WRITING PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

Pre-screening is only as good as the questions. Hiring managers must determine what attributes drive job success so that pre-screening questions can be created to aid in determining if applicants should move forward in the selection process. Know that a fair bit of upfront work and analysis is required to ensure the questions being asked are the right ones.

Pre-screening is only part of the selection process. The purpose of pre-screening is to make high-level decisions about applicants' general qualifications early in the selection process. While pre-screening questions aid in narrowing down the number of applicants, alone they are not suited for determining which applicants are the best fit for a particular job. Nor will they guarantee that the right applicants are applying in the first place. The selection process must include appropriate sourcing, writing effective job postings, interviewing, assessments (as appropriate), and reference checks.

Keep in mind that while you are evaluating applicants, they are evaluating us through the application process. Typos, poor grammar, unclear questions, and multiple hoops in the application process turn quality applicants away.

Is it worth Asking?

Pre-screening questions are used to help recruiters narrow down the pool. They are particularly beneficial for large applicant pools. However if you have a hard-to-fill position where you only receive 10 or less applications, you may choose not to include any pre-screening questions since the number of applications is manageable. For hard-to-fill position, you will want to review all applicants with an eye to potentially move forward.

So how do you know when to ask pre-screening questions? First, consider the applicant pool. If you anticipate a large pool 50 or more applicants, then questions will be helpful in pre-screening. Also consider if there are specific licenses or technical knowledge that without, prevents the applicant from moving forward. Those questions can be created fairly quickly to help identify who does and doesn't have the qualifications. Finally when soft skills are the deal breaker and they often are, adding a couple of questions on the essential soft skills can help you determine which applications you'll focus your time on screening.

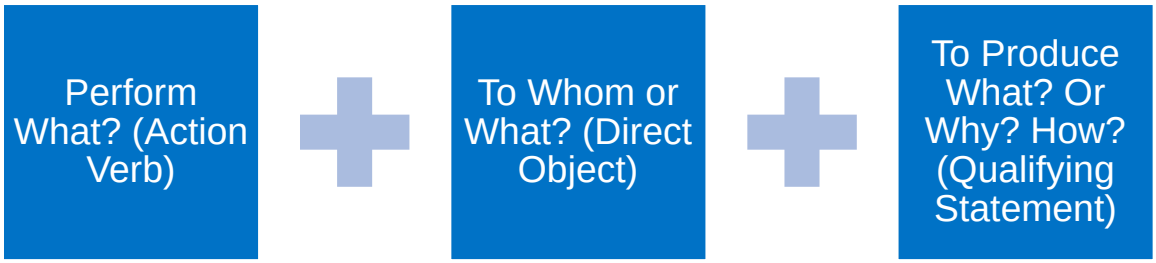
Ask yourself, will the question help you do your job; identifying quality applicants to move forward? If yes, use pre-screening questions.

General Guidelines

- Write the question in terms of observable and verifiable behaviors
- Focus on specific experiences, attributes, or tasks
- Avoid questions that may be answered the same way by the majority of candidates
- Write clearly and succinctly. Use language that any applicant can understand
- Use multiple choice, select all that apply, or Yes/No questions
    - Do not ask essay questions for initial application
    - Yes/No questions are best suited for licenses, certifications or specific degrees rather than asking about experience or behaviors
- Develop responses that meaningfully distinguish among applicants
- Keep questions focused on a single attribute
- Avoid asking questions that limit applicants from the private sector if the posting is open to all applicants
- Avoid questions that are vague, subjective, or use evaluative wording
- Avoid abbreviations/acronyms
- Pick a strong action verb
    - Writes vs. Develops (Writes is more descriptive than develops)
    - Assembles vs Prepares (Assembles is more descriptive than prepares)
- Proofread
- Focus on quality over quantity
    - Keep to 5-7 questions

Writing Questions Formula

Here is a formula for guidance in writing pre-screening questions.



Start with an action verb describing what is being performed. Then follow with a direct object to describe the verb and finally have a qualifying statement that provides purpose and context.

Examples

Action Verb	Direct Object	Qualifying Statement
Sort	incoming mail	into functional groups for distribution
Proofread and edit	letters, memos, and email	to address format, grammatical, or spelling errors

Turn it into a question by starting with phrases like:

- “Indicate the extent to which you have…”
- “Please select from the following which best represents your experience in….”

Avoid Pitfalls

Unnecessary words

Wordy:	Relay various types of written information and communications, both in e-mail and memo format, to individuals at all levels of the organization and on multi and varied topics.
More concise:	Write correspondence (e.g., e-mails, memos) on varied topics for distribution to individuals at all organizational levels.

Double-Barreled

Double-Barreled:	Assemble quarterly performance data from internal office sources into a spreadsheet and prepare a written report.
Two Statements:	Assemble performance data (e.g., quarterly, monthly) from internal office sources into a spreadsheet. Write a report summarizing trends in performance data for internal decisions making.

Vague, subjective, or evaluative wording

Vague:	Perform all required quality control procedures on time and attendance reports in an effective and through manner.
Behavioral:	Verify the accuracy of data or information in a report following established procedures.

Abbreviations/Acronyms

Abbreviated:	Prepare RFP to secure new contracts.
Written out:	Prepare Request for Proposal to secure new contracts

Limiting - State Specific

State specific:	Advise management on Oregon Accounting Manual processes and procedures.
Open to all applicants:	Advise management on financial and accounting process and procedures.

Write Response Options

Goal: Help applicants be as accurate as possible when selecting a response option

- Ensure that response options are focused on clearly stated, observable and verifiable behaviors
- Use specific and unmistakable language
- Maintain consistent ranges if asking about length of experience. For example:
  - 1 year or less
  - 1 year
  - 2 years
  - 3 years
  - More than 3 years
- Rather than ask proficiency ranges, ask if the applicant can perform specific tasks/functions
- Include response options for both qualified and unqualified applicants
- Always include an “out” for the applicant, Example: “I have never used…”
- Limit the number of questions asking about length of experience. Length of experience does not necessarily equate to competency and expertise.

Behavioral Responses

The best response options are those that behaviorally depict progressive levels of experience, knowledge or ability based on past behaviors.

Example:

Indicate the extent to which you have communicated orally with various levels of employees to obtain and provide information.

A. I have had no experience in performing this task.
B. I have communicated orally with others to obtain or verify information or to provide routine information.
C. I have communicated orally with supervisors, managers, or office personnel to notify them of decisions, problems, or further actions needed, or to explain the organization's programs or services.
D. I have given short oral presentations at departmental or organizational briefings and meetings to convey information on program activities or to describe the impact of new organizational policies on operational responsibilities.
E. I have led briefings or taught courses on highly technical or complex material to audiences such as high-level managers or executives.

Standardized Rating Responses

Another option to consider is standardized rating responses. Although this type of response option is not as beneficial as specific behavioral options, it is a step in the right direction. This format can also help you think through how you may write specific behavioral options.

Example

Manage a financial management information system that supports accounting, budgeting, procurement, disbursing, and/or statistical reporting.

A. I have not had education, training, or experience in performing this task.
B. I have had education or training in how to perform this task, but have not yet performed it on the job.
C. I have performed this task on the job. My work on this task was monitored closely by a supervisor or senior employee to ensure compliance with proper procedures.
D. I have performed this task as a regular part of a job. I have performed it independently and normally without review by a supervisor or senior employee.
E. I am considered an expert in performing this task. I have supervised performance of this task or am normally the person who is consulted by other workers to assist or train them in doing this task because of my expertise.

Soft Skills

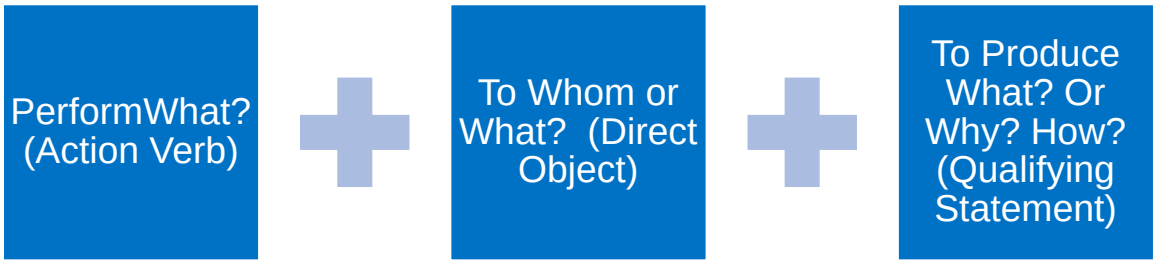
Writing responses for soft skills is more challenging than technical skills. It will take time and practice. For soft skill responses to be distinguishable between applicants, you as the recruiter must first identify what the soft skill looks like for the specific job. Start by talking with the hiring manager and subject matter experts (SMEs). Helpful ways to approach this talk are to:

1. Brainstorm behavioral examples and situations witnessed on the job which reflect the soft skill.
2. Ask the following questions to guide the brainstorming session:
    a. What essential tasks require (insert soft skill)?
    b. Describe the behaviors of your top performer(s) which demonstrates (insert soft skill).
    c. What behaviors differentiate someone who is better at (insert soft skill) than someone else less skilled?
    d. Can you think of one or more specific examples of an individual demonstrating (insert soft skill)? Can you describe the example in detail? What happened? Where? When? Who was involved?
    e. Can you think of examples of experiences or behaviors that do not match the needed soft skill (i.e. a lower level or somewhat trivial experience), however are viewed by the applicant as a match?
        i. (For example, a person equating retail customer service with public affairs experience.)
3. Convert the examples into question responses providing a range of proficiency level options.
4. Test your questions with 3-4 SMEs.
    a. A good test method is stream-of-thought. Ask each SME to tell you out loud what's going in their head when they respond to the questions.

Note: Ensure responses do not lead applicants to the "right" answer.

Writing distinguishing responses

Determine what variables in the formula to change in the response options to create different levels of experience or proficiency.



- Change the **action verb** to reflect level of competencies, for instance “author” versus “proofread”. Authoring a report takes a higher degree of skill than proofreading.
- Specify the **to whom or what,** for instance instead of “various staff” use “human resource staff, employees, managers”.
- Change the **why, how, or qualifying statement**, for instance instead of “making presentation” use “you gave a new employee orientation presentation”.
- Specificity provides context and will make it easier for the applicant to select the appropriate response for his/her experience.

Example:

Here is an example where the “who” is changed for a high level position in human resources that has to help managers problem solve.

1. Indicate the extent to which you have applied problem solving skills to personnel management issues.
    a. I don’t have experience in problem solving regarding personnel management issues.
    b. I’ve helped co-workers problem solve by identifying the problem and providing solutions to daily tasks.
    c. I’ve advised managers and executives on personnel management problems by analyzing the information and providing options for them to choose the best solution.
    d. I’ve lead team meetings to resolve conflict among co-workers, identifying the reasons behind the conflict and identifying options for resolution.
    e. I’ve counseled employees to correct inappropriate behavior by helping the employee come up with ideas of better ways to deal with co-workers.

In this example, the “who” is changed to show a different level of problem solving. For instance, advising managers and executives requires a higher degree of problem solving than helping co-co-workers. Also note that all the response options may be good problem solving experiences, but one best reflects the need of the specific high-level human resources job.

Example:

When creating pre-screening questions for soft skills, it is important to be specific about the attribute. For instance, “collaboration” is often a key criteria for success on the job, but collaboration can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. In your response options, instead of using the word “collaboration”, use a description of what it looks like on the job.

1. Please select from the following statements the one that most accurately represents your collaboration experience.
    a) I acted as a go-between for interdepartmental teams to create a mutually agreeable and effective business process.
    b) I actively listen and am respectful of others’ views during a team meetings.
    c) I have interviewed clients to learn more about their goals and together have developed a plan to achieve their goals.
    d) I have led my team in building consensus about goals and processes for a group project that impacted our unit.
    e) I do not have experience as described in any of the above options.

Scoring

Goal: Applicants with the best response for the job rise to the top. Unqualified applicants fallout.

- Only add points to the response that leads to the best answer option for the job
- Weight the best response heavily, Example: 100 points
- Use negative points for unqualified responses, Example: -1000
- Make sure that the scores accurately reflect key job requirements and are not overly rewarding candidates who have job relevant skills but somewhat trivial experiences.

  (e.g., an IT professional applying for an administrative job on the basis of his/her knowledge of MS office software). This is why it's important to be specific and provide context in the pre-screening questions.

Evaluating Scoring Results

Monitor the effectiveness of questions. Review results with hiring manager. Track whether your pre-screening questions are screening out appropriate numbers of applicants, and determine if the applicants being screened-in are the "right" candidates. If large numbers of unqualified applicants are appearing at the later stages of your hiring process, then try to determine what your screening questions are missing. Conversely, make sure the questions are effectively identifying qualified candidates.

- Were the questions clear and easily understood by all applicants?
- Did the questions help to make meaningful distinctions among applicants?
- Did scores on the questions help to identify the most highly qualified applicants?

Examples

Proficiency:

Instead of:	Ask:
Please select your level of Excel experience. a) Beginner b) Intermediate c) Expert	Please identify the excel functions you are capable of performing (select all that apply): a) Write macros b) Sort data c) Create formulas
Have you managed people? a) Yes b) No	To what extent have you been involved in hiring and promoting decisions? a) I've had sole responsibility for hiring and promoting employees. b) I've provided input and recommendations for hiring and promoting employees. c) I've participated in interviews for hiring and promoting employees. d) I do not have experience in this area.

Soft Skills:

Competency: collaboration

1. Please select from the following which most accurately represents your collaboration experience.
   a) I have been the go-between for interdepartmental teams to create a mutually agreeable and effective business process.
   b) I have contributed to my team by actively listening and being respectful of others views to help achieve business goals and complete tasks in our unit.
   c) I have interviewed clients to learn more about their goals, and together, have developed a plan to achieve their goals.
   d) I have led my team in building consensus about goals and processes for a group project that impacted our unit.
   e) I do not have experience as described in any of the above options.

Competency: verbal communication

2. Indicate the extent to which you have verbally advised various levels of employees regarding personnel policies and practices.
   a) I've directed managers and employees to the appropriate personnel policy that answered their question.
   b) I've posed probing questions to elicit more details about a specific personnel issues prior to providing guidance to managers.
   c) I have given short oral presentations at department meetings regarding updates and changes to personnel policies.
   d) I have conducted training for employees on personnel policies
   e) I have had no experience in performing this task.

Competency: problem solving

3. Indicate the extent to which you have applied problem solving skills to personnel management issues.
   a) I've helped co-workers problem solve by identifying the problem and providing solutions to daily tasks.
   b) I've advised managers and executives on personnel management problems by analyzing the information and providing options for them to choose the best solution.
   c) I've led team meetings to resolve conflict among co-workers, identifying the reasons behind the conflict and identifying options for resolution.

d) I've counseled employees to correct inappropriate behavior by helping the employee come up with ideas of better ways to interact with co-workers.
e) I don't have experience in performing this task.

Competency: relationship building

4. Indicate which response below most closely resembles your experience using relationship building skills to identify opportunities to improve personnel management practices.
   a) I have built relationships to improve personnel practices by deescalating the situation and clearly defining what an appropriate action would look lt.
   b) I have built relationships with union stewards by first listening without judgement to their perspective on a personnel management practices.
   c) I brought union stewards and management together to talk about needed changes to workplace practices for the betterment of employee morale.
   d) I have built relationships with supervisors, managers, and office personnel by openly discussing problems and fully listening to their input to resolve the problem.
   e) I don't have experience in this area.

References

Handler, C., Hunt, S. (2003). Guidelines for the effective use of online pre-screening tools. ERE Recruiting Intelligence. Retrieved October 9, 2017, from https://www.ere.net/guidelines-for-the-effective-use-of-online-pre-screening-tools/

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