
Interview Procedures / Questions

Interviewing Candidates

The interview is generally the final step in the selection process. At this point, the executive recruiter has screened the candidates and is satisfied that all finalists are capable of doing an outstanding job. Reference checks and more extensive background checks have been conducted, including discussions with individuals of our choosing and not on the candidate's list of references. Internet searches have been completed, along with a review of newspaper archives. Credit history, educational verification, and criminal background checks have also been run so there should be no surprises once a candidate is selected.

The interview is an opportunity for both the elected officials and the candidate to learn about each other and to determine how well they will work together. It is also an opportunity for the elected officials to evaluate each candidate's management abilities and to decide if he/she would be a good leader for the community. It is important for both the elected officials and the candidate to act professionally and in a manner that will impress the other party, all the while learning what they can about the other.

Since all the candidates are capable of performing the job, the focus of the interview should be on determining who fits best with the elected officials, the staff and the community. Some candidates will have more experience than others. Some have special areas of expertise that others do not. Some have better instincts, and some are simply more capable than others. While those with less experience may make more mistakes than others, they may also hit more home runs. The key is to determine which candidate will have the best chemistry with the elected officials, but also who can best lead the staff. No matter how technically sound a candidate may be, if he or she cannot build and maintain strong working relationships with the elected officials and staff, he/she will not last long as the community's appointed leader. Of course, experience and expertise are critical and should not be overlooked.

The Internal Candidate / Local Candidate

If an internal candidate / local candidate is among the finalists, elected officials occasionally will assume they already know the individual and just chit-chat instead of actually conducting an interview. Doing so is neither fair to the candidate nor the organization. Internal / local candidates may have ideas about what they would do differently as the City Manager, but have not been willing or able to convey these thoughts to the elected officials, much less act upon them. Unless the same hard questions are asked of the candidate as the external candidates, meaningful comparisons cannot be drawn.

It should also be recognized that a competent, likable, internal / local candidate will have a natural advantage in any job competition. To select the known quantity is a natural, human tendency, particularly in public sector recruitments. It feels comfortable and is viewed as safe. It may also be exactly the wrong thing to do. For example, we have seen governing bodies select

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individuals with whom they were comfortable and assume the individual will grow into the position. In our experience, they generally do not. Once someone has the top position, he/she has no mentors and it is difficult for them to improve in areas where they are weak. There simply is no one to teach them so they to focus on the areas where they are strong rather than improving in areas where they are weak.

Further, if the candidate does not do well in the position, then a year or so later the same governing body is struggling with a difficult decision. What should it do with someone who was a valuable employee or friend but who is not providing the necessary leadership? The choices become to continue with the employee even though he/she is not performing up to standards, demote the employee, or terminate his/her employment altogether. None of these choices is attractive, but one must be selected. Someone who was a perfectly good employee in his/her previous position may be lost. Of course, this same candidate, with a few more years of experience and mentoring, might make an excellent City Manager.

Please understand that we are not trying to discourage the hiring of an internal / local candidate. We do believe, however, that the internal / local candidate must be examined just as critically as the other candidates. We have found it helpful to ask the internal / local candidate what problems he/she sees in the organization and what he/she would propose to resolve them. If the individual does not have a good, specific answer to that question, then he/she is not ready to be the community's City Manager. External candidates will not have the same depth of experience or knowledge about the government, so it would not be fair to expect the same response to this question as you would from the internal / local candidate.

Another thing to keep in mind is that, if an internal candidate is hired as the City Manager, then a search must begin to fill his/her position. If an outside candidate is hired as the manager, in most cases the internal candidate stays, but is somewhat disappointed. Of course there is also the risk that the internal candidate may be so disappointed that he/she decides to seek employment elsewhere.

Possible Interview Questions

The questions on the next few pages may be useful in determining the information that you need. There are undoubtedly others. The point is to ask the questions that you feel will give you the best idea of what the candidate believes, how he/she will work with you and with the staff, and whether or not he/she is good match for the community.

The following topics and questions are divided into four groups. The first set contains standard introductory questions covering an individual's background, management style, and experience. The second set is designed to provide information about how the candidate will interact with the elected officials and staff, and to focus on particular issues that may be of concern to the community. Set III should always be asked at the end of the interview. The fourth section outlines what questions should not asked as they could provoke a law suit.

Possible Interview Questions

Since time will not permit asking all the questions, you should select the ones that are most important to you.

Topics / Question Set I:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why are you interested in our community?
3. What is your management style?
4. What would your staff say about you as a manager?
5. What would your elected officials say about you?
6. Have you fired people? How did you handle it? How did you feel about it?
7. What do you think your strengths are?
8. What do you think your weaknesses are?
9. What has been your biggest success? Tell us about it.
10. What has been your biggest failure (or mistake) in your career? What did you learn from it?
11. If you were asked to cite one particular situation or event in your career that gave you the greatest satisfaction, what would it be?
12. What would you do during the first six months in our community?
13. What do you hope to learn in the first six months in our community? What do you expect to teach us?
14. What do you believe to be the challenges and opportunities facing our community? How are these likely to change in the future?
15. The City wants a City Manager with new ideas and lots of energy. How do you meet those requirements?

Possible Interview Questions

16. What is your value system? How will your values determine how you manage our City?
17. Why should we select you to be our next City Manager?
18. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Topics / Question Set II:

1. Explain what you believe the role of our City Manager should be.
2. What are the three most important commandments for a City Manager?
3. Can you give me a breakdown of your typical day as a City Manager?
4. How would you view your relationship with the elected officials?
5. How will you go about building a strong relationship with elected officials? How will you maintain it?
6. How do you build consensus on an elected body when it is deeply divided?
7. What information do you think the governing body needs to have concerning day-to-day operations and on-going projects?
8. How will you keep the elected officials informed?
9. What kind of direction do you expect to get from the elected officials? What will you do if you do not feel they have made it clear how they want the staff to precede on a particular issue?
10. There is an expression, “A good City Manager only needs to be able count to three.” Of course in our case, that would be five. Could you please comment on that statement?
11. What do you do when your views on handling a situation differ from those of the governing body as a whole?
12. What will you do if a particular elected official disagrees with how you believe a situation should be handled?

Possible Interview Questions

13. What will you do when an elected official contacts a department head directly and tells him/her to do something?
14. What would you do if an elected official walked into your office and told you that you needed to repaint it navy blue?
15. Can you tell your elected officials what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear?
16. How well do you accept criticism? Please give me an example of a case where an elected official suggested you could improve your performance. How did you respond and what did you do?
17. What are your core values and which one is most important to you?
18. Tell us something unique about yourself.
19. Can you describe an ethical issue that you have had to deal with in your career and how you handled it?
20. As a manager, how do you evaluate your own performance?
21. What do you believe to be the highlights of your career over the past three years?
22. How will you build a strong relationship with our existing staff?
23. What kind of relationship do you want to have with the senior managers and the rest of the staff, and how will you establish it?
24. How many people reported to you in your last job? How did you keep them informed of the community's priorities? What do you intend to do differently if you are appointed here?
25. How will you keep the general employees informed of the elected officials' priorities?
26. To what extent do you believe contact with citizens and citizen's groups is important? How do you typically handle this responsibility? How will you build relationships with the community?
27. How do you plan to communicate with our residents?

Possible Interview Questions

28. How many community meetings have you attended in the last six months? What was the last one you attended and why did you go?
29. Sensitivity to different genders, races and ethnic groups is a priority for us. Can you provide us with some specific examples of how you have demonstrated your commitment to these principles in the past?
30. People are: _____. Please fill in the blank and explain your choice of that word or words.
31. How will you go about identifying the organization's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement? Once you have identified them, how will you go about making changes?
32. How will you approach the short and long range planning processes? What system do you use to set goals and objectives? How do you monitor progress against these goals and objectives?
33. Please describe your experience with strategic planning.
34. Please outline the similarities between our community and the previous communities you have served.
35. History defines the future. Can you please define the character of our community based on what you have seen and then tell what you would like it to look like in 25 years?
36. What will you do if you feel an employee is not doing his/her job in a manner you feel is satisfactory?
37. What do you do when you observe an employee - who works for a department director - who is not doing his/her job the way you think it should be done?
38. Describe the steps you would take if you needed to recruit, say, a new Planning Director.
39. Please describe a situation where you have had to "step up and lead" relative to a controversial issue.
40. Describe a situation where you had to build a team to solve a problem.

Possible Interview Questions

41. Please give an example of organizational restructuring you initiated. What was the reason for the restructuring and was it successful? Would you do anything differently if the situation presented itself again?
42. How would you go about raising morale in our organization?
43. Please describe your general experience in human resources administration including the development of personnel policies and performance appraisal systems.
44. Please describe your experience with and philosophy of labor/management relations.
45. What qualities make someone successful as a negotiator in labor contract discussions?
46. Have you sat at the bargaining table in contract negotiations? Tell us about the experience and what you learned from it.
47. Please identify the most difficult situation you have encountered with a labor union and how it was resolved.
48. What would labor unions you have dealt with say about you?
49. Describe an incident in which you played a role that embarrassed your government or caused it difficulty. What did you learn from it?
50. Are there any events in your professional or personal life that may reflect negatively upon your performance or which would be awkward or embarrassing to us if reported upon by our local/regional news media?
51. What are your long term career goals?
52. What areas of your skills/professional development do you want to work on at this point in your career?
53. How do you insure that your staff continues to develop professionally?
54. Are you willing to take calculated risks?
55. What kind of decisions did you make in your last job?

Possible Interview Questions

56. What kinds of decisions are difficult for you to make?
57. What personal skills do you feel are necessary for someone to be successful in this position?
58. What particular personal characteristic do you have that will most benefit our residents if you are hired?
59. What is your average workweek now, and what would you expect it to be if you came to work here?
60. Why did you leave your last job? (Ask if the candidate is in transition.)
61. Why do you want to leave your current job? (Ask if the candidate is currently employed.)
62. From what you know about our community, what is the most burning issue that we face, and how would you address it?
63. Strong fiscal management skills are central to this position. Please describe the most challenging budgeting situation you have encountered and how you reacted.
64. What innovative, cost saving programs and projects have you initiated and how successful were they?
65. What is your philosophy for developing and implementing a budget for our City?
66. Would you consider implementing a Zero Based Budget?
67. What techniques would you employ to develop and implement a balanced budget in these difficult economic times?
68. What techniques have you employed to reduce payroll expenses without layoffs and without reducing the level of service we provide?
69. How do you encourage staff to stay in your organization?
70. Give me some examples of cases where you have introduced new technologies to improve productivity or service delivery in a local government organization?

Possible Interview Questions

71. Like many communities, we are experiencing rapid growth and development. What would you do to protect the character of the community while permitting acceptable growth?
72. Do you view growth as a positive?
73. Tell us about your experience closing the gap between what is the ideal amount of infrastructure (roads, drainage, facilities, etc.) and what is actually present.
74. What experience do you have with economic development?
75. Please describe your experience in working with a business community, Chamber of Commerce, downtown business association, etc.
76. Tell us about an economic development project that you are particularly proud of and your role in its success.
77. What sort of concessions would you ask of developers when discussing their desire to bring a new development to our community?
78. Can you tell us about your experience with Tax Increment Financing?
79. Do you think it is necessary or appropriate to redevelop this community? If yes, how would you go about redeveloping it?
80. Do you feel it is desirable to bring new businesses to the community? What kind of businesses would you try to attract?
81. What actions would you pursue to bring jobs to our City? What sectors would you target?
82. What attributes of the City would market to businesses that you want to attract to our community?
83. Describe your experience with out-sourcing and your methodology for evaluating the cost-effectiveness of outsourcing.
84. What is your opinion of sole source procurements?
85. How will you balance the need for timely/efficient procurement with the need for checks and balances?

Possible Interview Questions

86. How would you go about building a good relationship with the County?
87. How would you go about building a positive relationship with other governments with whom you will have to deal if you are selected for this position?
88. Describe your experience in dealing with state agencies.
89. Describe your experience dealing with federal agencies.
90. Describe your experience obtaining grants. What agencies would you approach for grants? What kind of grants do you think would benefit us?
91. Are there other external sources of funds (beyond grants) that you would seek out?
92. Have you ever been involved in initiatives to contract out services? Tell us about them. Did these efforts succeed?
93. How do you feel about succession plans for managers and directors? Do you presently have one in your City?
94. What experience do you have in developing and implementing policies and programs that further the goal of green and sustainable communities?
95. Describe the kind of organization for which you would like to work. If you could change one thing in your current (or most recent) job, what would it be?
96. Who do you view as your customers? How will you interact with them?
97. What great idea have you had that did not go anywhere and why did it fail?
98. If we were look at your personnel file, what would we find? Would there be anything negative?
99. How do you respond when a resident walks into City offices and wants to meet with you about an issue that concerns him/her?
100. Would you make yourself available for two hours a week to see the public on a first-come, first-served basis?
101. How would you address a situation where an employee places the City in an embarrassing light?

Possible Interview Questions

102. What do you see as the primary drawback to being the City Manager of our community? What do you know about our operations and current employees?
103. If we hire you, would you seek a salary increase every year?
104. If the community decides to install a plaque somewhere in your honor after you leave your current job, what would it say?
105. If they decide to give you a roast, what would people say about you?
106. What was the most pertinent question you were asked today by any one of us, and how did you answer it?
107. Would you favor setting up a non-profit to deal with the feral cat and stray dog population in our community? [This question may seem a bit odd but it tests the ability of a candidate to think on his/her feet.]
108. Assume our 100th anniversary is next year. What ideas would you offer to make it a rousing success?
109. What was the last book you read and why did you choose it?
110. Who is your favorite comedian and how do you incorporate humor in your management style?
111. What did you do to prepare for today's interview?
112. If you accept this position, how long do you expect to stay?
113. How do you spend your spare time? What are your hobbies?
114. How would you describe your ideal day off?
115. Why should we hire you?

Topics / Question Set III:

1. If you are selected as the successful candidate, and understanding that pay and benefits are matters for negotiation, tell us in broad terms what sort of compensation package you would expect?

Possible Interview Questions

2. If we hire you, how long would you expect to stay in the position?
3. What kind of severance package would you expect if you were terminated?
4. When would you be available to start work?
5. Is there anything which we have not discussed today that you would like us to know?
6. Are there any questions you would like to ask us?

Topics / Questions Set IV: Topics to Avoid During the Interview Process

A large body of legislation has developed over the years addressing civil rights and race/gender/age discrimination. Questions in these areas should be avoided during the interview process. The process of interviewing and selecting an applicant is no longer a simple matter of conducting a casual conversation and hoping to learn a candidate's strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes. Various civil rights laws now make the average interview a process that should be approached with extreme caution. However, if you keep in mind certain basic rules, you will facilitate the process and avoid problems.

In most instances, asking inappropriate questions may raise an inference of either discrimination or retaliation against a particular candidate. In other instances, such as those involving issues of mental or physical health, inappropriate questions are presumptively discriminatory. Therefore, the interviewer must avoid questions relating to the following:

1. Political affiliation, political views, or voting history.
2. Religious beliefs or practices.
3. A candidate's race.
4. A candidate's age.
5. A candidate's national origin or ancestry.
6. A candidate's family and whether or not they would be willing/able to join them in the new City.
7. A candidate's desire to have children or raise a family.
8. Pregnancy and other gender related issues.
9. Sexual orientation or sexual practices.
10. Marital status or personal and private relationships.
11. Potentially controversial issues of race, gender or ethnicity.
12. A candidate's availability due to serving as a reserve in the military.

Any information a candidate may *volunteer* during the interview process regarding these matters does not render the interview invalid or otherwise taint the process. Consequently, open-ended questions, such as asking if the candidate wants to reveal anything else to the City that has not already been covered, are not prohibited. In fact, they can sometimes provide valuable insight into a candidate's views and perspectives.

Topics / Questions Set IV: Topics to Avoid During the Interview Process

With regard to issues of physical or mental health, many questions are appropriate after a conditional offer of employment is made, but must be avoided beforehand. The interviewer must avoid questions relating to the following topics:

1. A candidate's medical history.
2. Past workers compensation claims.
3. Past use of sick leave.
4. Health of a candidate's family members.
5. Any obvious physical or mental impairment of the candidate. However, it is permissible to ask if the candidate is able to perform the essential functions of the job for which he/she is applying. A better practice is not to ask this type of question at all. Of course, from a practical point of view, it is hard to imagine anyone answering negatively.
6. A candidate's frequency of illegal drug use or addiction. However, it is permissible to ask if the candidate ever used illegal drugs, and if so, the last time he/she did so. Once again, this is a very delicate area that can create significant problems for the employer if the questioning is intrusive.
7. Alcoholism or the frequency of alcohol consumption.

The questions listed above which relate to medical conditions may properly be asked of a candidate after he or she has received a conditional offer of employment. Before an offer is made, however, the questions must be avoided.

If you need further assistance in crafting proper interview questions, please do not hesitate to contact us for further guidance.