

The only three true job interview questions are:

1. Can you do the job?
2. Will you love the job?
3. Can we tolerate working with you?

That's it. Those three. Think back, every question you've ever posed to others or had asked of you in a job interview is a subset of a deeper in-depth follow-up to one of these three key questions. Each question potentially may be asked using different words, but every question, however it is phrased, is just a variation on one of these topics: Strengths, Motivation, and Fit.

Can You Do the Job? – Strengths

Executive Search firm Heidrick & Struggles CEO, Kevin Kelly explained to me that it's not just about the technical skills, but also about leadership and interpersonal strengths. Technical skills help you climb the ladder. As you get there, managing up, down and across become more important.

You can't tell by looking at a piece of paper what some of the strengths and weaknesses really are...We ask for specific examples of not only what's been successful but what they've done that hasn't gone well or a task they they've, quite frankly, failed at and how they learned from that experience and what they'd do different in a new scenario.

Not only is it important to look at the technical skill set they have...but also the strengths on what I call the EQ side of the equation in terms of getting along and dealing or interacting with people.

Strengths Definition

Gallup's Marcus Buckingham and Don Clifton provide an excellent definition of strengths in *Now Discover Your Strengths* (New York: Free Press, 2001).

Talent: Innate areas of potential strength (probably present at birth)

Knowledge: Things people are aware of, facts and lessons learned (through courses, mentors, reading, etc.)

Skills: How to-s, or steps of an activity (generally acquired through deliberate practice)

With that in mind, as an interviewer, make sure you understand the driving talent behind an individual's strength, how they acquired their knowledge of the subject and what they've done to practice the skill. Then you can be sure you've identified a real strength.

Advice for Interviewers

Figure out what strengths you're looking for. Tell the interviewee what they are. Ask the interviewee for examples of behavior that evidences those strengths.

Will You Love the Job? -Motivation

Cornerstone International Group CEO, Bill Guy emphasizes the changing nature of motivation, *...younger employees do not wish to get paid merely for working hard—just the reverse: they will work hard because they enjoy their environment and the challenges associated with their work.... Executives who embrace this new management style are attracting and retaining better employees.*

Interviewing for Motivation

Interviewing for motivation is much less straightforward than interviewing for strengths. Part of the problem is that it's hard to put your finger on what really motivates someone. The other part of the problem is that interviewee's will have a bias to come across as motivated even if they aren't sure. While they may not be sure they want to do the job, they are generally motivated to get you to offer them the job.

On one level, motivation is born of

- How activities fit with a person's likes/dislikes/ideal job criteria and
- How the job will help them progress towards their long-term goal.

On another level, people strive for happiness. My working theory of happiness, born out by deep analysis of a very sophisticated Harvard survey, is that happiness is good. Actually, it's three goods: Good for others, good for me, good at it.

Good for others: This is about finding meaning in the work (impact on others, match with values). People that care about this want a share in shaping the destiny of the firm (influence, being informed)

Good at it: This is about the match of activities with strengths, and resources (support and time). Over time, some people care about employability (learning, development, resume builder)

Good for me: This is about near term pleasure (enjoyable work/activities, fit with life interest). Compensation is also a factor (monetary, non-monetary rewards, recognition, respect)

Advice for Interviewers

Heidrick & Struggles' Kevin Kelly had some helpful perspective on this. He told me that he likes to ask two questions to get at motivation:

1) *"What gets you out of bed in the morning (other than your alarm clock)?"*. This helps him get at what's important to people now.

2) *"Talk about some of the most significant memories you have had throughout your career and what it is that got you through those times either good or bad."* This helps him get at patterns and trends.

Can We Tolerate Working With You? – Fit

Continuing on with our conversation, Heidrick's Kelly went on to explain the importance of cultural fit:

A lot of it is cultural fit and whether they are going to fit well into the organization... The perception is that when (senior leaders) come into the firm, a totally new environment, they know everything. And they could do little things such as send emails in a voicemail culture that tend to negatively snowball over time. Feedback or onboarding is critical. If you don't get that feedback, you will get turnover later on.

He made the same point earlier in an interview with Smart Business, referencing Heidrick's internal study of 20,000 searches.

40 percent of senior executives leave organizations or are fired or pushed out within 18 months. It's not because they're dumb; it's because a lot of times culturally they may not fit in with the organization or it's not clearly articulated to them as they joined.

Interviewing for Fit

To be clear, this is an attempt to make an inherently complex and ambiguous subject simpler and more straightforward. It's worth it because poor cultural fit is the #1 stated reason for a new leader's failure. (Of course, stated and actual don't always match. See [The top three excuses for onboarding failures.](#))

The fundamental questions and interviewer is getting at around fit are:

- 1) Will the organization be better off with you in it over time?
- 2) Will you change us for the better? (Will you be good for us?)

BRAVE Fit

The BRAVE framework may have applicability:

Behave: The way people act, make decisions, control the business, etc.

Relate: The way people communicate with each other (including mode, manner and frequency), engage in intellectual debate, manage conflict, etc.

Attitude: How people feel about the organization's purpose, mission, vision, identify with the subgroup, group, organization as a whole, etc.

Values: People's underlying beliefs, approach to learning, risk, time horizons, etc.

Environment: The way people approach the work environment in terms formality/informality of preferred office layout, etc.

The suggested approach for an interviewer is to assess the interviewee's BRAVE preferences and then line them up with the culture.