



P R O F E S S I O N A L S

Interview Questions that Assess Emotional Intelligence

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Emotional intelligence (EI) is no new kid on the block. For years, employers have widely acknowledged the importance of qualities like self-awareness and empathy to the success of the business professional and her organization.

What is new in the 2010s is the push to incorporate an evaluation of emotional intelligence (EI) into the employee selection process.

Here's how companies and consultants are approaching the various rewards and risks of EI assessments and some interview questions that shed light on the candidate's EI.

Select candidates who are honest about themselves. It takes emotional maturity to be realistic about one's own psychological makeup, and many otherwise competent professionals lack this form of emotional intelligence.

Look for ways to probe this in the interview. "People with high emotional intelligence would answer honestly the question, 'How do you get around one of your weaknesses?'" says Ashley Goodall, director and chief learning officer for leadership development at consulting firm Deloitte.

Be direct. "In the interview, ask candidates to talk about how they've resolved stressful situations," says Sylvia Lafair, a consultant and author of *Don't Bring It to Work: Breaking the Family Patterns that Limit Success*.

"You can ask, 'How do you handle a procrastinator who has something due every Wednesday and doesn't deliver?'" These 'how do you handle' questions give you a lot of keys.

"Do take care to ask all candidates the same set of questions, to reduce hiring-bias liability," adds Lafair.

Look at experience and education in emotional intelligence. Academic programs are beginning to include emotional intelligence in their curriculum. For example, the course of study in some pharmacy programs incorporates EI.

"But I wouldn't just take that coursework at face value," says Lucinda Maine, CEO of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy. "I think you can learn emotional intelligence, but that doesn't necessarily mean you're able to use it. So you need to explore how well the learning stuck with the candidate."

In the interview process, ask the candidate to give examples of how they apply what they learned in their EI training.

Seek hires who will attract collaborators. After self-knowledge, emotional intelligence is really about knowing how to relate and how to work with people. To Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, vice president of research and innovation at Hogan Assessments, professional success comes down to three things – and asking these questions in the interview:

- "Do you have the skills and IQ to learn the job?"
- "Will you work hard?"
- "Are you rewarding to deal with?"

Adds Chamorro-Premuzic, "Emotional intelligence is the key to determining if you're rewarding to deal with." Also ask the candidate how his colleagues benefit from working with him.

Consider formal assessments, in context. Firms such as Hogan Assessments offer testing instruments specifically intended to evaluate a professional's emotional intelligence in the workplace. These written assessments may play a role in your overall evaluation of a candidate's EI, but they won't tell the whole story.

"You have to look at a number of things, not just a single test," says Louisa Mattson, a partner with consulting firm Essex Partners in Boston.

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Interviewing candidates across a range of situations -- phone, video, peer-to-peer and group situations, as well as traditional one-to-one meetings -- can also yield valuable insights on emotional intelligence.

Beware employment-bias liability, even in written assessments of EI. “If you buy a test, ask the test provider for documentation that the EI test or interview questions have been validated following recognized guidelines -- or at a minimum, that have been shown to predict success in similar jobs,” writes Gabrielle Wirth, a partner at Dorsey & Whitney LLP in Business Excellence.

Look out for cultural bias. Human emotions may be universal but their expression is not. For example, body language, particularly avoidance of eye contact during the interview process may signify fear or disagreement in one culture, and in another, simple respect. So beware of the risks of assessing emotional intelligence by way of gestures or other communications in the interview -- verbal or nonverbal -- whose meaning may be culture-dependent.

“These assessments have to be culture-free,” says Mattson. Ignore cultural bias at the expense of diversity -- and perhaps a discrimination lawsuit.

Emotional dysfunctionality and the triumphant bully. If you're the first in your organization to raise the importance of emotional intelligence with your board of directors, be prepared for pushback. It's common for directors to accentuate the positive results that a scorched-earth executive has achieved, and to ignore the negative.

But ultimately, if bad hires are made and “tyrannical executives leave too many bodies by the wayside, the interpersonal liability will become so great that they'll be jettisoned,” says Mattson.

To circumvent this type of situation, take the time to check an executive candidate's track record via references.

What about noxious executives who just keep climbing? What if, even with toxic leadership, your company is enjoying some success, apparently vindicating those board members who were skeptical of EI from the start?

“Yes, most executives are argumentative, aggressive, narcissistic, neurotic,” says Chamorro-Premuzic. “But just because they've been able to manage their careers upwards, that doesn't mean they're the best leaders.” And it doesn't mean emotional intelligence shouldn't count in future hires.

Here's the exception that proves the rule. “The paradox with Steve Jobs is that he was narcissistic but incredibly successful,” says Chamorro-Premuzic. “If you are creative and have such extraordinary talent, you can probably get away with it.”