Journeyfront

2021 Essential Guide to Applicant Screening Questions

The right screening questions ensure that only the most qualified applicants progress in the hiring process. This allows you to spend less time with unqualified applicants and more time with the applicants best suited for the job. Follow the tips in this guide to get the most out of your screening questions.

Contents

What are applicant screening questions?

Applicant screening questions are used to screen out applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements of a job. Screening questions are often delivered through short online questionnaires that are completed as part of an initial application process.

More complex applicant screening questions can also be used during a recruiter screening interview. Combining two approaches can also provide a more cost effective and efficient hiring

Here are a few key characteristics of good screening questions:

1. Screening questions ask if an applicant meets minimum job requirements.
2. Screening questions are focused on job and company fit.
3. Screening questions are direct; they don't try to trick candidates.
4. Screening questions are simple to understand and not designed to confuse applicants.

"Screening questions help you quickly and easily screen out applicants who do not meet the minimum job requirements."

Why should I use screening questions during employee selections?

Hiring unqualified, ineligible or mismatched applicants often leads to turnover, which has costly results. Screening questions filter unsuitable applicants from progressing in your selection process and minimizes risk. Using applicant pre-screening questions as an initial step in an employee selection process can help you quickly and effectively identify candidates that clearly don't match the company or the job. These questionnaires are short (10 questions or less) and ask candidates to answer a series of questions related to their ability to meet the specific and critical needs of the job or the company.

Applicant screening questions can efficiently reduce initial applicant pools to a reasonable number of candidates that recruiting teams and hiring managers can effectively manage. When facing large volumes of candidates or looking for very specific skills or backgrounds, applicant screening questions allows you to filter through the least qualified applicants and identify people who meet the requirements with the skills and qualities necessary to be successful.

When combined with an adaptive system that identifies which screening questions are making a difference and which aren't, your hiring system becomes more efficient and creates more time for the most critical steps in the hiring process, including interviews and work samples.

The two types of screening questions

There are two main types of questions that will help screen out the wrong applicants. Applicant screening questions have a specific purpose in the screening process.

Type 1: Eligibility Screening Questions

Eligibility screening questions measure if an applicant is actually eligible for consideration of employment in a given position. These questions are those black and white requirements that must be met before any other evaluation should take place.

These questions typically measure things like:

1. **Compensation:** Is the applicant willing to accept the pre-determined compensation for this role?

2. **Start Date:** Can the applicant start this position in an acceptable time frame?

3. **Employment Status:** Is the applicant authorized to work in the required environment legally?

4. **Location:** Is the applicant able to be in the required physical location?

5. **Willingness to Complete the Process:** Is the applicant willing to complete the necessary hiring steps?

Type 2: Job Performance Screening Questions

Another type of screening questions are related to the ability of the applicant to perform the required tasks of the job. These attributes are generally measured after the initial screening for basic eligibility but can also be a powerful tool for filtering out any applicants who do not meet the minimum performance requirements. These questions often measure education, certifications, experience and other relevant skills.

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Each performance-based question will be unique to the position you are hiring for, while the eligibility questions are more generalized across job roles.

These questions typically measure things like:

1. **Education:** Does the applicant have the minimum education requirements?

2. **Certifications:** Does the applicant have the required certifications of licenses?

3. **Experience:** Does the applicant have the necessary experience to be successful?

Other Skills: Are the are other skills that are required for this position?

Remain focused on the most critical questions that need to be answered here and respect the time it takes for candidates to fill out any pre-screening questionnaire. In today's marketplace, people apply to dozens of jobs, and the company that can show that it values a candidate's experience in the hiring process by being respectful of their time as well as communicative, are the ones who will gain a reputation as a good employer, leading to more recruiting success in the future.

Some argue that screening questions are "easy to game," but even if a person does game the question, many others do answer truthfully. Falsified screening questions can also be a useful tool for recruiters and hiring managers to help identify the integrity of candidates. For instance, if a person responds that they meet all of the minimum requirements, but a review of their resume suggests otherwise; that's new information you have about whether or not that candidate will be a good addition to your company.

In summary, pre-screening questions can help you identify applicants who do not meet your minimum "deal breaker" requirements and help you identify applicants who might lack integrity or have been dishonest about their match with your company's needs. This allows you the confidence to move to through the hiring process knowing you are focused on the most qualified applicants.

How to score screening questions

There are multiple ways to score pre-screening questions based on the needs of the job and the characteristics of the applicant pool. If you have a large applicant pool (e.g., entry-level job, unique skills needed, low job complexity) then using simple "Yes" and "No" questions can help you quickly and easily select people out of the hiring pipeline.

If you have a smaller potential applicant pool (e.g., non-entry level job, multiple possible ways to be successful, high complexity, etc.) then using Likert-Scale (multiple options in a range) or even check boxes (check if you have any of the following) in place of Yes/No questions can help you rank order candidates based on how much they fit the desired attributes or needs of the job. It's important to check work history accuracy; check resumes and ask pointed questions in telephone screening interviews. The more complex a skillset or background is, the less likely any one person will meet the requirements. An applicant responding as high as possible on every question about past experience and skillset might be a turnover risk if the role won't challenge them. It could also indicate potential exaggerated responses in the screening system.

Finally, you can allow people to compose written responses to questions in a pre-screening by asking them to describe how their previous experience, skills, or background might make them a good fit for the challenges of the role. Applicants can also respond to skill prompts (i.e., if persuasive writing is a requirement for the role). You might also ask them to list the salary they are looking to achieve or explain what their timeline for accepting a new job is and/or why that is their desired timeline.

Example screening questions with scoring criteria

Example questions are separated by the overall category they are measuring.
Question type:
Is the applicant legally able to take this job?
Are you a citizen of the United States or do you otherwise have legal authorization to work within the United States?

Yes
No
Question type:
Is the applicant able to meet the minimum requirements for this role?
This role requires a person to be in the office during normal working hours. Are you willing to work solely from our office headquarters during normal working hours?

Yes
No

How proficient are you with using python for data analytics and database management?

No proficiency
Basic knowledge
Novice proficiency
Intermediate proficiency
Advanced proficiency
Expert proficiency

Question type:
Is the applicant economically feasible to hire?
This role requires a person to be in the office during normal working hours. Are you willing to work solely from our office headquarters during normal working hours?
Yes/no

Avoiding bias in applicant screening questions

There's an unfortunate statistic that suggests that male candidates will apply for a job even if they only meet 60% of the qualifications yet female candidates only apply if they match the qualifications necessary exactly.

You can avoid biasing a job away from women applicants by:

Avoid using terms or descriptions of jobs that are biased or gendered in the way they are described, or the verbs used.

Avoiding requirements creep by focusing only on what the bare minimum to do the job effectively requires in the job description and in screening questions.

Remember, screening questions are tools to identify who does not meet the minimum requirements of a position and clearly identifying what those minimum requirements are is critical for reducing bias. Do not use screening questions to see if people have "desirable but not necessary" skill sets or backgrounds. Do ask screening questions to see whether candidates can immediately perform the minimum necessary to do the core functions and responsibilities of a job, not those which can be trained on the job.

What not to do with screening questions

Previous compensation or salary
A growing number of states now deem it illegal to ask candidates questions about their previous compensation. These questions are often considered as complicit in continuing pay imbalance between men and women. Further, asking this kind of question can put your company in a poor light as it can be seen as unfair or irrelevant to the process. Therefore, you should ask candidates what they want to be paid instead of what they were paid previously.

Technology
Screening candidates based on their comfort or skill with new technologies can be seen as a proxy for age discrimination in selection which is illegal under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. Therefore, technology or computer-relevant screening questions must be clearly job-relevant to avoid legal challenge.

Non-job relevant questions
Applicant screening questions are considered employment tests and brings some burden along with every other step in the selection process. Screening for anything that is not directly relevant to the job or a candidate's proven success in that job should be avoided at all costs. This includes but is not limited to anything related to personal including hobbies, religious or family background, marital status and current employment.

Protected class status
Protected classes include race, sex, national origin, color, age (40 years or older), and disability and it is illegal to intentionally (or unintentionally) use selection tools to discriminate against people in these classes. Keep your questions broad and avoid asking questions that are (or could be interpreted) as asking about someone's membership in these protected classes. If you are looking to hire a bilingual employee, for instance, you can ask a candidate whether they are fluent in written and spoken Spanish (for example), but you should never ask whether they are Latino or have "native" fluency in Spanish as these could be considered questions relating to a person's race or national origin. Generally speaking, it is encouraged to get a wide perspective and feedback from multiple, diverse, individuals to ensure that you don't ask an illegal screening question. Remember that you should ask the same screening questions for every candidate. Never ask different questions based on a person's demographics or protected class membership.

How to get started

Using screening questions to make your hiring process more efficient allows you to spend more time with applicants who are a good fit for the position and can make a big difference in your recruiting process. If you're not currently using applicant screening question, start by looking at your job req for things the applicant must have in order to progress in the hiring process. The key is "necessity". If the applicant "must" be a US citizen to be considered for this position, then ask that as early on as possible. If they "must" have 10 years of sales experience, then ask that as early as possible. Avoid questions that are "nice to haves" or difficult to evaluate with a self-answered question. An example might be communication. It might be a "must have" for someone to be a great communicator, but that is an attribute that is very hard to confidently determine when asking a survey question. You can find an example of how you can use a job req to identify things that can be asked with screening questions.

Remember - the more you can ask up front the more likely the applicant will be to continue through the entire recruiting process.

Sample screening questions are shown in red below:

CONCLUSION

Great performance, retention, culture and diversity all start with hiring accuracy. When you hire the right person for the job they thrive naturally, so performance goes up (30% on average) and turnover goes down (50% on average). Journeyfront identifies what attributes bring success in each job role and then measure applicants for those traits, giving companies the most data to make the best hiring decisions. Add that with a closed-loop feedback system that connects your pre-hire data to your post-hire outcomes, so you're always getting smarter about who and how you hire.

The more often you get hiring right, the more impact you have on retention, job performance, culture and diversity in your organization.

Hiring is the biggest investment your company will make this year and those who invest in getting it right will reap the benefits for years to come.

For more information about Journeyfront and to request a free demo visit:

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