

# Spotting High Potential Employees

**W**hat's the true value of a top performing employee? According to HR expert, Dr. JOHN SULLIVAN, top performers out produce their peers by 25 to as much as 1,000%!

The differences between high performing employees and the rest of the pack are immense. They're harder working, more innovative, and produce better results. They possess better communication skills, better planning and organizing ability, greater capability to adapt, and greater ability to learn.

So how do you spot these high achievers? Here's your first tip – don't rely on traditional hiring techniques. Resumes don't tell the whole story. And the functional interviews most companies rely on typically highlight knowledge rather than results.

*Want to find the best employees more often? Add these steps to your hiring process:*

1. Identify the key behavioral traits of your current top performers.
2. Familiarize yourself with the common characteristics of each trait.



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3. Use behavioral interview questions to determine whether candidates possess the desired traits.

Behavioral interview questions are designed to uncover specific examples when a candidate demonstrated a trait you're seeking. Past performance is widely viewed as the best indicator of future behavior, so a candidate who has already exhibited the traits you seek is most likely to exhibit those traits again.

## THE TRAITS OF SUCCESS

In every company and in every job, key performance traits for top performers will vary. But as a start, here are several behavioral traits that are typically linked to superior performance.

To help with your hiring process, I've included a few sample behavioral interview questions you can use to evaluate each trait.

### Success Trait #1: Initiative

Most top performing employees are "take charge" kinds of people. They don't wait to be told what to do; they look for problems and opportunities and assume responsibility for them. To determine if a candidate will show initiative in your firm, ask targeted questions that force the candidate to provide specific examples of where he or she demonstrated initiative in previous jobs.

Listen for examples such as completing more work than what's required or expected, taking risks that resulted in success, and making an effort toward continuous improvement. Below are a few sample questions that will help you uncover characteristics of initiative.

- Tell me about a time when you took initiative and went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Tell me about a time when you created a new process or program that was considered risky. What was the result?
- Tell me about a time when you encountered obstacles while pursuing an important professional goal. Did you reach the goal? How?

### Success Trait #2: Personal Effectiveness

Personal effectiveness encompasses everything from how a potential employee interacts with others, to how strong a sense of confidence and professionalism they display. You should be looking to find out if the candidate is confrontational, has a positive self-image, and can focus clearly on goals and objectives. Some sample questions to help you determine how effective a candidate is on a personal level are:

- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- What are your top three personal and business goals? How do you measure your success in terms of reaching those goals?
- Have you ever been displeased with your own performance? When, why, and what did you do about it?
- Describe a specific goal you set for yourself and how successful you were in meeting it.

### Success Trait #3: Flexibility

There are certain positions that require a higher level of flexibility than others in order to ensure success. For example, a line manager in a plant may need to demonstrate a different level of flexibility.

ity than, say, a chemical engineer testing the safety of a new product. However, there are certain universal situations in which every employee needs to exhibit the ability to “bend”. A strong candidate should be able to demonstrate creativity when problem solving, show that he or she can compromise in challenging situations, and find alternate ways to succeed when faced with roadblocks.

*Here are a few questions you can ask to evaluate a candidate's ability to demonstrate flexibility:*

- Describe the most creative idea that you've implemented to solve a problem. How did you come up with the solution?
- Tell me about the most difficult challenge you faced in trying to work cooperatively with someone who did not share your ideas. How did you deal with the situation?
- Tell me about a situation when you abruptly had to change what you were doing. What was the outcome?
- Describe a situation that required you to do a number of things at the same time. How did you manage your time? How successful were you?

### **Success Trait #4: Knowledge**

One of the most valuable traits for a job candidate to demonstrate in an interview is his or her range of knowledge. As the interviewer, you may be looking for functional product knowledge, comprehensive knowledge of the market or territory, or basic critical thinking skills. Depending on your specific job market however, and the skilled labor shortage that experts are predicting, you may find a need to be flexible in certain areas of this part of the interview. The best way for you to discern if a potential candidate has enough expertise is to delve further into his or her past by asking these questions:

- Tell me about products or services that were sold or implemented primarily because of your efforts. What was your role? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you recognized a change in your market or territory. What did you do? How successful were you?

- How have you kept on top of the current trends in your area of expertise?
- What process do you use to solve problems? Tell me about a time you had to analyze information and make a recommendation.

### **Success Trait #5: Teamwork**

Whether your company employs five people or 5,000, the cornerstone of achievement will always be teamwork. Finding a group of people to work together simultaneously toward a common goal can often be a daunting task. Personalities and egos can get in the way, and often result in a delay in progress. Considering this point, every candidate you hire should be hand-selected carefully with the entire “team” in mind. The best candidates will be able to demonstrate that they can accept constructive criticism, deal with controversy, and understand that others can provide valuable ideas.

*These questions will help you assess a candidate's willingness to be a team player:*

- Give me some examples of how you encouraged others to share their ideas with you. Were their ideas useful?
- Tell me about a time when you felt it necessary to modify or change your actions in order to respond to the needs of another person.
- Tell me about the most difficult co-worker or boss with whom you have ever had to work. What actions did you take that helped? What made things worse? What would you do differently?
- Describe a time that you received less than positive feedback from your boss. How did you respond? Did you implement any changes as a result?

### **Success Trait #6: Leadership**

Not every job candidate will be cut out to be a leader, and even those who possess the traits of leadership need to be able to demonstrate to you in the interview they are an effective leader. An effective leader possesses the ability to question conventional ideas, even when others will not. They are honest and have integrity. They work to develop other's strengths, and show trust in the abilities of their co-workers and associates.

*The following questions will help you to uncover qualities of leadership:*

- Have you ever tried to “sell” an idea that wasn't conventional? How did you do it? Did your co-workers “buy” it?
- Have you ever experienced a personal loss from doing what is right?
- Tell me about a time when you were able to provide a co-worker with valuable job guidance.
- Discuss a time when you had to delegate responsibility. How did you assign roles? Monitor progress? Evaluate performance?

## **TAKE THE GUESSWORK OUT OF HIRING**

Most of us know all too well that the hiring process can be as risky as a roll of the dice. Behavioral interviewing techniques help take the guesswork out of hiring. With a clear outline of the traits that are necessary to succeed at any given job, and an effective list of questions that help to uncover those traits, you are well on your way to being able to spot high potential employees. It may take some practice to hone your skills as an expert interviewer, but, in the end, your bottom line will thank you!