

Spotting Candidates With High Potential

Here are the key traits that many top-performing employees have in common.

WHAT'S THE TRUE VALUE of a top-performing employee? According to HR expert Dr. John Sullivan, top performers outproduce their peers by 25 to as much as 1,000 percent!

The differences between high performing employees and the rest of the pack are immense. They're harder working, more innovative and produce better results. In addition, they possess better communication skills, better planning and organizing ability, greater capability to adapt and greater ability to learn.

So how do you spot these high achievers? Here's your first tip—don't rely on traditional hiring techniques. Resumes don't tell the whole story. And the functional interviews most companies rely on typically highlight knowledge rather than results.

Want to find the best employees more often? Add these steps to your hiring process:

1. Identify the key behavioral traits of the current top performers in your company.
2. Familiarize yourself with all of the common characteristics of each trait.
3. Use behavioral interview questions to determine whether candidates possess the desired traits.

Behavioral interview questions are designed to uncover specific examples when a candidate demonstrated a trait you're seeking. Past performance is widely viewed as the best indicator of future behavior, so a candidate who has already exhibited the traits you seek is most likely to exhibit those traits again.



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In every company and in every job, key performance traits for top performers will vary. But as a start, here are several behavioral traits that are typically linked to superior performance. To help with your hiring process, I've included a few sample behavioral interview questions you can use to evaluate each trait.

Success Trait #1: Initiative

Most top performing employees are "take charge" kinds of people. They don't wait to be told what to do; they look for problems and opportunities and assume responsibility for them. To determine if a candidate will show initiative in your firm, ask targeted questions that force the candidate to provide specific examples of where he or she demonstrated initiative in previous jobs.

Listen for examples such as completing more work than what's required or expected, taking risks that resulted in success and making an effort toward continuous improvement. Below are a few sample questions that will help you uncover characteristics of initiative.

- Tell me about a time when you took initiative and went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Tell me about a time when you created a new process or program that was considered risky. What was the result?
- Tell me about a time when you encountered obstacles while pursuing an important professional goal. Did you reach the goal? If so, how did you reach it?

Success Trait #2: Personal Effectiveness

Personal effectiveness encompasses everything from how potential employees interact with others to how strong a sense of confidence and professionalism they display. You should be looking to find out if the candidate is confrontational, has a positive self-image and can focus clearly on goals and objectives. Some sample questions to help you determine how effective a candidate is on a personal level are:

- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- What are your top three personal and business goals? How do you measure your success in terms of reaching those goals?
- Have you ever been displeased with your own performance? When, why, and what did you do about it?
- Describe a specific goal you set for yourself and how successful you were in meeting it.

Success Trait #3: Flexibility

There are certain positions that require a higher level of flexibility than others in order to ensure success. For example, a line manager in a plant may need to demonstrate a different level of flexibility than, say, a chemical engineer testing the safety of a new product. However, there are certain universal situations in which every employee needs to exhibit the ability to "bend."

A strong candidate should be able to demonstrate creativity when problem solving, show that he or she can compromise in challenging situations, and find alternate ways to succeed when faced with roadblocks. Here are a few questions you can ask to evaluate a candidate's ability to demonstrate flexibility:

- Describe the most creative idea that you've implemented to solve a problem. How did you come up with the solution?
- Tell me about the most difficult challenge you faced in trying to work cooperatively with someone who did not share your ideas. How did you deal with the situation?
- Tell me about a situation when you abruptly had to change what you were doing. What was the outcome?
- Describe a situation that required you to do a number of things at the same time. How did you manage your time? How successful were you?

Success Trait #4: Knowledge

One of the most valuable traits for a job candidate to demonstrate in an interview is his or her range of knowledge. As the interviewer, you may be looking for functional product knowledge, comprehensive knowledge of the market or territory, or basic critical thinking skills. Depending on your specific job market however, and the skilled labor shortage that experts are predicting, you may find a need to be flexible in certain areas of this part of the interview. The best way for you to discern if a potential candidate has enough expertise is to delve further into his or her past by asking these questions:

- Tell me about products or services that were sold or implemented primarily because of your efforts. What was your role? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you recognized a change in your market or territory. What did you do? How successful were you?
- How have you kept on top of the current trends in your area of expertise?
- What process do you use to solve problems? Tell me about a time you had to analyze information and make a recommendation.

Success Trait #5: Teamwork

Whether your company employs five people or 5,000, the cornerstone of achievement will always be teamwork. Finding a group of people to work together simultaneously toward a common goal can often be a daunting task. Personalities and egos can get in the way, and often result in a delay in progress. Considering this point, every candidate you hire should be hand-selected carefully with

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About the Author

Patrick B. Ropella is president and CEO of Ropella & Associates. With 20 years of experience, Ropella & Associates is an international executive search consultancy specializing in the chemical and allied industries.

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