses and maintaining the conversational flow
- Ask questions in a way that indicates the answers you want
- Ask convoluted or over-defined questions
- Be aggressive or evasive
- Raise candidates' hopes when they are not likely to be selected

## **IV. CHECKING REFERENCES**

You have completed the interviews, but you are not done yet.

A resume and interview are great tools, but **contacting references is crucial to verify information given by the candidates.**

Normally, you will conduct a reference check on one or two top finalists. Reliability of the reference check is based on the concept that past performance is a good predictor of future performance. Reference checks will help:

- Verify information the candidate provided both in the application and during the interview
- You gain insight into who your candidates are and how they behave in the workplace
- **Never make an offer** (remember, you can only make a **tentative** offer) **without first doing an exhaustive check** of the candidate's background. A comprehensive reference check goes back 5 years and includes contacting a minimum of three sources that are knowledgeable about the candidate's abilities. Contact enough references to confirm the quality of your selection

## 1. WHICH REFERENCES SHOULD I CHECK?

- Academic references—institutions **and** teachers/professors
- Current and former supervisors—immediate supervisors are often the best sources for reliable information about a candidate's work performance
- Your network of professional associates/associations
- Candidate's personal references—they will generally provide a favorable reference. Ask them for names and positions of other persons who know the candidate and contact them
- Candidate's colleagues—business or work associates will sometimes provide an objective analysis of the candidate's strengths and weaknesses
- Seek your own independent sources who know the candidate

## 2. TIPS FOR CHECKING REFERENCES

- Ask only job-related questions and ask the same questions about each candidate

- Ask open-ended questions and probe
- Use telephone reference checks rather than mail inquiries since they are faster and less time consuming
- Keep the conversation casual. If you speak to the person in a relaxed manner, you will get better results
- If the reference provider keeps talking, keep listening and asking more questions. Seek out judgmental comments and try to read between the lines of what the person is telling you. A reference who says the candidate tried hard or is a people person may be saying such things to avoid talking about real problems or issues
- Always check dates and times the person giving the reference worked with or supervised the candidate, and then determine if there is a personal relationship
- Give only a general description of the vacant position. Too many details may bias the reference person in formulating their answers. As in the case of the employment interview, let the other person do most of the talking
- Do not use leading questions such as “He’s a good manager, isn’t he?”
- Do not let a prominent characteristic, such as a good academic record, overshadow less obvious or possibly negative traits, such as a poor leave record
- Speak to someone in addition to the current supervisor. A dishonest supervisor may try to unload a problem employee by giving a glowing reference
- Listen carefully to the answers you are given and take notes

### **3. THE REFERENCE CHECK: QUESTIONS TO ASK**

When contacting a reference, we recommend you begin with,

“Thank you for taking a few moments to provide information about our job candidate. The information you provide will be considered along with other information submitted by the applicant and other references. Please be aware that under the Federal government’s employment policies, we may become obligated to disclose the information to the applicant or others involved in the selection or review process.”

Then, ask and record the answers to the following:

- How long have you known the candidate?
- In what capacity were you associated with the candidate?

As employer? Supervisor? Co-worker? Friend? Other?

- Using a scale of 1-5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate the candidate in comparison to most others you have known

**RATINGS**  
**1 2 3 4 5**

Work ethic?	_____
Work quality?	_____
Technical skills?	_____
Writing skills?	_____
Communication skills?	_____
Interpersonal skills?	_____
Reliability & dependability?	_____
Receptivity to feedback?	_____
Adaptability to change?	_____
Ability to deal with job stress?	_____

- What would you consider to be some of this candidate’s most positive attributes or strengths?
- What would you consider to be some areas where this person is not as strong or needs to improve?

What type of work environment does the candidate require to excel?

- Describe the candidate's initiative, personality, and negative habits
- How does the candidate get along with customers? Coworkers? Supervisors and managers?
- Is the candidate reliable? Honest? Trustworthy? Of good character?
- Would you rehire the candidate?
- Is there any other information concerning the candidate's qualifications, character, conduct and general fitness I should know about?

## V. PROHIBITED QUESTIONS & PRACTICES

Please do not put yourself in a position of engaging in a prohibited personnel practice related to employment and selection. As a selecting official with the authority to take, direct others to take, recommend, or approve any personnel action, **you must not:**

- Discriminate for or against any employee or candidate for employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status
- Deceive or willfully obstruct any person with respect to such person's right to compete for employment
- Influence any person to withdraw from competition for any position for the purpose of improving or injuring the prospects of any other person for employment
- Appoint or employ a relative to a position over which you exercise jurisdiction or control as a selecting official
- Take or fail to take a personnel action with respect to a candidate for employment as a reprisal

- Discriminate for or against a candidate for employment on the basis of conduct which does not adversely affect the performance of the candidate or the performance of others (except for criminal behavior)



## **RECORDING A PROFILE OF IMPRESSIONS**

Candidate's Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are the candidate's strongest assets in relation to the requirements for this position?
2. What are the candidate's shortcomings in relation to this position?
3. The candidate seemed knowledgeable about/ interested in:
4. Contradictions or inconsistencies noted were:
5. The candidate was evasive about:
6. Overall, the candidate responded to questions with: (e.g., openness, confidence, poise, directness, glibness, evasiveness, etc.) Examples?
7. Overall, reference checks were positive, mediocre, less than positive. Examples/key descriptions or characteristics?

### **SUPERVISORY & MANAGERIAL COMPETENCIES:**

**Leading People** is there evidence demonstrating:

1. Ability to gain commitment and support from others?
2. Ability to develop solutions to management problems?
3. Ability to establish performance objectives?
4. Ability to foster cooperative working environment among employees?
5. Ability to deal with morale and employee concerns?

**Building Coalitions/Communication** is there evidence demonstrating:

1. Conflict resolution?
2. Working as a member of a team?
3. Expression of ideas and views that others understand and that influence (persuade) them to act?