

Interviewing for Safety

Asking the right questions

By **Jeffery E. LaBelle**

IT WAS A SUNNY DAY this past April when Lars walked in for his interview with Debbie at Baker Foods Inc. The position was for a forklift driver in the company's new warehouse. Let's listen in on the interview in progress.

Debbie: I understand you previously drove a forklift at Newcastle Co.

Lars: Yes, I did. I was one of the night-shift loaders for the past 2 years.

Debbie: Great. So you've been through all the required operator safety training?

Lars: Oh yes. I'm a very safe driver. In fact, most of us there were all very safe drivers.

Debbie: Most? Was there ever a time when you saw a fellow employee driving in an unsafe way?

Lars: Well, there was a slow night when a couple of the hot-shot drivers were drag racing their trucks to see who was the fastest.

Debbie: Wow. That could be dangerous. What did you do?

Lars: Well, nothing of course. I certainly don't want to be seen as a snitch. Plus if they get hurt, it's their own fault.

This example illustrates a conversation that if real may have prevented a poor hiring decision. Debbie is proud of the progress she and her colleagues have made in safety at Baker Foods, and safety is a core value at the site. Lars might not be a good fit at the site because he does not appear to have the safety values necessary to intervene in an obviously dangerous workplace situation.

This example illustrates how interviewing for safety values can provide insight into a person's core safety beliefs and historical involvement in safety practices. This can

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aid in determining
the best candidate
fit for an open posi-
tion and ultimately
help elevate the
site's safety culture.

Why Is This Approach Unique?

Shouldn't all employee interviews include questions about personal commitment to working safely? The author has found through personal interviews and research that specifically interviewing for safety values is not a common practice in modern organizations [Hartshorn, 1999, p. 107]. While safety-conscious companies recognize that performing work safely is critical to an employee maintaining a job after the interview, they rarely evaluate a candidate's personal commitment to safety before the offer.

Hiring an employee who is already safety conscious benefits both the candidate and company. The candidate's concern for him/herself and others will likely reduce risks of injury for all involved. A new hire with intrinsic safety values also means management needs to spend few to no resources to instill those values. Additionally, the safety culture is now enhanced by the safe hire decision rather than being diminished by a poor decision.

Behavioral Interviewing

Interviewing for safety values uses questions specifically designed to elicit responses about past behaviors. This method is more generally known as behavioral interviewing.

The basic premise behind behavioral interviewing is this: The most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation. It focuses on experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities that are job related. Traditional interviewing questions ask you general questions such as "Tell me about yourself." The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and works very differently (MIT Career Development Center, 2008).

The intent of interviewing for safety values methodology dovetails nicely with the behavioral interviewing method.



Behavioral interviewing is based on the Behavioral Consistency Principle, which essentially states that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar circumstance. Therefore, the questions that are asked of you will tend to focus on behavior, and attempt to evoke how you responded to a variety of specific personal and interpersonal situations and what results occurred from your actions (College of the Holy Cross).

The high-value questions offered later are designed to elicit factual information about a past safety experience (being behavior-based), rather than an opinion or thought about a hypothetical situation. The basic premise behind asking high-value questions is in accordance with the behavioral consistency method. U.S. Office of Personnel Management explains that this method is:

... a method of evaluating a person's training and experience by asking candidates to describe their major achievements in several job-related areas identified for the position, called job dimensions. The behavioral consistency method operates on the assumption that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance.

The practicality of this method of interviewing for safety values offers many benefits. Instead of asking for and receiving information relating to general safety awareness and perhaps attitude and knowledge, behavioral interviewing elicits situational information that can provide the interviewer with a greater insight into a candidate's ability and values regarding working safely (Washington State, 2009).

The STAR Method

Another common interviewing technique is to request STAR answers (MIT Career Development Center, 2008). These answers demonstrate the candidate's assessment of the situation, task, action and response to situation-based questions.

For example, when a candidate is asked to provide an example of a time when s/he felt the need for extra safety training for an upcoming job, s/he

might answer: "I was asked to do some preventive maintenance on our pumping equipment [situation]. We needed to replace a worn electrical cable to one of the pumps [task]. I remembered that these cables are all 220 V and my training only limited me to work on 110 V equipment, so I walked into the electrician's office [action] and he signed me up for the company training and assigned the job to one of the electricians [response]."

The intent is to ask questions that elicit task-based answers, not opinions or "right" answers.

Asking the Right Questions

"If you can ask the right questions, you're more likely to select a candidate who's right for the job" (Dun & Bradstreet). When an interviewer asks questions during an interview, s/he is seeking to determine not only whether the candidate has the right qualifications for the position, but also whether the person is a good fit for the organization's culture. Asking questions is a relatively inexpensive method of making these determinations. Candidate testing, site tours and checking references can be valuable tools when making a hiring decision, but the interview remains a key staple of the hiring process.

High-Value Questions

Questions can generally be divided into high- and low-value categories. High-value questions allow the candidate to offer specific details that help paint a picture of the candidate's qualifications and fit. These include questions that require STAR answers, are behavior-based, or provide insight into the candidate's values and work ethic.

The interviewing process necessarily redirects some employees away from their primary jobs temporarily. An interviewer who spends time with a candidate is not able to perform his/her additional daily work functions. It is the interviewer's job to assess a candidate's qualifications and fit in an efficient amount of time; high-value questions better serve this purpose.

Table 1 (p. 42) contains sample high-value questions that were assembled from the author's interviews with professional human resources managers and from referenced sources based on generally

Abstract: To successfully interview job candidates, the interviewer must accurately evaluate each candidate's qualifications against essential job functions. Questions relating to the candidate's experience and value system help develop a broader picture of the candidate's overall fit within the organization's safety system. Specific questions are presented as are ideas on how to incorporate safety questions into interviewing to help improve overall site safety culture.

accepted interviewing principles (Hartshorn, 1999, p. 107; JobBank USA). The eight questions can help determine a candidate's personal safety values and permit the candidate to provide specific examples of experiences s/he has had that share and highlight personal safety values.

Depending on the job's potential inherent dangers, different quantities and types of questions should be asked. An office worker might be expected to answer fewer (and possibly different) safety-related questions than a nuclear plant technician. Over the course of the interview, it is recommended that a candidate is asked at least three questions designed to gauge personal overall commitment to working safely.

When utilizing the interviewing for safety values process, the same legal rules apply as with any other job-related questioning. Questions that are off limits include inquiring about past injuries or illnesses or workers' compensation claims. Human resource professionals can supply more detailed information about these types of questions.

A good interviewer can use a candidate's answers to help determine whether the job requirements of working safely can be met and whether there is a good fit with the company's overall safety values. While many candidates will answer posi-

tively about their work-related safety experiences, a good interviewer will be able to compare answers to help identify which candidate has safety values and attitudes that match best with the organization's overall needs.

Low-Value Questions

The next category of questions is generally not recommended when interviewing for safety values. These are considered low-value questions. An interview for safety values should effectively evaluate a candidate's safety values and experiences in the most efficient time possible. The use of low-value questions generally does not further this endeavor. Low-value safety questions may include any questions that:

- elicit only a yes/no response;
- ask only the candidate's opinion;
- elicit an obvious or trite answer;
- require only a simple, unhelpful answer.

As this list illustrates, low-value questions elicit answers that most likely would not help the interviewer(s) make the best hiring decision based on the candidate's safety values of the candidate (Table 2).

When interviewing for safety values, candidate responses that indicate a lack of safety values and/or commitment to working safely should be

carefully weighed in the hiring decision, up to and including not offering the position. If working safely is a core value to an organization, why would that company want to hire someone who might not only place him/herself at risk, but also jeopardize other employees? Wouldn't it be advantageous to have a chance to evaluate a candidate's safety commitment and personal safety values in advance? One might envision this as placing a single drop of green dye into a large bucket of clear water. It will not color the water green immediately or drastically, but enough drops and the color eventually, and significantly, changes.

Multiple or Single Interviewers

Where the interviewing process includes several interviewers, safety value questions can be divided between interviewers. One benefit of an interview panel includes the ability to divide questions according to the asker's talent and experience (i.e., an asker with safety committee experi-

Table 1

Sample High-Value Questions

High-value questions	Intent
1) What are some of the most important safety rules at work? In what ways did you follow them?	To determine the candidate's awareness of safety rules and how s/he has used them.
2) Tell me about a time when you saw an employee working in an unsafe manner? What did you do?	To determine whether the candidate would speak up and demonstrate concern for fellow employees.
3) Tell me about a time when a new safety rule did not make sense or perhaps slowed you down?	To determine whether the candidate would follow the safety rule and perhaps notify his/her supervisor so better solutions could be determined.
4) Did you ever volunteer to be on a safety committee and if so, what activities were you involved in?	To determine whether the candidate is motivated to become involved in improving site safety and/or seeks out greater safety responsibilities.
5) Give me an example of how you have improved safety at work.	To determine what level of active involvement the candidate has had in improving the safety of his/her immediate environment.
6) Tell me about a time when you had to make a quick decision to prevent a dangerous situation from becoming a crisis.	To determine whether the candidate exhibited an intuitive reaction to protecting life and property when personal safety is at stake.
7) What safety training have you received? If you were hired, what safety issues would you expect to be trained on?	To elicit a rounded answer to gauge the depth and breadth of the candidate's experience. Answers may incorporate elements ranging from very basic safety (evacuations) to technical (PRCS) to perhaps even behavioral/cultural items.
8) What are some of the most important things you do or have done in order to keep yourself safe in the workplace?	Open-ended question allows the candidate to expand on other safety activities s/he has been involved in (e.g., JSAs, training, safety observations investigations, audits).

ence). This allows the asker with the applicable experience to better evaluate a candidate's answers to that question.

Dividing the questions also allows for multiple perspectives on the candidate's values. These multiple perspectives can provide for valuable discussion among interviewers, perhaps shedding more light on the candidate's capabilities and values. Additionally, "Using a panel to conduct the interviews may reduce the impact that personal biases of individual interviewers may have on the selection of an employee" (Arizona @ Your Service).

Using a single interviewer to ask safety value questions has benefits as well. For example, a candidate may be less nervous in a one-on-one interview and, therefore, feel s/he can expound more on the answers. Additionally, the logistics of setting multiple interviews can be difficult due to varying schedules, whereas a single interviewer need only coordinate one schedule.

Evaluating the Benefits

The practical benefits of using interviewing for safety values protocols are somewhat difficult to quantify but easy to identify. Some employers have a probationary period for new employees. According to University of California, Berkeley (2008), "The probationary period should be used to ensure that the applicant selected is qualified to perform the job and achieve regular status. During this period, you should carefully evaluate the employee's performance and general suitability for . . . employment." If during this period an employee exemplifies desired safety values (e.g., good housekeeping, following existing safety rules) the operation could say that the good hiring decision was helped by this interviewing technique.

Conversely, if an employee does not exhibit desired safety values during this time, an organization should seek to identify how s/he passed the interviewing process and/or consider reevaluating the types of safety values questions or interviewing methodology used.

Applying the interviewing for safety values technique, let's go back to the scenario at Baker Foods and see what the next candidate has to say.

Debbie: Was there ever a time when you saw an employee driving a forklift in an unsafe manner?

Ripley: Well, once this new guy came in and he forgot to check the floor of this trailer for damage before he started loading.

Debbie: What did you do?

Table 2

Sample Low-Value Questions

Low-value questions	Problem
1) Should safety be an important part of your job?	Question does not probe into core safety values and answer is obvious.
2) Did you use PPE on your past job?	Yes/no answer tells little about the experience or his/her personal safety values.
3) What would you do if the right safety equipment was not immediately available to safely do a job?	These types of questions elicit expected "to ask for help" answers that are too apparent and unhelpful.
4) Why do we have safety programs and safety rules?	Answer (either required by OSHA or to keep employees safe) is obvious and does not explain personal values.
5) Should you say something if you saw an employee getting ready to lift a box that was too heavy?	Yes/no answer tells little about personal values.
6) Which takes priority—safety or productivity?	Obvious answer is either safety or both. Neither answer provides much insight into a candidate's core value systems.
7) Agree or disagree: If a safety rule gets in the way, it is okay to skip it.	Who is going to say "agree" and expect to get hired?

Ripley: I immediately stopped him and reminded him that our safety training requires it. I said that our supervisor wants us to be safe and considers it a job requirement before any loading or unloading. I also told him that I'd feel horrible if he got hurt.

Debbie: What did he say to that?

Ripley: He said, "Ripley, I didn't know you cared so much." ■

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