

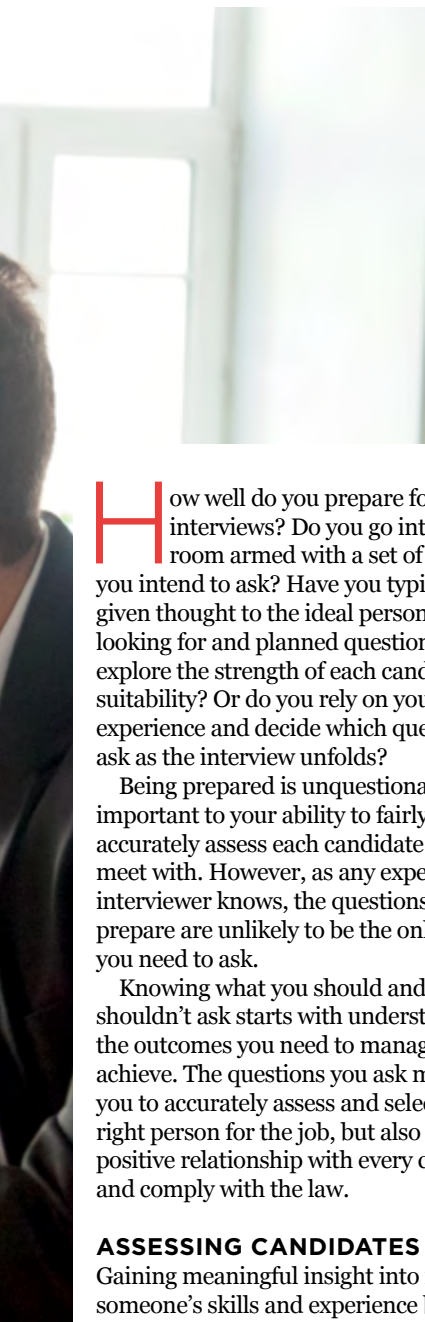


# CURIOUS CATS

Get wise to what you can and can't ask in a job interview to respect candidates and protect your brand in an increasingly digital world.



**BY KAREN GATELY**



**H**ow well do you prepare for job interviews? Do you go into the room armed with a set of questions you intend to ask? Have you typically given thought to the ideal person you're looking for and planned questions to explore the strength of each candidate's suitability? Or do you rely on your experience and decide which questions to ask as the interview unfolds?

Being prepared is unquestionably important to your ability to fairly and accurately assess each candidate you meet with. However, as any experienced interviewer knows, the questions you prepare are unlikely to be the only ones you need to ask.

Knowing what you should and shouldn't ask starts with understanding the outcomes you need to manage and achieve. The questions you ask must help you to accurately assess and select the right person for the job, but also build a positive relationship with every candidate and comply with the law.

### **ASSESSING CANDIDATES**

Gaining meaningful insight into not only someone's skills and experience but also how they typically think, feel and behave in certain circumstances, is vital to your ability to make good hiring decisions.

Identify relevant scenarios and build questions around them. Ask candidates to share examples of their experiences that allow you to explore what they know and how they are likely to go about doing their job in your organisation.

Confusing candidates with overly "clever" or off-putting questions undermines your own process. It's difficult to see the value that comes from asking job applicants, "If you were a box of cereal, what would you be and why?" or "You're a new addition to the crayon box; what colour would you be and why?"

### **INFLUENCING RELATIONSHIPS**

Being respectful and nurturing healthy relationships with every individual you interview is not only the right thing to do, but also makes good business sense. Consider for a moment the reach of just one unsuccessful candidate's network and the ability they have to impact the reputation of your organisation. It's wise to remember, also, that as much as you are assessing the candidate, in turn they are evaluating you and the employment opportunity you have to offer.

As IT firm Web Applications UK recently discovered, how you behave in interviews can very readily be shared with the world via social media. Following a gruelling interview, 22-year-old Olivia Bland was left in tears, but she had the courage to walk away from the job offer and stand up for her right to be treated with respect and decency. She chose to share her story with thousands of people via a now viral Twitter post, leaving the employer open to much criticism from the general public.

This story highlights both the two-way nature of job offers and what can happen when someone leaves an interview feeling disgruntled. Think carefully about not only what people will perceive from the questions you ask, but also how you deliver them.

### **STAYING WITHIN THE BOUNDARIES OF THE LAW**

In Australia, people have a legally protected right to be considered for a job on the basis of skill, aptitude and relevant qualifications – that is, on the basis of merit. Limited exemptions aside, it's typically unlawful to consider personal characteristics such as someone's age, race, gender, disability, marital or parental status when contemplating hiring them. Equally, asking questions relating to national origin, religion, political opinion, personal attributes or sexual preferences is likely to be regarded as discriminatory.

Despite the law, there continues to be an unacceptable rate of discrimination experienced by job applicants in Australia. According to research from job site SEEK, 40 per cent of applicants reported that they have been asked unlawful questions. Of those surveyed, 24 per cent were asked to provide their age, 18 per cent their marital status and 12 per cent whether they had or were planning to have kids.

It's important to understand that the

questions you ask create perceptions about what factors you have taken into account when making your hiring decisions.

Be careful when engaging in casual conversations intended to build rapport. An all too common "trap" managers fall into is "breaking the ice" by asking unlawful questions, the answers to which they have no intention of using to help them to make their decision. In the event a candidate is unsuccessful, these conversations and the relevance of the questions asked can be challenged.

If understanding who someone is outside of work helps you to assess their fit with your culture, a safe way to ask is, "Tell us about yourself. Share with us anything you feel comfortable sharing about life outside of work, that you believe will help us to understand the person you are and what motivates you." Don't then ask "Oh you've got kids – does that make it difficult for you to get to work?"

Some of the obvious questions to avoid include: How old are you? How many kids do you have? Are you still married? Are you planning to get married? Are you planning on having kids? Does your religion mean you need flexibility at work?

Making comments about someone's physical appearance, especially when backed up with exploratory questions, is another sure-fire way to get yourself in trouble. While "you're obviously fit and healthy, do you work out a lot?" may seem like a compliment, unless directly related to the role this question can easily leave a candidate feeling uncomfortable about your assessment process.

It's definitely not okay to say "I see you've been on maternity leave, how are you going with getting the weight off?" The manager who asked that particular question was sincerely trying to express empathy; but when the candidate didn't get the job, the manager was accused of taking the candidate's weight into consideration when hiring for a women's fashion retail assistant role.

While you may have innocent intentions behind some questions, it's important to appreciate the risk created of inaccurate conclusions being drawn. ■

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