

EBOOK BY JANICE M. JONES, SPRING 2020

Top Interview Tips for Federal Recruiting



Our federal agencies provide leadership and support for all Americans in agriculture, commerce, diplomacy, education, energy, finance, healthcare, housing, labor laws, land, past and present military, security, transportation, and more. Our nation's strength and wellbeing are closely tied to these agencies' ability to achieve their missions. For this reason, federal agencies must attract and retain high-caliber individuals who are committed to public service and are well suited for their respective roles.

In the pages that follow, we will review the federal recruiting process, focusing on best practices in interviewing. We will present an in-depth comparison of structured and behavioral-based interview techniques, and provide tips for crafting interview questions, conducting interviews, rating candidates, and following-up after interviews.

Tip #1: Understand the Federal Recruiting Process

While efforts are underway to improve the federal recruiting process significantly, and individual agency processes may vary according to their individual needs, the following process is most common.

- A. **Job Category Determination** – The nature of the position will determine the job category. The vast majority of federal positions are competitive and will be the focus of this discussion. Possible categories include:
- Competitive – Open to all eligible applicants who meet **minimum qualifications**
 - Excepted – Appointments that are not subject to the competitive process
 - Senior Executive – Candidates who are selected for **senior executive service**
- B. **Job Opportunity Announcement (JOA)** – A description of the job and applicant qualifications is drafted and posted publicly on **USA JOBS**.
- Posting Identifiers – Announcement number, job title, grade, and location
 - Applicant Status – Requirements such as current federal employee, veteran, US citizen, and security clearance
 - Minimum Qualifications – Basic requirements such as experience and education
 - Preferred Qualifications – Highly desirable competencies
 - Closing Date – Date and time after which no additional applications will be accepted
 - Evaluation – Criteria that will be used to such as college transcript
 - Contact Information – Name and contact information of the person who can address questions or concerns about the JOA
- C. **Preliminary Evaluation** – An evaluation of applicant submissions, that may include a conversation between a representative of the agency hiring manager and the applicant, to verify qualifications. In most cases, this step will be carried out by an HR professional. The objective is to eliminate applicants who are not eligible or not likely to be successful in this role. This preliminary evaluation may include:
- Assessment Administration – Competency assessments to confirm readiness will be administered
 - Position Overview – Confirm that the applicant understands the responsibilities of the job and is willing and able to carry them out
 - General Impression – Documentation of the applicant's responses, readiness, and overall impression given during the conversation



Click to view: Understanding the Federal Hiring Process at the Department of Labor

- D. Applicant Certification** – Applicants who meet the minimal qualifications will be interviewed and scored according to their suitability for the position. Depending on the agency hiring process and the nature of the role, multiple rounds of interviews may be conducted at this point. The objective of these interviews may include:
- Position Overview – In-depth discussions about the nature of the position, including responsibilities, challenges, and expectations
 - Readiness Confirmation – Conversations about applicant’s previous experiences that relate to role responsibilities
 - Hiring Process Overview – Inform applicant about the hiring process, remaining steps, and estimated timeline
 - Determine Level of Interest – Gauge the applicant’s interest in the agency, expectations for the role, and willingness to completing the remaining steps in the hiring process
 - Culture Fit Evaluation – Consideration for the applicant’s ability to adapt to and thrive in the culture of the team and agency
- E. Final Selection** – Once all applicants have been evaluated, the best-qualified candidates will be referred to the hiring manager for final selection. Interviews may be conducted on the phone, virtually, or in-person. They may also include HR professionals, hiring managers, and other stakeholders.

Tip #2 Define Your Selection Process

Once a JOA has been posted, and all applications have been received, you will need to clearly define who will be evaluating the applications and what the process will be, which may include aligning it with established agency recruiting practices. The selection process must be handled the same way for every applicant.

A. What Do We Need to Evaluate?

- What are the preliminary qualifications for this position?
- How can important qualifications be quantified for comparison?
- What qualifications must exist for the candidate to be certified?
- What qualities will be evaluated through direct interaction between the certified candidate and final decision-makers?

B. Who Will Conduct Each Evaluation?

- In most cases, preliminary evaluations are conducted by HR professionals.
- Who will evaluate screened applicants to determine which ones will be certified?
- Who will interview the certified candidates?

C. What Format Will Be Used for Each Evaluation?

Are you verifying information during the preliminary evaluation, or are you narrowing the field of highly qualified candidates? Does this position require advanced problem-solving skills or managing important relationships? Is it focused on managing information for quality assurance? Will successful candidates be providing customer service to citizens? These are just a few circumstances that could help you determine which interview format would provide the information you need to select the best candidate. For example:

- Confirming an applicant’s ability to meet the minimum requirements could consist of an HR representative asking an applicant a list of questions over the phone.
- Determining if an applicant possesses essential skills may involve an HR representative administering an assessment in-person.
- Assessing whether a certified candidate’s personality fits well within a team, department or agency may involve an in-person interview with a panel of stakeholders.
- Testing a certified candidate’s ability to contribute to critical thinking and problem solving, an HR representative, team leader, or panel of stakeholders may provide a realistic scenario for the candidate to address at an in-person interview.



D. Which Interview Styles Will Be Most Effective?

Each of the following interview styles requires the interviewer to be familiar with the responsibilities of the job and be ready to assess the applicant's response:

- In **structured interviews**, a list of clear and concise closed-ended questions about the job is asked of every applicant with a standard scoring method. Using a systematic, structured approach ensures fairness, impartiality, and complies with **Merit System Principles** by limiting the conversation to job-related skills and may be suitable for jobs that rely heavily on technical skills.
- In unstructured interviews, the interview questions are based on hiring manager preferences and may vary greatly between candidates, exposing agency representatives to bias complaints. A structured approach is much more effective for predicting job performance than an unstructured approach.
- During **behavioral-based interviews**, a list of open-ended questions about knowledge, skill, and past performance are asked of each candidate to reveal core competencies, behavior, and test for cultural fit. Behavioral-based interviews are preferred for positions that require advanced problem solving or communication skills because they give candidates a chance to explain how their past experiences have prepared them for this role.

MERIT SYSTEM PRINCIPLES (5 USC § 2301)

1. Recruitment should be from qualified individuals from appropriate sources in an endeavor to achieve a work force from all segments of society, and selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.
2. All employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, age, or handicapping condition, and with proper regard for their privacy and constitutional rights.
3. Equal pay should be provided for work of equal value, with appropriate consideration of both national and local rates paid by employers in the private sector, and appropriate incentives and recognition should be provided for excellence in performance.
4. All employees should maintain high standards of integrity, conduct, and concern for the public interest.
5. The Federal work force should be used efficiently and effectively.
6. Employees should be retained on the basis of adequacy of their performance, inadequate performance should be corrected, and employees should be separated who cannot or will not improve their performance to meet required standards.
7. Employees should be provided effective education and training in cases in which such education and training would result in better organizational and individual performance.
8. Employees should be
 - a. protected against arbitrary action, personal favoritism, or coercion for partisan political purposes, and
 - b. prohibited from using their official authority or influence for the purpose of interfering with or affecting the result of an election or a nomination for election.
3. Employees should be protected against reprisal for the lawful disclosure of information which the employees reasonably believe evidences
 - a. a violation of any law, rule, or regulation, or
 - b. mismanagement, a gross waste of funds, an abuse of authority, or a substantial and specific danger to public health or safety.

Source: US Merit Systems Protection Board

Tip #3 Prepare Evaluators for Interviews

Each stage of assessment has a specific objective. It is the objective that influences who will be responsible for conducting the evaluation, how it will be carried out, and which style of interview will be employed. To properly prepare interviewers, it is essential that they have the following preparation:

- A. **Knowledge of the Job Opportunity** – In addition to familiarity with all of the information on the JOA, the evaluator should be aware of additional criteria that may be contributing to success in the role. Examples include common challenges, anticipated changes, and team dynamics.
- B. **Familiarity with Applicants' Submissions** – It is important that before meeting with an applicant, the evaluator reviews all of the information that is available on the applicant being evaluated. This may include applications, resumes, curricula vitae, cover letters, letters of recommendation, awards, and work samples.
- C. **Interviewer Training** – While HR professionals should know the do's and don'ts of interviews, hiring managers, team leaders, and agency stakeholders need to be aware of relevant rules and limitations. In addition, evaluators may benefit from training on how to establish rapport with candidates, present questions, observe behavior, listen to, document, and evaluate responses, and apply weighted scoring.
- D. **Prepared Questions** – When forming questions for each stage of the process, evaluators should first be aware of the objective of the stage and formulate questions that will be used consistently for every applicant, to ensure fairness.
- E. **Consistent Evaluation Format** – How the evaluations will occur should be determined in advance and be consistent, per stage, for all a pplicant. For example, preliminary examinations may be conducted via phone by a hiring manager or their representative and consist of a list of closed-ended questions.



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by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

Tip #4 Carefully Draft Interview Questions

From scheduling the time and place of an interview to formulating questions and understanding how applicants will be scored, evaluators will find the best results from participating in the interview planning process. The following provides examples of effective interview questions:

A. Formulate Interview Questions – To ensure fairness, the questions asked and the rating scale used should be consistent for all applicants. General guidelines for interview questions include:

- Base questions on job analysis to ensure fairness and impartiality
- Craft questions that will evoke responses related to the evaluation stage objective
- Ask applicants to describe the actions and outcomes of past job experiences in detail

B. Sample Structured Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?
- What attracted you to this position?
- What experience, qualifications, and skills would you bring to this position?
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a quick decision.
- What was the worst conflict you have ever had with a client or coworker? How did you deal with it?
- Do you have experience working with union and nonunion personnel?
- Can you tell me about a job experience in which you had to speak up and tell other people what you thought or felt?
- What are your proudest professional accomplishments?
- Give an example of a risk you had to take?

C. Sample Behavioral-Based Interview Questions

- Describe a time when you set and met a goal. How did you set your goal? How did you accomplish it?
- Describe a time when you tried to negotiate a solution that was acceptable to everyone. What was your approach? What was the solution? How was it decided? What was the outcome?
- Describe a time when you were unable to meet a deadline. What was the situation? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time that you had to deal with an unreasonable customer. What did you do and what was the outcome?
- As a supervisor, have you ever had to discipline or counsel an employee? What was the nature of the discipline? What steps did you take? How did you prepare yourself?
- Much of our work involves confidential information. How have you handled sensitive information in the past? What strategies have you used to maintain confidentiality when pressured by others?
- Give an example of when you have been required to adopt a plan in response to change at work. Explain how you adapted the plan. What impact did your actions have on the outcome?
- Successfully delegating work can be challenging. Describe a time when you delegated work. How did you determine that the distribution was equitable? Did you adjust the distribution? How and why?
- How do you identify technological, economic, political, or social trends? How did you apply this information at work? How do you stay informed about these trends?
- Describe a situation in which you have used your knowledge of the organization's mission, functions, or policies to contribute to a program, project, or assignment. What steps did you take? What obstacles did you encounter? What was the impact, outcome, or result?



Click to view: The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential by The Merit Systems Protection Board

D. Avoid Prohibited Questions

The **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** prohibits discrimination in recruiting and hiring practices. To avoid any appearance of impropriety, do not ask applicants about the following topics:

- Race or Color
- Religion
- Sex, Gender Identity, or Sexual Orientation
- Pregnancy status
- Disability
- Age or Genetic Information
- Marital Status or Number of Children

Tip # 5 Conduct Interviews Effectively

Now that you have developed a process, prepared the evaluators, and crafted the interview questions, it is time to conduct the interviews. The interactions that occur at this stage can significantly influence the outcome. The following are best practices for conducting interviews:

- A. **Schedule the Interview** – Take into consideration that the people conducting the interviews have other obligations. Confirm with each person the length of time to allow for each candidate, and the dates and times they would be available for interviews. Reserve a location for the interview that is quiet and relaxed, and easy to locate.
- B. **Set Expectations** – Begin your conversation with an ice breaker about the weather, traffic, or logistics. Inform the candidate of the interview format, and the approximate time it will take. Let them know that you will be taking notes and that all candidates will be asked the same questions and scored according to the same standard. Give the candidate an in-depth understanding of the role and expectations set by the agency, supervisors, collaborators, and peers.
- C. **Appear Neutral** – Because the selection process will likely have several phases, it would be inappropriate to signal to any applicant that they have favored status. All impressions or judgments should be documented and discussed with the decision-makers and not expressed, verbally or non-verbally, to candidates. Every candidate is entitled to a fair, equitable, and impartial interview focused on past performance related to essential skills.
- D. **Achieve Your Objective** – Not every candidate will be forthcoming with grandiose success stories. Once you have built some rapport with the candidate, encourage them to provide details about past experiences. This also helps to expose exaggeration and falsehood. Try to keep the candidate speaking 80% of the time, to ensure you gather sufficient information about them. Listen carefully to what they say, respond when necessary, and always maintain control of the interview.
- E. **Document Everything** – Capture as much as possible about the interaction between you. Because you will likely see several candidates, you cannot rely on your memory. These notes should be comprehensive, professional, and non-judgmental because they may later become referred to in defense of a hiring decision. We have included a **sample scoring sheet** for your reference.
- F. **Close with Questions** – After you have finished asking your questions, ask the candidate if they have any questions. Do your best to answer them, even if you need to find the answer and get back to them. Thank them for their time and let them know how soon you expect to make the final decision and any additional steps that would precede an offer. It would not be appropriate to offer a candidate the position during the interview.



Click to view: [How to Conduct a Successful Interview Webcast by the Office of Personnel Management](#)

Tip # 6 Making Final Determinations

When you have had a very positive experience with a candidate, you may be tempted to overlook the verification process. It is always better to err on the side of caution, especially when the work will impact the American public. The following practices are essential for selecting the best candidates:

- A. **Compare Notes** – Have a group discussion about each of the certified candidates comparing notes and scores. Try to arrive at a consensus about which 1-3 candidates appear to be the best fit.
- B. **Verify Assertions** – Did one of the candidate’s stories sound too good to be true? Verify accomplishments with their previous supervisor. Also, be sure to verify the dates of employment and any other information that was conveyed to ensure nothing was falsified.
- C. **Contact References** – Check the personal and professional references of the top 2-3 candidates (in case your top candidate does not accept your offer). Sample reference check questions include:
 - How long did the candidate work for you?
 - How would you describe his/her work ethic?
 - Would you rehire him/her? Why or why not?
- D. **Make a Decision** – After your reference checks are complete, review all the information gathered from the resume, interviews, and reference checks, and make your selection. Work with your HR representative to certify your best candidate and move forward with the hiring process.



Compare
Notes



Verify
Assertions



Contact
References



Make a
Decision

Conclusion

Recruiting the best possible candidates for our federal government helps agencies achieve their missions for the benefit of all Americans. These best practice tips are sure to help you better understand the federal interview process, define your selection process, prepare your evaluators for interviews, craft productive interview questions, conduct effective interviews, and make the best possible final determinations.

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1. US Merit System Protection Board, Merit System Principles (5 USC § 2301).
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