

E-Tool #4 Interview Starter Questions

Just as you want applicants to be prepared for their interviews, you, too, need to prepare. The best way to do that is by knowing what you plan to ask them beforehand. The 23 questions in the following FREE eTool – Suggested Starter Questions for Interviewing – are a great way to begin the interview process. These starter questions are just the beginning, as each one might illicit answers that require more detail. Remember, you are trying to discover the real person beneath the surface. These should help you might find is candidates with good work value. Happy hiring!

SUGGESTED STARTER QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWING

1. “Please give me a quick summary of your personal and work experience/background?” This will help the candidate to relax because it’s a subject they should know a lot about: themselves. Among the details in this answer should be the dates of their employment. As they respond, you can compare these details to their application and/or résumé to be certain you have an accurate account of their work experiences.
2. “Tell me what your duties were (are) at your last (or current) job.” What were your responsibilities?” If they can’t give you the specifics, they either haven’t had the job they listed, or they never understood it. Example: If they claim they were in a management position, yet their job duties sound more like that of a clerk’s, you should consider the possibilities that they might be giving false or misleading information.
3. “What did you like best about your last (or current) job?” Good applicants will usually want to discuss their positive activities. You should then decide if what they liked is a match for the position for which you’re interviewing them.
4. “What did you like least?” If they were upset with their last or current job, try to determine if the same problem could also happen in your store. If their dislikes are part of your clerk’s day-to-day activities – for example, handling customer complaints – let them know up front that these dislikes do happen. It’s better to be open and honest and have someone start on the job fully aware of what’s required.
5. “Tell me why you decided to leave your last (or current) job.” You should ask this for each position they’ve worked. If something in their answer doesn’t sound like it was good judgment on their part, then ask more questions for clarification. If they had a problem, look for a pattern of problems. For example, if they left the job before having another, or without giving proper notice, you need to ask why. Most people have financial responsibilities and cannot afford to be without employment.
6. “What suggestions for improvements did you make at your last job?” Making suggestions is an indication of involvement and commitment. If they made none, they might not have been very involved with their work, or were there only for a paycheck. You don’t need people who won’t make at least some commitment to their job; however, keep in mind that it might have been possible that they were working for a supervisor who didn’t openly ask for or accept new ideas.

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7. "Tell me about the best boss you ever worked for, and why you felt that way." If the description sounds like you and your style of leadership, then you might have some compatibility. Two things vital to any selection of new team members are competency and compatibility. It's certainly important that a new employee has the requisite skills and talents you're looking for, but just as important is how their natural personality blends with you as a person and manager. Employing competent people who can do the job but constantly clash with your personality is a formula for disharmony and chaos. This will lead to poor customer service and a store that is destined for failure.
8. "What would you say is your greatest strength as an employee?" Do their strengths fit the position? "I love working with people," for example, is obviously a desirable strength; but beware, this is a stock answer. Ask them to give an example of why they "love working with people." Also, this "greatest strength" question shows whether they have ever thought about why they think they're been a good employee.
9. "In what areas would you like to improve?" Everyone has areas that need development. This is an important question, mostly to determine whether their self-esteem is high enough to accept that there are always areas that everyone can improve. If they won't admit it, it could also be that they won't be open to redirection while working for you.
10. "What have you done in your personal or work life of which you're most proud?" Everyone that has even a minimum of self-esteem should be able to give an example of an accomplishment. There might not be a particular answer here that's more right than another – the most important answer is any answer. That would demonstrate that they have given some thought to what they've done with their life. If they cannot give you an immediate answer, it might only be that they need more time to think about it. If that's the case, then
11. "What have you done in your personal or work life that you are least proud of?" As in the above question, the information you're seeking is the applicant's level of self-esteem. If a person can readily talk about a business or personal failure, it might demonstrate that they're strong enough to learn from their mistakes and are able to grow and improve themselves. People who learn from their experiences, good or bad, are ones who are open to direction to improve their work performance.
12. "What annoys you most about work?" Answers that indicate an applicant's dislike with what can be everyday occurrences in your store might tell you that this person could become a problem for you in the future. For example, the applicant might not be a team player and says, "I don't like other people always asking for my help. I have my own job to do!" This isn't what you want to hear from someone who is to work side-by-side with peers while helping customers. A good response would be that they get irritated when their peers in their past jobs did not deliver good customer service. This question looks for what will be compatible between the applicant's likes and dislikes and the work environment that exists in your store.

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13. "Tell me how you handled an unsatisfied customer in your earlier work experience." The ability to give good service under pressure is a vital requirement! Notice that the question asks how they did handle the situation, not how they would. This distinction is critical. It's very important to remember that past behavior and actions are the best predictor of future behavior. If the candidate has been in the retail industry before, they're likely to have dealt with an irate or at least mildly upset customer. If that's true, they should be able to tell you about a particular incident. Listen for empathy toward the customer and their concerns overall with diffusing the situation and keeping the customer's business. That is an invaluable talent.
14. "If I could speak with your past co-workers, what would they tell me about you and what you're like to work with?" Your goal with this question is to get their view of how well they work with team members. Your first thought might be that they will automatically say that they're a wonderful person to work with... and, they might be. Whatever they say, ask them to elaborate. For example, if they say that their past or current peers say they are great to work with, ask them why that is. You're trying to determine if they have given this issue some thought. Any employee who wants the partnership of others does think about what they are contributing and about how they can help others. If they answer that there are some people they don't always get along with, then ask for an explanation. For example, they may have a work ethic that is not matched by other less ambitious employees.
15. "Do you think that work policies are always to be followed?" If not, ask them when in their past work experiences did they "bend the rules?" "What were the circumstances? And what was the outcome?" The information you're seeking is whether the applicant has the imagination, strength of self-esteem and conviction to act on what they feel is best for the business. A good example of this would be if they state a situation where they had to go against policy to better serve the customer or, by their definition, to help the business in general. Conversely, if it sounds as though they utilized bad judgment, or they exhibited insubordinate or disruptive behavior, that might be a warning that the applicant might not be the type of team-player you're looking to hire.
16. "What do you know about our store and our company?" If both your store and the applicant have been in the market for a number of years, it wouldn't be unfair to expect that they should know something about your business. And possessing some knowledge might demonstrate that they also know and understand the community enough to have an identity or connection with your customers.
17. "Have you ever been a customer at our store?" It's good to have employees who utilize what you're selling!
18. "Outside of any physical or mental disabilities, tell me about any absences or tardiness you had from your past work, and why did those occurrences happen?" The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits employment decisions based on workers' real or perceived physical or mental impairments. The principle here is that these decisions, including the decision of selecting a new hire, should be a conclusion of the candidate's abilities to perform the core job responsibilities of the position. Your goal is to determine if, in fact, they did

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have many instances of tardiness and absences in past employment. If they have and cannot give you a satisfactory explanation as to why, you might have cause to believe that this kind of behavior could continue in your store.

- 19.** “What were your grades like in school?” Their response may not be indicative of their ability to do the job. On the other hand, someone who earned good grades might have been a person who could prioritize their actions and activities. This could indicate someone who’s responsible and has good follow-through.
- 20.** “Have you ever been convicted of a crime? If so, what were the circumstances?” You should not ask about arrests, as arrests are not a proof of guilt, only an alleged wrongdoing. Convictions of crimes involving theft or dishonesty should give you cause for concern, although past errors in ethics and judgment might not mean this behavior will repeat in the future. You’ll have to determine if you believe the candidate has learned from their mistakes sufficiently so as not to be a serious security risk in your business. Your company might also have a policy against hiring ex-felons. (It’s very possible that you won’t get a truthful answer to this question from someone who was convicted and this non-disclosure can be used in the future, should you decide to terminate them.) One other consideration: someone who is open and apparently contrite about their conviction might well be someone who will work hard to gain your trust and confidence.
- 21.** “Do you know of any reason that you could not physically do the required functions of the job?” (Hold this question until after you’ve described the job functions during a later stage of the interview process.) You want to be certain that the candidate can lift a minimum weight of goods and merchandise, and that they can be on their feet for most of their shift. If, in the future, they’re unable to handle the physical requirements of the job, and accommodations cannot reasonably be made to compensate for this, you might have a legal right to terminate their employment.
- 22.** “Do you know of any reason why you could not be to work on time each day or shift that you are scheduled?” The information you’re seeking is to find out if they have transportation challenges, or if they have a pattern of absenteeism or tardiness. It also indicates your expectations that timeliness at reporting for scheduled work shifts is mandatory.
- 23.** “Why would you want to work at our store?” A good candidate would say that they like people or that they are interested in promotion opportunities. Someone who says the biggest reason is that they are in need of a paycheck is probably someone who is first and foremost interested in where they can work to make the most money. That doesn’t make them a bad person, but it should give concerns about how long it will be before they replace your job with another one that pays more. What you want is a candidate who doesn’t just value wages, they should also be seeking satisfaction in a job well done by making customers happy and being part of a successful collaboration.