SPECIAL REPORT

50+ Interview Questions for Millennials
I believe that 95% of the personnel problems employers face could be eliminated if they hired the right people. Naturally, the pivotal emphasis here is on the word right because the people who are right for your business may be completely wrong for the business next door to yours. You have to know what right looks like in your business, and you have to do everything possible to maintain a healthy flow of applicants to keep the odds of finding the right talent stacked in your favor.

The right people are out there, but only if you can find them; therefore, it’s imperative for you to be able to quickly and effectively separate the chaff from the grain. The right young job seekers are in high demand, and Gen Y, impulsive and impatient by nature, tend to choose the first offer they get rather than wait for the right one.

Nothing can replace personal interviews as the best way to select the right people for your business. However, over the past several years the interviewing game has radically changed. Through instant peer-to-peer information exchange, young applicants already know the “typical” questions they’ll be asked. They’ve also been tipped off as to how to answer those questions in order to “win the game” and get the job offer. In many cases, they’ll give these answers even if there’s a considerable chasm between their responses and what they really think and feel.

So how can you really know if you’re hiring the right person or simply getting the right answers from the wrong person? You can start by asking better interview questions or, at the very least, asking questions that will lead to honest, and sincere, unrehearsed replies. You’ve got to create a relaxed environment that will enable the applicant to open up, yet avoid being overly casual and turning the interview into an informal chat. That means you must have a game plan going in and know what questions you’re going to ask before the interview begins. You also have to know what questions the law prevents you from asking, including those regarding an applicant’s age, race, ethnicity, gender, birthplace, and religion, as well as disability, marital, family, or pregnancy status.

It may sound complicated, and it is. Finding the right people for your business has never been easy. And the combination of the impending labor shortage, the skyrocketing costs of making a bad hire, and the probability that a young applicant can outsmart an experienced interviewer makes this challenge even greater. In today’s world, interviewers need to elevate their game.

The questions that follow have been submitted by leading-edge business owners, managers, and HR professionals in North America. These are the kinds of questions they are asking young applicants, and the ones they use to find the right Gen Y employees. I am deeply appreciative of everyone who took part in creating this report, and hope that it provides great value to all who read it.
1. If you were to rate yourself on a scale/continuum from “hard work, effort” to “natural ability, talent,” where would you put yourself and why?

The key to this question is obviously the applicant’s answer to the “why.” This question might make people think about their perceptions of themselves in their work lives.

2. If my tendency to micromanage you and always look over your shoulder is driving you crazy, how will you: a) get me off your back, and b) help me learn to let go?

This can reveal a lot about how they perceive authority and take direction. It will also give great insight into their conflict resolution mindset.

3. If you could buy any skill what would it be?

Isn’t this a better, more positive way to ask them about their weaknesses, and show what they think they need to work on?

4. Tell me about a time when it was hard for you to be on time and how you handled it.

Does the applicant have a tendency to come up with excuses, or do they place a high value on punctuality? Also, do they look for solutions to problems, or place blame and look for excuses?

5. Have you ever not followed instructions because you thought they were kind of stupid?

More important than the actual response here is the way that they appear after they are asked the question. Does this type of question make them nervous? Can they think on their feet, i.e. “Yeah, the shampoo bottle says to lather, rinse, and repeat, and I never repeat.” It may also give you insight into how they truly feel about rules and authority and what they consider to be a ‘stupid’ instruction?

6. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to follow a rule you disagreed with? How did you handle it?

How does the applicant view authority? Are they inclined to play by your rules, or theirs?

7. Tell me about a time when you had to work with a difficult person and how you handled it.

Does the candidate have the ability to be sensitive to the needs of others while at the same time the ability to influence them?
8. Have you ever heard gossip about someone at school/work? What did you do after hearing it?

Will this person be a positive addition to your team? Additionally, if they respond stating that they heard something that goes beyond petty gossip and is something that a teacher/manager really should know, did they do the right thing and report it?

9. What is the most common misperception people have of you?

This question can reveal a lot about the applicant’s hidden personality and help you determine if he/she has a chip on the shoulder.

10. Why are your skills for this job better than the average job seeker (be specific)? Followed by: If I have only one job available, and your best friend is also applying for the job, who should get the job, and why?

This open-ended question can reveal what an applicant sees as his/her strengths. It will also give the interviewer an idea of the candidate’s self-confidence. Finally, you can tell a lot about an applicant from the way he/she describes friends.

11. If you saw somebody stealing something, either an employee or a customer, how would you handle this situation?

Answers to this question can produce a great deal of insight into a person. If the answer is vague, suggest that the applicant elaborate. If he/she continues to be vague, depending on how the rest of your interview goes and the position he/she is applying for will determine whether there is a fit.

12. If you were to write your autobiography, what would you title it and why?

An interviewer can tell a lot about an applicant’s creativity with this question. It also speaks to a person’s ability to think fast under pressure and keep composed.

13. If you could only have one word written on your tombstone, what would it be?

How does this applicant see him/herself?

14. If you had an extra $100 per week, what would you do with it?

This helps determine the applicant’s priorities and interests. Is he/she in debt? (e.g. “I have to pay off some bills.”) Does the applicant show discipline and strategic goal setting by suggesting he/she would save or invest part of it?

15. What things do customers do that you find annoying?

This can tell you all you need to know about whether this person will interface well with your customers.
16. If a customer were to yell at you for something that is not “your job,” what would you do?

This will show you how the applicant will deal with stress and difficult people.

17. If you were interviewing you for this job, what would you want to know about you?

This question places the applicant in the interviewer’s shoes. An “I don’t know” response shows the person may not be suited for any kind of leadership position.

18. If you were the boss, how would you tell somebody that they were not accepted for the position?

This will speak to an applicant’s ability to relate unpleasant news to customers, and it may speak to his/her honesty and integrity.

19. How would you handle a co-worker that always came to you with complaints, be it regarding customers, fellow associates or supervision?

Will this applicant be a positive or negative addition to your team? Is he/she capable of dealing with difficult coworkers?

20. If you could be a superhero, who would you want to be and why? What superhero power(s) would you like to have?

The answer is not as important as the applicant’s reaction.

Does he or she laugh or take the chance to joke with the interviewer(s)? Does he/she come up with something creative or just say, “I don’t know”? This gives the candidate a chance to relax and the interviewer an opportunity to see behind the nerves and prepared answers.

21. **The most important factor in the hiring process is whether or not candidates want to work for a particular concept and be on the “team.” This is even more important than personal opinion and whether or not there is a desire to hire them. After the interview (if you think he/she is a good candidate), suggest he/she “sleep on it” and call the next day if he/she wants to be on the team. Amazingly, you’ll find about 50% of the candidates don’t call back or contact you to say they are not interested! This is important because it saves precious company resources and valuable time for all involved. It also allows them time to think instead of acting impulsively and saying yes to a job because they are excited. Most importantly, it reduces the number of hires that leave within the first three months of employment.**
Frequently, Generation Y candidates are simply looking for "a job" and they don't really look into the future of what their work experience will be like. If this future for them isn't illustrated, or the seed isn't planted in their mind to look into the future, they often become frustrated with the realities of the workplace (such as accountability for their actions, meeting expectations, etc.).

22. How do you feel about downloading music without paying for it?

The answer touches on legal and moral issues and forces candidates to articulate their reasoning.

23. If we were to hire you for this position, how would you make an immediate impact on our organization?

Since most Gen Y's are seeking immediate gratification from EVERYTHING they do in life, it may be surprising to see how they handle this question. Surprisingly, it really gets them to open up and feel an instant connection to the company. Worst case scenario ~ the question helps them relax and see the interview as a REAL opportunity instead of just a formality!

24. Have you ever had a teacher/supervisor you disliked? How do you deal with teachers/supervisors you dislike?

Everyone has had teachers and supervisors they didn’t like. If they answer ‘no’, it’s a safe bet they are not being truthful with some other answers. The follow up question of how they dealt with a person in authority they didn’t like will be a key indicator of whether they can survive a difficult relationship with a boss, or if they’ll take the easy road and quit at the first sign of conflict.

25. How did you prepare for this job interview?

Can reveal the depth of interest the applicant has in your opportunity as well as his/her ability to plan ahead.

26. Is there something missing from your current job that you want in your next job?

Does the applicant criticize a previous employer? This is a warning sign that the candidate could be a problem employee.

27. How would your teachers or friends describe you?

Is the applicant energetic? Does the applicant put his/her mind to the task at hand and see to it that it's accomplished? Is the person accountable--can you always depend on the applicant to see that a task is accomplished? Has the applicant any reference letters?
28. How do you continue your learning?

This question will reveal whether a candidate looks for diversity in learning opportunities—someone who learns from workshops, books, friends, newspapers, internet, etc. It will determine if the candidate is a lifelong learner—someone who thirsts for knowledge.

29. What will your friends think (about you) if you get this job?

Look for an answer that shows how the applicant responds to peer pressure. You can determine if the candidate is guided by “what others think” or is capable of making his/her own decisions apart from the crowd.

30. What would make you WANT to come to work, vs. HAVE to come to work?

This question speaks to both the reason the applicant is seeking work as well as the factors which will motivate him/her once on the job. Surprisingly enough, money often ranks very low on this list.

31. What is the most irritating part of your current job—the part you might wish you could delegate to someone else? Why?

This question is aimed at getting behind the rehearsed answers as it’s not something usually asked during a first (or second) interview.

What does the candidate hate doing and why? Does he/she not like making phone calls, running errands, drafting memos, etc.? Is this a task that may cause problems later? This gives the interviewer the opportunity to address the issue or cross the applicant off the list.

32. Tell me about a time when you were given a project at school/work that you didn’t fully understand how to complete it or the teacher/supervisor wasn’t descriptive enough on what was expected. How did you go about making sure the project was completed?

This type of question is great to ask. It shows how much initiative the applicant has— if he/she goes in before school/work starts, stays late to ask questions, just asks his/her peers or if the applicant doesn’t really care and tries to figure it out by him/herself. Did the applicant wait until the last minute or did he/she jump right in and try and get the project accomplished?
33. Give an example of a situation where you felt proud of what you did without being asked while working at your last job. How were you recognized for doing this?

The kind of personal initiative your applicant has displayed in past employment can serve as a good predictor of the initiative he or she will bring to your position. Pay attention to his or her tone of voice and body language when describing the recognition he/she may or may not have received. Overly negative or critical may be the sign of a prima donna who displays initiative only for the attention or rewards it will bring.

34. What is the biggest error in judgment you have made? Why did you make it? How did you recover?

How quick is the candidate on his or her feet? Can he/she come up with a good example of miscommunication or an assumption he/she eventually worked through? Is it as simple as communicating face to face versus e-mail and instant message systems? In the end, were any valuable lessons learned from the mishap(s)? Or is the candidate stumped? Is there a perceived belief that he/she is perfect and has never done anything wrong? That can be a red flag in itself.

35. What is a “pet peeve” you have had about an organization or an environment you’ve worked in?

Is there another reason for the applicant’s leaving or looking to leave his/her company that has not been revealed before? This is another chance for the candidate to reveal something interesting about his/her personality.

36. Give me an example of when you disagreed with a teacher -- if a recent student with little work experience -- or a supervisor and what you did about it. What was the end result?

Conflict is an inevitable part of life and work and inevitably employees will disagree with the boss. Being able to defend your point of view without anger and to gracefully accept defeat when your supervisor insists you do things his or her way are traits to seek in young applicants.

37. I’d like you to tell me something good about yourself that you think I should know about you - something I wouldn’t know unless you told me.

This is the applicant’s chance to do a little bragging and self-promotion. It could be something he/she likes to do that no one knows about, it could be something he/she has been training for, etc. If the applicant is hired, this can be a great conversation opener.
38. What if you had interruptions? How do you handle that and accomplish your work?

This question gets to the heart of a candidate’s ability to a.) prioritize and make decisions on the fly, b.) stay on task regardless of interruptions and c.) deal positively with customers when they, as they often will be, are the source of the disruption to the candidate’s assigned tasks.

39. How do you resolve conflict? How do you react to co-workers disagreeing?

When conflict occurs, it's because of a failure to see both sides of the situation. Does the applicant ask the other person’s perspective and, at the same time, ask to be allowed to fully explain his/her perspective? Does the applicant work toward compromise? If the conflict is with a supervisor, is the applicant willing to submit to their decision because they are the superior?

40. Describe an accomplishment that you are really proud of and tell me how you achieved it?

You are looking for the ability of the “Y’s” to have done something they are proud of and willing to share, and you are looking for an explanation of their road to glory. What is best about this question is it lets you know if they know how to overcome obstacles and it also lets you know things in which they are interested. Occasionally, it will also show you how to motivate if they share with you what helped them get through this process.

41. Tell me what person, event, or circumstance most shaped you as a person.

You can learn a lot about a person’s values and character from this one storytelling exercise.

42. If you could describe a perfect work environment, what would it look like?

To see what kind of work environment would engage and retain the candidate...supportive, fun, professional, relaxed, structured, opportunity for advancement.

43. If you had a really boring task to do, how would you pass the time during that task?

Most jobs contain a fair amount of rote and repetition, this question will reveal if your applicant can stay focused, on task and committed to a quality outcome even when bored senseless.
44. **What does being a 'Team Player' mean to you?**

Will the applicant pitch in, even if the task or committee is outside his/her normal job description? In a small business, it’s important to look for people who will grow into more responsibility as the business grows larger and expands into more markets.

45. **If you were hired, what could we count on from you without fail?**

The applicant should be concrete and confident. If he/she is unable to come up with -- or struggles -- with an answer, it might show a struggle with accountability. The applicant here would discuss his/her work ethics, strengths, etc.

46. **Tell me two people you consider to be heroes or role models in your life and two things about each of these people that you admire most.**

We often learn the most by imitating the positive traits and behaviors of those we admire; if a candidate has admirable role models then it’s likely that he/she will pursue admirable behaviors.

47. **Please describe a time when you had to work very hard to accomplish a goal.**

   a. What did “working very hard” mean to you?
   b. What were the biggest obstacles you faced?
   c. Were you successful? If so, what were the most important things that enabled you to be successful?
   d. How long did it take you to be successful or, alternatively, to determine that you could not accomplish the goal?

This multiple-part question tests whether applicants have the willingness and perseverance to work through a situation (translate “assignment”) to a successful conclusion – or whether they will fold when it is not immediately interesting or they don’t get what they want easily. Pluses for the individual: Someone who describes a situation that required a longer time frame, perhaps one or more false starts, and some obstacles and/or who can identify the key success factors to success means the behavior can most consciously be replicated.

48. **Describe a time in your previous employment, or in any previous experience, when you “went the extra mile.” What motivated you to do this?**

This can help you to see what they interpret as "going the extra mile." If, for instance, they think staying ten minutes late to cover a busy shift is a big deal, you’ll know you might have someone who operates at the ‘minimum daily requirement’ level. The follow-up question about motivation will give you an indication of how they are wired and what it takes to bring out the best in them.
49. Tell me about a time you disagreed with something your boss, teacher or coach said or asked you to do; how did you handle it? What was the result?

Did the applicant ask questions to clarify the authority’s position, offer alternatives with his/her own reasons, and show examples of his/her own idea?

50. Tell me about a time when you needed to give instructions to or make a request of a teacher, coach or boss who was part of the “older” generation. How did you communicate? How was it successful?

While we, as employers, are concerned about our ability to communicate clearly with younger generations of employees, it is equally important that our young applicants demonstrate a willingness and ability to communicate with the “older” generation in a clear, concise and respectful manner as well.

51. Would you rather work for someone who watches your every move or someone who ignores you? Explain why.

This question will help define the individual’s personality, which then can be compared to that of who will be supervising the applicant. Many people choose an answer that could go either way, such as, “I have worked with both types of people and have done fine with each.” If that is the answer, ask him/her to give the pros and cons of working for each of the individuals and which one he/she preferred to work with.

52. Based on what you know about the job so far, where would you focus your energy first if we were to hire you?

The answer to this question can reveal lots of good information about the candidate, including:
- How well has he/she researched the company and the position?
- What are his/her priorities?
- What are his/her strengths?
- Is he/she a lone ranger or a team player?
- Potential leadership style or motivation?

It also provides launching points for follow-up questions in categories the employer may want to pursue.

53. When you were little what did you want to be when you grew up? What changed your mind about that decision?

A good answer would be: “I haven’t changed my mind; I am working on it.” This indicates the applicant is ambitious and sets goals. It’s also interesting to learn a little about the applicant and how high his/her goals have been set.
54. Where did you (do you) choose to sit in the classroom in school -- the front or back of the class?

An answer of “Front of the class” shows an interest in paying attention to the teacher and being interested in learning the lessons without distractions. An answer of “Back of the class” shows a bit of reluctance to be called upon to answer the questions or a tendency towards tardiness.

55. Think about a day in the last few months that really energized you (personally or professionally). What happened or what were you doing that made it so good?

Have the candidate describe situations in which he/she was so engaged in an activity that he/she lost track of time. Listen for his/her innate talents.

56. How do you respond when someone does something really stupid?

This speaks to the way an applicant interrelates with both authority and peers.

57. What one question would you like to ask me? Follow up question: Of all the questions you could have asked why did you choose that one?

What is the applicant looking for in a job? How much preparation has been put into this process? Candidates who are ideally prepared won’t need to be asked this, as they’ve been asking questions of the interviewer throughout the process.

58. What question were you afraid I would ask and didn’t?

If a Gen Y offers a question in response to this, a natural follow-up question is, “Okay, great. Now answer that question for me.”