



Sharp interview questions

TN65 Training Notes series: Management

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These notes are designed to help those tasked with interviewing candidates for a post on the staff of a church or mission agency. A formal interview can be a pretty blunt tool in a process of selecting candidates for a position, but it becomes much sharper if the right kind of questions are brought into play.

These notes are designed to supplement Article A17, *Staff selection step-by-step* on this website and, in particular, part C which deals more widely with the interview stage of the process. The idea is to draw candidates out to reveal the kind of information you need to help you make an informed judgement.

There are two sections in these extra notes. The first gives ideas for starter questions. The second looks at the vital art of asking the right supplementaries.

It is important that each candidate is asked the same starter questions, but the key to success in most formal interviews is the choice and manner of the supplementaries. These will, for the most part, depend on the answers given to the starters and have the power to lift the interview away from the wooden approach of an interrogation into the dynamic of a lively discussion. The art of good interviewing lies not so much in the choice of starters but in the immediate reaction to their answers. This is where interviewing experience counts.

Note that in all this there will need to be specific and technical questions about the post applied for, based on the written application. You will need to discover whether candidates have the right qualifications and experience to do the job, and the appropriate character that you have identified in the person profile.

1: Sharp starter questions: key areas to explore

All of these should lead to good supplementary question opportunities (see section 2). Avoid asking two questions at once – keep the second for a supplementary to keep the dynamic alive and to save confusing the candidate.

Select and relate questions like these to the requirements for the post in terms of skills, experience, gifting and personality. There are far too many ideas here for one interview.

1 **Reasons for moving on**

- “Why are you looking to move on now?” – especially if successful in their present role or if they have only been there a short time.
- “Why this post in particular?”

Are they seeking to develop themselves, are they in a redundancy situation through no fault of their own or are they running away from something? Try not to let them get away with a slippery answer, so be ready to challenge.

2 **Their view of their match with the post**

- “In the person profile which element listed do you feel you match least well?”
- “In the job description which element would you find easiest, and which areas would you struggle with?”
- “Are there any aspects of the papers about this job which cause you any concern?”

Expect them to have thought about this carefully and so have immediate answers. Be surprised if they have to reread the papers for the job to answer the question.

3 **The boundaries of competence and challenge**

- “If we offered you this post, what would scare you the most about taking it on?”
- “Describe one of the most difficult challenges you have faced at work.”

It might be a conflict or other management issue, or technical competence, or a new area such as up-front presentation. Ask supplementaries on how they will deal with it.

4 **How others would describe them**

- “Tell me how an honest friend might sum you up in a reference for this post.”
- “How do you think your present manager would describe you to us?”
- “In what ways might your church Minister find you frustrating or difficult?”

Note whether they talk about personality and character or just skills, strengths and weaknesses. How do they see their weaknesses and what are they doing about them?

5 **Current challenges**

- “If you gave yourself an annual appraisal today, what would be the areas of your present role that you would list as needing training or improvement?”
- “Describe an area of work or life in which you are improving at the moment.”

This is another aspect of self-perception to see whether candidates are seeking to develop themselves or if they are content with their present performance.

6 **Their homework on your church or organisation**

- “What excites you most about this church’s (or organisation’s) vision?”
- “How would you improve our website to give a more helpful overview?”

Don’t expect knowledge of what they cannot have easily found, but anything they have been sent in print or on the website is fair game here.

7 **Questions around the CV and application**

- “Can you explain what happened in 2009 as your CV has a gap there?”
- “How would you see your recent MBA course applying to this post?”

It is quite appropriate to pick up specifics from the CV or application form.

8 **Areas of failure and lessons learned**

- “Give a recent example of where you feel you have failed in your present role.”
- “What have you not achieved during the past year that has disappointed you?”

This can be followed up by questions on lessons learned and the difference this has made since, or on the fear of failure for the job being applied for. For a post involving communication or reception skills, you can ask about an example where there was misunderstanding or when the candidate upset someone unnecessarily.

9 **Areas of success**

- “Can you give us an example of a conflict situation that you handled well?”
- “What has been one of your most satisfying achievements this past year?”

Aspects of current work (or widen it to life) where the candidates feel they have done well (or can’t they cope with that idea?).

10 **Frustrations and anger**

- “What frustrates you in your present position (or in life, or about other people)?”
- “What makes you angry in the work environment?”

A good question to see if a Christian can talk about such things – but supplement with ‘How do you express it?’, ‘How do you get over it?’, ‘Give us an example’, etc.

11 **Impacting other people**

- “Describe a successful team that you have led... or a situation where you have fallen out with a work colleague...or the impact you have had on your boss...”
- “Describe how you have developed someone else into a star player.”

Choose something that is required in the post and focus on that.

12 **Areas of spirituality**

- “How have you grown as a disciple of Christ in the past year?”
- “How do you pray?”

This is an area where challenging supplementaries are a must or people can get away with the answer they want you to hear. It assumes the post has an Occupational Requirement (OR) for a Christian.

2: Sharp supplementary questions: the secret of success

The real information about the candidate is usually to be found in their response to the supplementaries, those further questions that you cannot prepare much in advance but which flow straight out of what the candidate is saying. This means you need to be listening with great care to everything the candidate is telling you (not thinking ahead to your next starter question!). Most inexperienced interviewers find they can only focus on starter questions which severely limits the effectiveness of the process.

1 Making sure the primary questions are answered

These are important if the candidate's answer is not on target.

- Clarification if necessary: "Let me put that question another way...."
- The Radio 4 'Today' technique: "But you haven't answered my question...."
- Helpful steering (less blunt): "But that's not quite what I had in mind...."

All of these can be interruptions if necessary but, unlike the next group, not to move on but to stay put with that question. Never let a candidate ramble for five minutes and *then* tell them they have not answered the question!

2 Ideas for interruptions to move on

These questions can be quite blunt:

- "Why was that?"
- "How did you discover that?"
- "But did it make any difference?"
- "That was awkward. Why did you not deal with it on the spot?"

The key point with these is that they are interruptions. Forget about being polite and letting the candidate drone on. Jump in as soon as the opportunity comes. If they deal with that well enough, let them return to their previous point and continue if that is helpful. Except with quiet or really nervous candidates, it is good to get a sense of cutting edge into the interview.

3 Drawing out a fuller answer

Similar to 2 above but as a gentle next step in the sequence, not as interruptions. So the tone of voice will be different.

- "Can you give me a practical example of how that worked out?"
- "Why do you think they said that?"
- "What did you learn from that experience?"
- "That sounds interesting – what happened next?"

These are vital for candidates who say little and need drawing out. These often need to be designed to earth something that has been described. You may use several of these in the answer the candidate is giving to just one question.

4 Case studies as illustrations

- "If I was a donor on the phone complaining about the begging letters I kept receiving, how would you go about making me feel I had been heard?"

- “If I was a member of staff you managed who had now arrived late into the office for three days in a row looking shattered, does this need pastoral care or a disciplinary procedure?”

These might be starter questions or might follow on naturally from an appropriate starter but asked of all candidates.

5 Challenges to their view

- “But, in your experience, are most people really as easy to manage as that?”
- “That’s all very well, but what if no one volunteered to help?”
- “But is that what St Paul had in mind in this passage?”

Challenge them in the hope that they will then show they can defend their viewpoint – an interview that develops into a lively debate can be excellent! But beware imposing your own views.

6 Challenges to their supposed knowledge

- “So you enjoyed that book. What were the author’s two main arguments?”
- “You say you are proficient in Microsoft Access. How can you use queries to delete data?”

This assumes you have read the book in question yourself and know Microsoft Office! It is sometimes necessary to call a candidate’s bluff.

7 The next level down

You can afford one or two ‘supplementaries of supplementaries’ but there will not be time for too much. So you might interrupt with a quick question and then challenge how they answer it. The more senior the post, the more you should challenge.

For all other aspects of the interview, refer to Article A17, *Staff selection step-by-step*, on this website and sections 9-11 in particular.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes then TN65. They are based on one section of a training event on selection procedures. See also Article A17, *Staff selection step-by-step* which these notes supplement. With the boot on the other foot, see Articles A22 and 23, *Job applications in Christian ministry*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on staff selection in a Christian context or if you want him to join an interviewing panel for a church post.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN65 under Management with a link to Structures.

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