WHITEPAPER

Guide to MSP Job Interview: 20 Key Questions to Ask

There is no shortage of guidance available for professionals who are interviewing for a job in the IT industry.

But when it comes to those conducting the interviews, information on how to behave, which questions to ask and so on is more difficult to find. Complicating the challenge is the fact that many managers and business owners in the IT industry -- and especially in the MSP space -- come from technical backgrounds, and have little formal experience in areas such as HR. As a result, they may struggle to conduct effective interviews.

That challenge places many MSP businesses at a disadvantage. A poorly conducted job interview is not only bad for the interviewee who suffers through it, but also for the company trying to find the right person to fill a new role.

To help MSPs avoid these outcomes, this white paper offers guidance on how to conduct effective job interviews in the managed services industry. It explains how to prepare for the interview and what to do during it. It also suggests various questions to ask to evaluate the way candidates think and act on the job, as well as to assess their preparedness to perform specific technical tasks required by an MSP business.

Preparing for MSP job interviews

Even though you can't plan every minute detail of the job interview process ahead of time, you can and should take steps to ensure that it starts off on the right foot.

Know what you're hiring for

Job interviewing starts -- or should, at least -- with identifying the requirements of the position you're hiring for. If it's a new role, you'll need to invest some time in detailing the specific job responsibilities, the technologies that the employee will need to know, how the employee's time will be organized, who will be managing the role and so on.

Spelling out these details ahead of time is crucial; otherwise, you risk sitting down with interviewees and saying things like, "We need someone to help manage Windows servers, but we're not sure yet exactly how you'd do that. We'll figure it out once you start." This makes you look disorganized, and it makes it difficult to assess whether candidates have the specific skills they will need for the role.

Further reading	[Think You're Ready to Hire Your First Employee?](#)

Know your company

Equally important is to know what your company values and what it has to offer to employees. This includes benefits, promotion opportunities and so on. It also includes values like work flexibility and team culture.

Scheduling interviews

When it comes time to schedule interviews, offer each candidate multiple scheduling options. This shows that you value candidates' time. Be sure, too, to leave a buffer between interviews and other commitments, so that you don't have to rush out of an interview and leave a candidate feeling undervalued or unable to answer all of your questions.

Know your candidates

Before each interview begins, scan the candidate's resume to remind yourself of his or her professional background. Knowing this information ensures that you won't ask questions that are already answered on application materials, but can instead build upon that information to ask pointed, personal questions, such as, "I see that you were responsible for SQL Server backups in a previous role. Can you tell me about a time when your backup routine failed and how you handled it?"

Plan for team interviews

If multiple members of your team will be conducting the interview, coordinate ahead of time, so that everyone has a sense of which questions you will ask and how the interview will be run. This coordination demonstrates the value that your team places on being organized and working well collectively -- values that you probably want your new hire to share.

Plan the right location

Determine ahead of time where you will conduct interviews. You don't want to have to say to a candidate, "Let me go see if I can find an empty conference room," when he or she arrives at your office for the interview. Instead, make sure you've reserved a quiet space ahead of time.

Make sure, too, to ask colleagues not to interrupt you, and to turn off non-critical alerts on your phone, PC, or any other devices that may be in the room.

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During the interviews

No matter how much preparation you do ahead of time, there will always be a certain amount of unpredictability to each job interview. There is also likely to be some awkwardness, both for you and for your interviewees. Few people feel truly at ease in these situations, although it should be your goal to make the process as smooth as it can be for everyone.

Start with small talk

Toward that end, it's a best practice to make small talk when you first meet the candidate, in order to help cut the tension. Talking about the weather or asking how the candidate's trip to your office went may seem

mundane, especially when interviewing for technical roles, but it does help interviewers and interviewees alike to break the ice.

Set the agenda

Once you have spent a couple of minutes with small talk, you can transition into the interview by briefly outlining how it will proceed. A standard structure is to begin by describing the position to the candidate, then asking them a series of questions, and finally giving them an opportunity to ask you questions.

Present an overview of the company

You can also help to set the right tone for the interview by beginning with a general overview of the company, the team that the candidate would work with and the job responsibilities. These are all things that the candidate will want to know about, so it makes sense to spell them out upfront.

Be polite

Some interviewers fall into the trap of thinking that being rude or difficult in their communications during the interview is a way to test candidates by seeing how they act under pressure. That's a poor strategy for an MSP business, where the challenges that employees will face are more likely to come in the form of a crashed server or disk array than someone going out of their way to be unkind.

So, be friendly and polite. If being able to work with difficult people is a requirement of the job, have a conversation about that during the interview; don't try to play the role of a difficult person to test your applicant.

Ask questions, and follow up

You should go into the interview with a series of questions in mind (for more tips on what to ask, see below), but don't be afraid to ask other questions that come to mind as the conversation progresses. Remember, too, to follow up on the candidate's responses to questions, where relevant, by asking for elaboration, examples and so on.

Discuss interview tasks

For technical roles, MSPs sometimes ask applicants to complete a task (such as installing software or setting up a tool) as part of the job application process. If you require a task like this, make sure to discuss it with the applicant during the interview.

Let the candidate ask questions

Be sure to offer the candidate an opportunity to ask questions. If he or she doesn't have any, it might be a sign of lack of preparation or interest in the position. Of course, that is not universally true; some applicants may truly feel that all of their questions were answered during the interview, or may sense that the interview has run past the allotted time and feel that they should end it. Thus, don't disqualify an applicant purely on the basis of not having questions to ask you.

10 common non-technical interview questions

When you come to the part of the interview where you ask the candidate questions, it generally makes sense to start with non-technical questions in order to help break the ice further and establish the type of question-and-answer format that you will use. Asking non-technical questions also helps to build a positive image of your company in the candidate's mind, because it shows that you care about more than just esoteric technical skills.

Common questions to ask include:

▸ **What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?** The actual answer to this question is less important than how the candidate answers it. It probably does not matter to you how candidates spend their non-work hours (and from a legal perspective, certain aspects of their personal lives cannot influence hiring decisions), but you can use the response to assess how well the candidate communicates, especially when bringing a personal discussion into a professional context.

▸ **What was the biggest challenge you faced in your current role, and how did you handle it?** This question may touch on technical processes, but its main purpose is to see how well the candidate communicates the responsibilities of his or her current or past roles.

▸ **Can you recall your biggest blunder at work?** This question gauges how well the candidate is able to admit mistakes, and how sensitive he or she is to criticism.

▸ How would you explain [X] to a seven-year-old? Ask the candidate to explain a technical concept to a non-technical individual, as a way of evaluating his or her ability to translate technical information into universally understandable terms. That's important for MSPs, because the new employee may have to discuss technical information with other employees who don't know the systems or tools that the new employee uses.

▸ **What are your "red flags" at work?** Answers to this question reflect how the candidate engages with others in a professional setting, and what his or her expectations of a productive work environment are.

▸ **What would you do when you face a problem you can't handle on your own?** This question assesses the candidate's ability to search for information, ask questions and solve problems independently.

▸ **How do you organize your daily workflow?** Ask this question to see how the candidate manages his or her time day-to-day, and how much management or direction he or she requires in order to be productive. An answer such as, "I start the day by checking our monitoring systems and responding to alerts," suggests that the candidate is a self-starter, as compared to one like, "I come into the office and ask my boss what to work on."

▸ **How do you stay up-to-date in your field?** This question is a way of assessing where the candidate gets technical information -- which magazines, websites and so on he or she uses. It also evaluates how much time he or she spends on self-education.

▸ **How would you deal with an irate customer?** This is a critical question for any role where the employee will interface with outside customers. It's helpful even for employees who won't, because it reflects how they respond to difficult situations.

▸ **Scenario walk-through.** For this question, choose a common task for your business and ask the candidate to walk through how to solve it. The accuracy of the answer is not as important as the candidate's ability to investigate, problem-solve, know when and when not to ask for help and so on.

You need not ask every one of these questions of every candidate (indeed, doing so would probably take too much time). But choose a handful to assess each candidate's overall communication skills, problem-solving methodologies and so on.

Technical questions

After you have finished asking higher-level questions, you can dive into specific technical questions. These will vary from one role to another, of course, but some general questions that you can pose include:

▸ A user is calling saying that he doesn't have an Internet connection. What are the diagnostic steps you would take to determine the cause of the issue?

▸ A user submitted a ticket because he or she can't log in. What is most likely to be causing the issue, and how would you proceed in responding?

▸ How would you troubleshoot a [printer/Web server/file server/etc.] remotely?

▸ How would you explain to a customer that a server has gone down, and how much technical detail would you include?

These questions, which can be customized to fit the specifics of the role you're hiring for, assess how much technical expertise the applicant has with various technologies that are common in the MSP world. They also evaluate how well candidates can communicate technical information to others -- whether to other employees on their team, or external stakeholders, such as clients.

Additional general-purpose questions that assess overall technical skill sets include:

▸ What are the signs that a PC is infected with malware?

▸ How would you check whether an RDP port is open or not?

▸ What is DHCP and how does it work?

▸ What is a SAN and how does it work? How does it differ from NAS?

▸ What do SSL certificates do?

▸ How is HTTP different from HTTPS?

These questions can be answered in various levels of depth. For example, the question about HTTP and HTTPS could be answered as simply as, "HTTPS is more secure," or it could involve a deep dive into how HTTPS works, the role played by SSL/TLS, potential flaws in HTTPS and so on.

Depending on how important the skills associated with each question are to the role you're hiring for, the applicant's answers will be revealing. Remember, too, that a candidate may simply say that he or she doesn't know the answer. In that case, ask how the candidate would find the answer. Having the skills to gain technical information upon demand is more important in many cases than knowing it outright.

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Conclusion

Conducting job interviews is one of the most difficult tasks that MSPs face -- not least because it involves a set of skills that are quite distinct from the technical expertise required to work as an MSP.

Fortunately, job interviewing can be mastered just like any technical system. By understanding what the purpose of the interview is and which techniques help you achieve that goal, you can conduct interviews that reflect positively on your company, assess candidates accurately and help you find and hire the best people to fill any role in your MSP company.

About MSP360™

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MSP360's offerings include powerful, easy-to-use backup management capabilities and military-grade encryption using customer-controlled keys. Customers can choose to store their backup data with all the major cloud storage providers, including Amazon S3, Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud, Wasabi, and others. MSP360™ also partners with thousands of VARs and MSPs to provide them with turnkey, white-label data protection services.

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