

*Automotive Personnel, LLC*

## **Intelligent Interviewing and Candidate Assessment**

The most important aspect of your career is the people you hire. Problem is you can have an MBA from Harvard and still not learn how to interview and assess candidates in the real world. Let me show you what we have learned in 29 years of recruiting key personnel for the automotive finance industry.

– Donald Jasensky, Founder and CEO of Automotive Personnel, LLC -



# Intelligent Interviewing and Candidate Assessment

## Part 1 ) Intelligent Interviewing

### **Smart Recruitment Rule:** Intelligent interviewing produces intelligent hiring decisions!

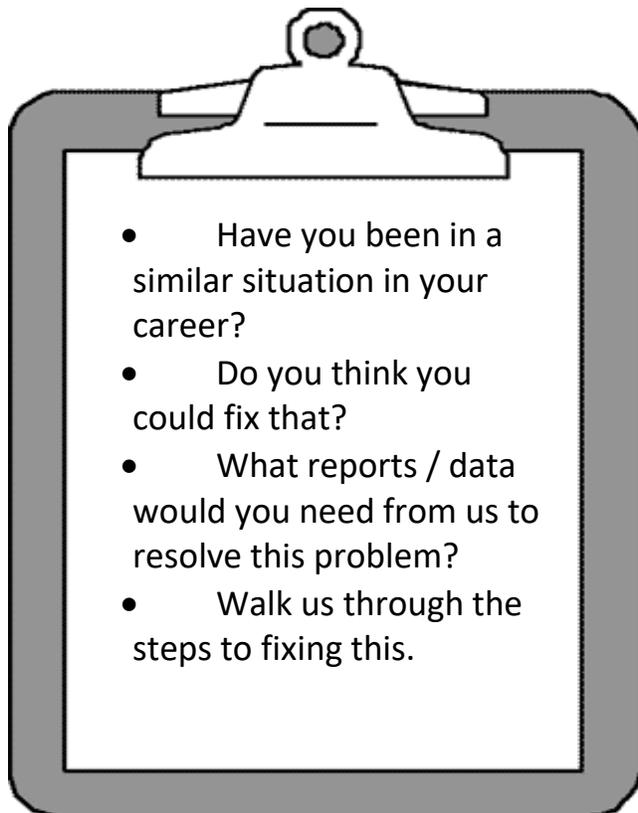
Most clients tell us that they often feel uncomfortable starting an interview. You will feel much more comfortable if you prepare intelligent questions ahead of time.

Objective of interviewing is fact finding so that you can accurately assess a candidate. Here is what we look for in the interviewing process:

- 1) Proven performance
- 2) Would they excel in your position ?
- 3) Motivation
- 4) Do you have the time / capacity / ability to provide adequate training?
- 5) Cultural fit ?
- 6) Knock-out factors such as non-compete, spouse won't relocate, bad attitude

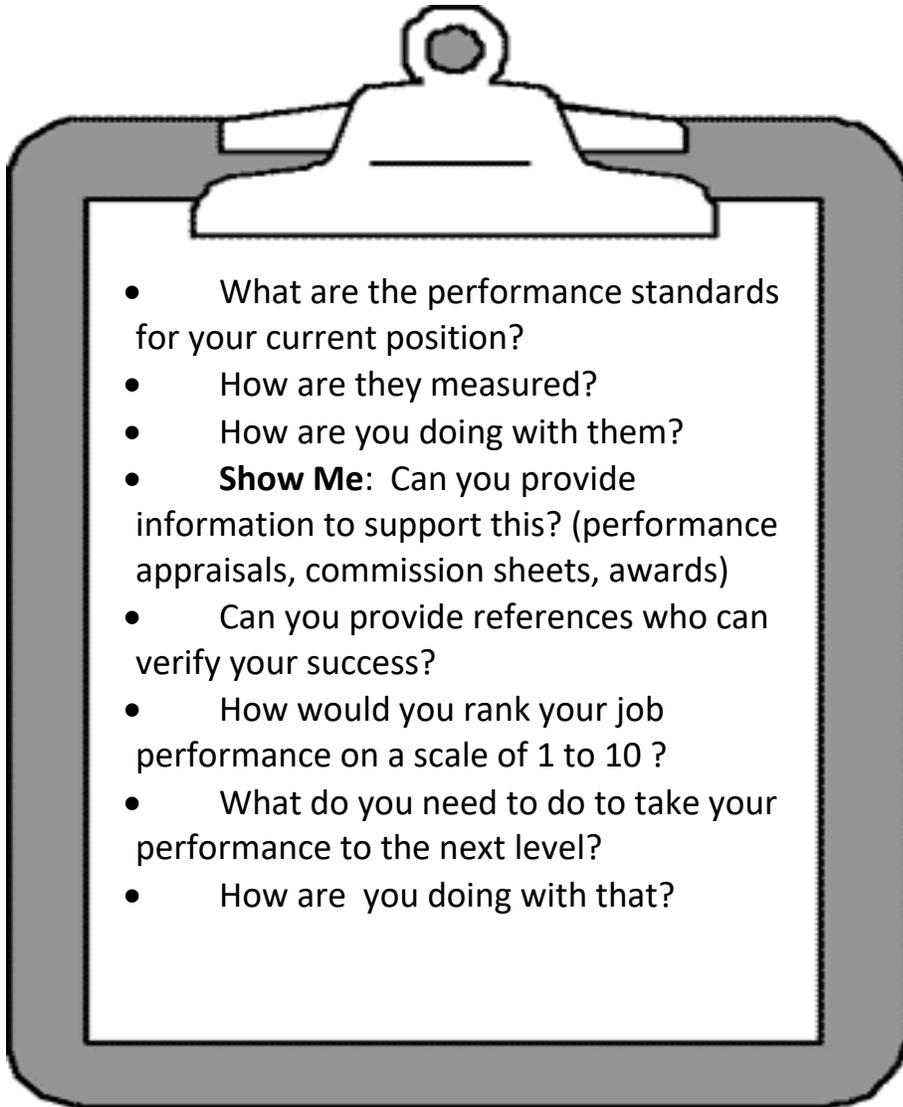
### **Smart Recruitment Rule:** Prepare your questions ahead of time. Make them real world questions that will yield information to help you make intelligent hiring decisions.

Real world questions - Explain your situation .....



Here are several position specific questions we commonly ask after describing what needs to be resolved by the new employee



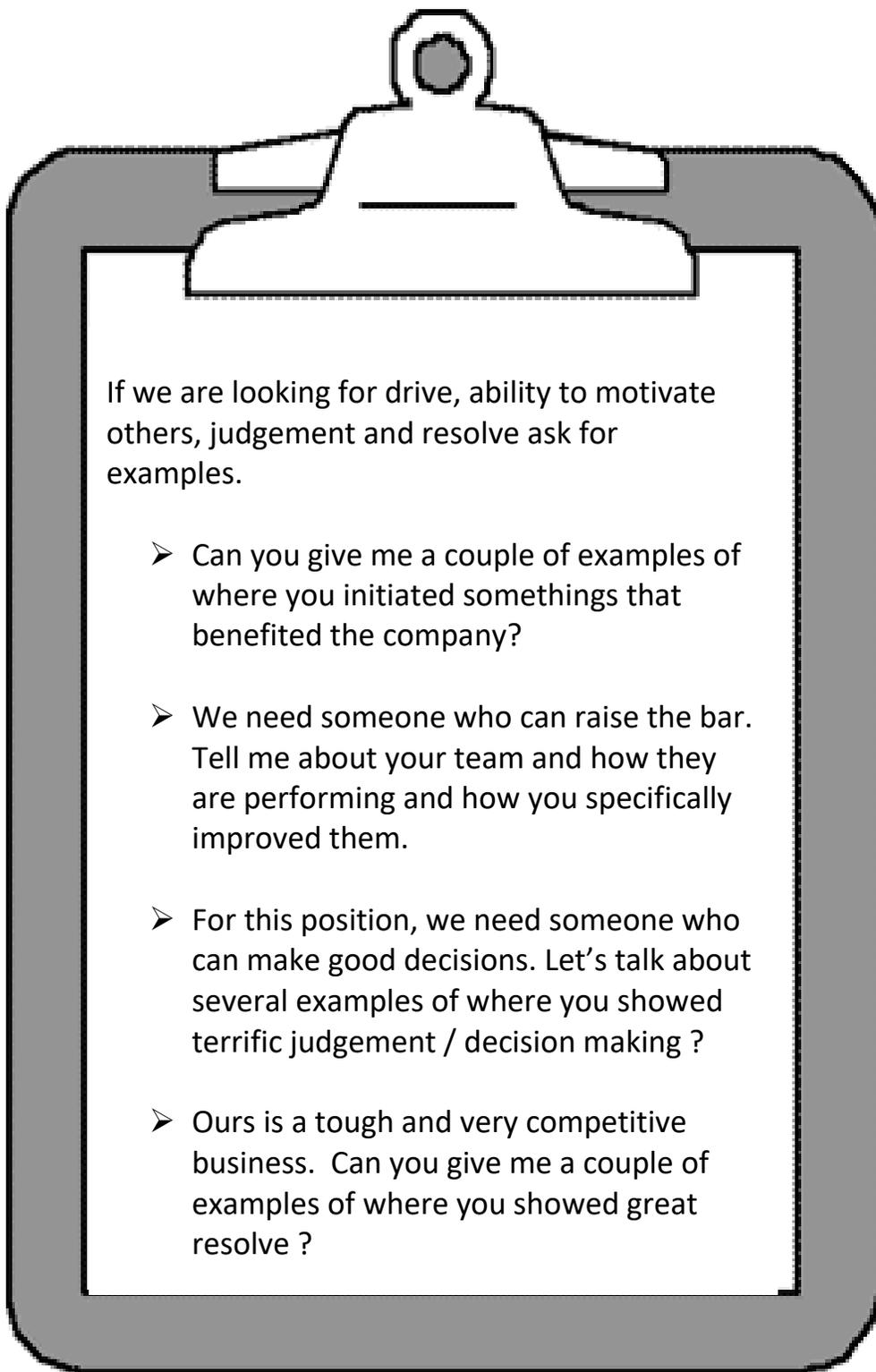


Example of  
generalized  
questions we  
commonly ask

- What are the performance standards for your current position?
- How are they measured?
- How are you doing with them?
- **Show Me:** Can you provide information to support this? (performance appraisals, commission sheets, awards)
- Can you provide references who can verify your success?
- How would you rank your job performance on a scale of 1 to 10 ?
- What do you need to do to take your performance to the next level?
- How are you doing with that?

**Smart Recruitment Rule : Ask references these same questions regarding a candidate's qualifications !**

## Example of additional intelligent questions that yield results



**Drive / Initiative**

**Ability to “raise the bar”**

**Judgement**

**Resolve**

## Ending the 1<sup>st</sup> interview like a Pro!

If you like the candidate, then, at the end of your interview accomplish these 3 things:

- 1) Gauge their interest level
- 2) Ask for their concerns that we need to resolve
- 3) Get their thinking **down** dollar-wise !



**“We are interviewing some terrific candidates, but I don’t mind telling you that I think you would do very well here. Before we finish this interview please tell me your thoughts and any concerns.”**

## Part 2) Candidate Evaluation

### POST INTERVIEW - How to make smarter hiring decisions

So you have several good candidates. Perhaps members of your hiring committee are even split as to who to hire. Let's bring clarity to the evaluation process so you can cover all your bases and make a smart hiring decision. After the interview, ask yourself and members of the hiring team about each candidate. Have a list of talking points that will help organize and lead to **intelligent conversation** about each candidate that will bring clarity to your decision:

Let's recap what you are looking for in the evaluation phase or recruitment :

- 1) Proven performance - "From-To" numbers
- 2) Strengths and weaknesses of each candidate
- 3) Would they excel in your position – duplicate past success ?
- 4) Motivation
- 5) Do you have the time / capacity / ability to provide adequate training?
- 6) Cultural fit ?
- 7) Knock-out factors such as non-compete, spouse won't relocate, bad attitude

Make sure someone is in charge of the reference checking and reports back to the hiring team. The references should help confirm a candidate's contributions, work style, promotions and achievements.

**TIP:** I hear from managers and executives that references are often worthless because people are reluctant to talk about a candidate. This is easy to overcome – tell the candidate to call each reference and let the reference know it is ok to talk to you. We find that if the reference gets permission to talk to us they will take our call and engage in a productive dialogue most of the time.



- 1) **Proven Performance** : Our cardinal rule of personnel recruitment is: “ **The best indicator of future performance is past performance**”. Human behavior follows patterns throughout our adult life. High performers tend to distinguish themselves early in their careers' and throughout. So do low performers . In the candidate evaluation

phase we focus our mental capital on dissecting the information gathered during the interviews, testing, reference checking so that we can make an intelligent hiring decision based on facts .



“From – To” questions are good here. Sales Manager grew profitability from \$X to \$X+ of a Controller reduced closing from 4 days to 3 days.

Throughout my careers I have heard many hiring managers state : “I go with my gut”. I certainly understand this sentiment. We learn to rely on our ability go with feelings instead of researching the facts. Let me suggest this, go with your gut only after you have done your research and reference checking. There is no excuse to not do your homework on a candidate. It may seem time consuming to conduct multiple interviews, check references, discuss the candidates with your hiring committee – and it is. **Let me suggest that all this is a lot less work then making a bad hire will be!**

- 2) **Strengths and weaknesses of each candidate:** Each candidate will have different attributes, experiences, personalities and attitudes. Take the time to make a list of each candidate’s strengths and their weaknesses for your position and company. Often seeing this on paper makes a decision much easier.



- 3) **Would they excel in your position?** A quarter of a century of recruitment has taught me that a high performer in one position or organization may not be a high performer in another. You have seen this at your company too. How many times have we seen a college coach go to the Pro’s and fail miserably? Or a Salesperson promoted to a Sales Manager and flop? So it is important once you identify a high performer to ask yourself and your hiring committee if the candidate will be able to excel in your company and position as they have done in their past?

So what factors do you look for to make this judgement? Let’s not make this too complicated, so start by asking : Are their different skills / experiences /abilities the candidate will need to excel in your company and position?

**Let’s look at their company** . Is candidate coming from a company that offer support such as manpower or a proven system that the candidate relied on that you cannot offer? As an example we have seen employees from large well run organizations with great systems in place and proven leadership that oversee the employees work . Even an average performer

will produce good results in such a system. The system and their leadership will ensure that the result are there.

So your task will be to determine the ability of the candidate to reproduce their results with your company and position. This is where *Intelligent Interviewing* and reference checking saves the day.

Let's look at their current position compared to yours. A questions to answer is: Will the candidate be moving up to more responsibilities? If so, *Intelligent Interviewing* and good reference checking will bring clarity here. Let's use examples to help us:

Service Manager candidate is from a small shop, let's say 8 Automotive Techs. Your shop is 16 Automotive Techs. His current shop he and his 1 Service Writer do all the service writing. At your shop the Service Manager will have 3 Service Writers. Clearly we can see that this is a large step up in responsibility. To help you evaluate if the candidate can handle this increased responsibility you need to determine their capacity or "**ceiling**" as we call sometimes call it.

Determining capacity is never an exact science. Just look at all the Assistant Coaches who step up and fail miserably. To greatly increase the accuracy of your evaluation, spend time spent discussing this with the candidate and how they will handle the added responsibilities will help you. Discussing this with references, especially managers the candidates reported to will also help a great deal.

- 4) **Motivation** : There is nothing like a highly motivated employee. It is important to determine a candidate's motivation. I would take a highly motivated candidate with less experience over a poorly motivated but more experienced candidate anytime.

### **One sure sign that you are interviewing a future high performer is ...**

Over the past quarter century of interviewing candidates and following up on their careers, we have noted one factor that all top performers share. It is also easy to find out if your candidate possesses it - if you know what to look for. If they do possess it, they are very likely to be high performers for you!

So what is this single magic ingredient that can predict future success? It's been proven to us through thousands of interviews that employees who ***work hard to develop their professional skills and increase their industry knowledge away from work, at their own expense and time*** nearly always develop into high performers in their careers!

#### **Examples include:**

- Sales personnel who practice their presentation at home and record it on the smart phone to review and look for ways to improve
- Managers who practice meeting at home and record it and look for ways to improve it
- Reading books on management practices, leadership, customer service, sales, etc., because they want to excel in their job

- Enrollment in online or weekend classes related to work
- Join LinkedIn Groups to stay current on their industry
- Joining clubs like Toast Masters to hone their speaking skills

**So what do we ask candidates ?** Our wording will vary depending on the level of candidate, generally here is what we ask:

*“What are your career aspirations in the next 5 years?”* Listen to their answer then ask:  
*“What are you doing – away from your work place - to get to that level?”*  
 After listening to their answer I may be prompted to ask *“Do you think that is enough to get there ?”*

I may be impressed with their answer and more confident that I have a high performer. If their answer is lacking I may wonder why they are not putting more effort into developing their skills / knowledge the way high performers generally do.

**In summary:** Employees who put effort into their career improvement - ***on their own time and dime*** - are very likely to be successful with you!

### **5) Do you have the time / capacity / ability to provide adequate training ?**

When evaluating candidates it is important to ask yourself and your hiring team what training a new candidate will need and if you have the time and ability to properly train them.

Often when evaluating candidates we need to make this determination. Sometimes companies need to pass on the candidate with that really “high ceiling” and chose a good candidate already trained.

I have often seen this when a very busy service department loses a good Service Adviser and no one has the time to train a new person. The dealership looks for a “solid” Service Advisor with high volume experience.

When a dealership loses a good Desk Person, do they have the time and capacity to train and groom a top Salesperson for the role? Or do they have a hole that needs to be filled ASAP and they need to hire the experience?

- 6) **Cultural Fit** : Wikipedia states **Organizational culture** encompasses values and behaviors that "contribute to the unique social and psychological environment" of an organization. In my years of professional recruitment I have learned how important corporate culture can be to one's success at a company .

Early on when looking for personnel for subprime automotive finance companies I learned that bankers – who have the same job responsibilities such as credit underwriting, collections, sales – are a terrible cultural fit for subprime automotive finance companies. They perform the same work but the difference in cultures made it very difficult to adapt from one to the other.

The lesson I learned here is explain your corporate culture to the candidates. Let them meet with and talk to your employees and the candidates will better understand the cultural differences. Discuss this with the candidates and see how they feel about the differences. The majority of times corporate are similar enough that it won't make a big difference. However in some situations it can be a deal breaker.

## 7) Knockout Factors

### Save time, aggravation and professional embarrassment!

We have learned the value of establishing ***“Knockout Factors”*** at the beginning of every search. These are factors that are so important that, no matter how qualified a candidate may otherwise be, they will be “knocked out of contention” if this need isn't met.

You may have been there yourself. A typical example is hiring a Sales Rep, letter of intent already presented contingent upon background check. Background checks come back and reveal that your #1 candidate has too many points on their driver's license to be insured with your company. No matter how qualified – game over!

Worse, I know a large company that was about to hire a CFO. After 2 months of interviewing, committee meetings about the candidate, even interviews with members of the BOD and investors and letter of intent sent, contingent upon background check, they found that the CFO had a non-compete that he could not get out of! Game over, lots of professional embarrassment! CEO was livid – careers changed that day for allowing that mistake!

To spare our clients from these issues, we prepare a list of “knockout factors” when beginning a search such as:

- Candidate's ability to commute to your office daily or relocate. Spouse plays a crucial role in relocation so make sure spouse's input is received early in the process
- Non-compete exist
- Specific knowledge necessary such as “EXCEL Expertise”
- Needed licensure (driver's license needed to do job or CPA required, etc.)?
- Credit and criminal background checks needed
- Ability to travel as required
- Bad attitude

These issues are easy to resolve up front.

- If a candidate has concern about **location of office**, we have them make the drive in rush hour traffic to see if it is a reasonable drive day to day. Don't forget to factor in winter driving here up north!
- We ask about **non-compete** up front. If there is one we want to see it. We let our client know about it and they can determine how it may affect them. Some are limited to industry, geographic area, prime Vs subprime financing, etc. Many are game ending!
- We ask about **ability to travel**. Generally we do not consider candidates for a travel position, (such as a Regional Sales Manager), if they are not in a travel position. Travel sounds glamorous but it is a grind. Most people cannot do it. No heavy travel experience - no need to consider them for a heavy travel position.
- When it comes to **credit, back ground and driver license** checks, we tell candidates about these requirements up front. Should the candidate have an issue they will either take themselves out of the process or tell us about their situation to see if it is workable. If they know about these requirements and try to keep them from us – they are immediately disqualified.
- If I may share a quarter of a century recruitment experience with you – as soon as a candidate's "bad attitude" is revealed - end any and all thoughts of hiring the candidate. Bad attitudes are contagious and no amount of technical skill will overcome the issues they can cause on your team!

Make a list of "knockout factors" before you start any search, it will save you time, aggravation and professional embarrassment.

## **"Ceiling" Vs. "Getting them up to speed"**

Let's go into more detail here. In the executive search profession we are always comparing candidates as we decide who "makes the cut" and gets sent to our client and who does not. We look at many factors in making our decisions, I want to talk about 2 factors that will bring clarity to your group of candidates fairly quickly.

We look at potential "ceiling" a candidate may have. This is how high do we think this candidate can rise. This is easier for a candidate whose performance can be measured : sales, sales management, department head, CEO are good examples where their performance is fairly easy to measure.

You can also use this concept when looking at positions that may not have such measurables.

Example : You are looking at Accounting Manager candidates. After interviewing the candidates you begin the final selection process. Who in the group looks like they have the "higher ceiling" ? That is who may have the ability to become a Divisional Manager? Corporate Controller? CFO?

As an example, let's assume you are looking at your group of good Accounting Manager candidates: all have degrees, good work experience, good references, interviewed well etc. - those with the "higher ceiling" may be more attractive to your company.

In a search we completed earlier this year for a CEO of a midsize automotive company, we had several very impressive candidates that ownership and the search committee liked. They debated candidates for several days then in a conference call they asked me what I thought. I told them I will ask 1 question and I think your answer will emerge immediately after. They were intrigued! I communicated that the finalists are all very good candidates with terrific experiences, accomplishments, etc. Now, which candidate has the highest ceiling? All agreed on 1 candidate right away! Conversation then moved to putting an offer together.

There is a balance to “highest ceiling” that needs to be factored in and that is what will it take to get this candidate up to speed for your open position? As an example, let’s assume you are looking for a Regional Manager over a 12 person parts department. Big responsibility.

The candidates with the highest ceiling may look like they possess the potential to really grow your wholesale department someday. However the job at hand is Collection Manager and ***you cannot look past this fact!*** What will it take to get the best candidate “up to speed for your position?”

- what is the cost and time to getting this candidate trained and “up to speed?”
- product knowledge?
- learning more about your industry? your customers?
- your corporate technology?
- is this a much larger staff than candidate has ever managed?
- do you have the **time and ability** to get this candidate “up to speed”?

Very often companies need to pass on the candidate with the highest ceiling and focus on the candidate that can do the very best with the position they are hiring for now.

This is the “Ceiling Vs Getting them up to speed” decision you sometimes need to make.

**TAKE AWAY :** Go into each interview looking for clues to a candidate’s “potential ceiling” and what will be needed to get the candidate “up to speed” with your open position.

## ***Deciphering a candidate’s employment record during the interview - made easy !!!***

**The best indicator of a candidate’s future performance with you is their past performance. But you have to know what to look for !!!**

Employment behavior tends to follow consistent patterns. A low achiever has a record of low achievement and a high achiever has a record of high achievement. The confusing part is deciphering a candidate’s employment record during the interview and evaluation process!

Low achievers are usually very good at “hiding” in successful departments. As an interviewer it is your responsibility to find out the actual contributions, accomplishments and employment record of the candidate to determine if a high or low achiever is sitting in front of you. In 29

years of recruiting we have learned that one of the most common mistakes employers make is hiring low performers from successful companies.

**As the interviewer, you must ask the questions that will yield the information you need to make a smart hiring decision.**

During the interview, probe candidates about their accomplishments, their specific role, dates and time frames, awards, bonuses, promotions, attendance and good teammate traits. Then verify with references. Do not miss the “verify with references “ part! Learn from the automotive finance and banking industry – they do not just ask customers “how they pay their bills” do they? No, they verify – so should you!

Don’t allow important questions to be answered with soft answers. They provide you with no real assessment value. Ask for facts, details and information to support their contributions and references who will verify them.

**Revealing Questions:**

We have found certain questions can be very revealing. Of course many question will be asked, but keep the 80/20 rule in mind when it comes to revealing questions! Following is an example that I use when interviewing Sales Managers. Whether your position is a Group VP over multiple divisions or a Sales Manager, a few intelligent questions reveals so much from the interview.

Now watch as I drill down for specifics and remember that the devil lies in the detail !

**EXAMPLE – Sales Manager :**

After a general discussion about our client’s sales staff and its strengths and weaknesses

**I ask :** *Now that you know the issues our client has with its sales staff tell me how you will help their sales staff perform much better for you than they are now.*

**Candidate answer :** *I will motivate them to sell*

**My follow up -** *Walk me through the details how you have done that in the past ...*

**Candidate answer :** *I will train them to be better, I’m a great trainer*

**My follow up -** *Share some significant details about your training program and walk me through your " From-To "results ...*

**Candidate answer :** *I will hold them accountable for their results*

**My follow up -** *That sounds great, let’s talk about your current system to hold your people accountable ...*

I do not allow for soft or generic answers to specific questions. You shouldn't either. The high performers will have specific answers and be able to support their "From – To" results. You, as the interviewer, must lead and ask the questions that will yield the information you need to make a smart hiring decision. Become great at developing these revealing questions and pursuing details so that you can decipher a candidate's true employment record. We have a separate article devoted to "Intelligent Interviewing" on our website that goes into more detail. [www.automotivepersonnel.careers](http://www.automotivepersonnel.careers)

Please keep in mind we are not trying to stump a candidate, we want to learn about them so we can make an astute judgement on how they will perform in the future with our client.



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