

# Working Learner Interview Questions & Strategies

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DATE	May 2024
RESOURCE	Guide

There are a variety of interview styles you have the opportunity to choose from based on your environment, the role and responsibilities you are hiring for, and the best interest of those you are interviewing. As a supervisor and hiring manager, you want to ensure your student employee and working learner candidates have the best chance to showcase their skills and abilities for the position while providing intentional space to get to know them, their interests, goals, and values. Consider the key competencies of the role you are hiring for when planning out your interview questions and approach. This resource will highlight a variety of different interview styles and approaches – based on your specific role and need, it may be best to bring a few different styles together for the best interview experience possible.

## Interview Formats and Styles

### Behavior(al) Interview

**What:** A behavior or behavioral interview asks specific, example inducing questions that allow the working learner candidate to highlight their experiences and for the interviewer to find out more about how they have handled and behaved in specific work situations in the past.

**Why:** Behavior(al) interviews are a great way to gain insight into a student's skills, experiences, and interests and can provide you as an interviewer with context of how they may handle situations in their role within your department or office. It can be beneficial to have some behavioral formatted questions in the interview to glean tangible examples and learn more about your student candidate as a person throughout the interview process.

### **Considerations**

- A common approach to answering behavioral interviewing questions is the STAR or PAR method. STAR highlights the situation, task, action, and result the candidate experienced in answering the skill-based question and PAR does similarly, but focuses on problem, action, and result. Provide this format to your candidates prior to the interview so they can be set up for success and have time to practice *how* to answer the questions.
- In behavioral interviews, you will be providing your student with skill-based questions and requesting specific examples from them. It can be helpful and mutually beneficial to provide the questions before the interview to ensure your student has time to think through thoughtful responses. Remember, you are assessing their skills, interest, and experience, not testing them on how quickly they can think of an example from their life.
- Ensure your questions are related to skills directly relevant to the role to ensure you get a good gauge of understanding of their ability to do the work in the position you are hiring for, specifically.

## **Example Questions**

- Tell me/us about a time you handled a difficult or complex situation and how you approached the situation.
- Provide an example of how you have demonstrated leadership.
- How did you learn from a mistake you have made?
- Describe a time you had to learn something new, maybe a new system or skill, and in what ways you approached that learning process.
- How do you motivate those who work with you?

## **Case, Puzzle, or Situation Interview**

**What:** When conducting a case, puzzle, or situational interview, the candidate is provided a problem, “case scenario”, case study, situation, or puzzle to work through. This is a common interview approach for positions you may be filling with student employees in positions that use high levels of analysis, critical thinking, processes, or creativity.

**Why:** Case interviews provide the interviewer(s) to see how the candidate works through a realistic problem in real time and invites them to be privy to the thought process and real time problem solving to showcase the working learner’s innovation and critical thinking.

### **Considerations**

- It can be beneficial to incorporate a case, puzzle, or situational question within the process rather than gear the entire interview towards processes and critical thinking. Having some of these type-questions allows the candidate to showcase their skill and ability while also allowing you to get to know their interests, goals, and skills through other type-questions as well.
- If you are going to have the candidate share the case, puzzle, or situation in a presentation, be sure to share the prompt prior to allow them time to create and practice.
- This interview format can be beneficial for working learners who currently hold a position within your office and are up for a promotion or advancement requires more targeted and specific skills they would have gained with you already. That way, you can ask a work-related case, puzzle, or situation question to them and they have the necessary context and resources to successfully showcase their skills.

## **Group Interview**

**What:** During a group interview, multiple candidates are brought together to be interviewed at the same time by one interviewer or a team of interviewers, based on the circumstances. Through this format, an interviewer may be assessing the student employee candidate’s ability to work effectively in a team or their listening and communication skills.

**Why:** When interviewing multiple candidates for the same position, this format can be helpful for schedules and shortening overall process timelines. It can also be particularly helpful in seeking insight on how your candidates work together in specific environments that may mirror that which they will be in within their working learner role.

### **Considerations**

- Group interviews are especially helpful in skill-based review. Feel free to share with your candidates the why behind the group interview to help them understand the skills you are assessing, within reason.
- Consider non-verbal communication during the group interview such as body language.
- Remember this is not an organic environment for these students and it may be their first interview, let alone their first group interview. Consider nerves and discomfort within your review and assessment of the candidates.

### **Approach or Format**

- A supervisor led presentation about the department or office followed by a group question-and-answer session.
- A problem-solving session where you provide a hypothetical situation and candidates work together to come up with one or more solutions emphasizing teamwork, communication, active listening, and leadership.
- A group-oriented work-related task where candidates find a way to perform or carry out a task together.

### **Individual Interview**

**What:** An individual interview is the most common interview format and takes place directly with the candidate and the interviewer in a one-on-one conversational format. This can be done in a relaxed and casual way where it truly feels like a natural conversation or it can be done where the interviewer asks the student the individual questions one by one off of a script.

**Why:** Individual interviews can be easiest in scheduling as it is only you and the specific candidates without having to consider multiple staff and committee members. It can also be a really great way to get to know your student employee candidates and show a care for their interests, goals, abilities, and their skills. Providing a personal connection, especially with our students, can ease nerves and allow the candidate to focus on the situation at hand.

### **Considerations**

- Though these interviews tend to be more personable and individualized, consider still having a script of questions so you ensure you ask each candidate the same questions and provide each with the same opportunity to showcase their interest and abilities.

### **Panel or Committee Interview**

**What:** In this format, a candidate is interviewed by two or more people at once, making up the hiring or interview panel. The individuals in this interview are likely part of the hiring committee or have direct connection to the job or department (and may include a member of Human Resources). They should each have the ability to share their candidate feedback with the hiring manager or supervisor during the process. After introductions, it is common for panel members to take turns asking the questions in a “round robin” format.

**Why:** Providing different perspectives is helpful because it provides new insight to the role and experience for the candidate while also ensuring personal feelings don't affect judgment in the process. Incorporating diverse perspectives is valuable to the process and reduces opportunity for bias.

### ***Considerations***

- It may be intimidating to the student employee or working learner to have so many new faces and interviewers at once.
- Sharing your chosen format with your candidate prior to the interview and sharing how many and even who will be present can be a great resource to provide.

### **Phone Interviews**

**What:** A phone interview is just that – an interview that occurs via a phone call and allows you to ask some initial questions of the candidate. Though they should be treated like any other interview, phone interviews can be less stressful for a candidate due to the candidate being able to focus solely on what they are saying and how they are saying it and not having to consider all of the in-person variables yet.

**Why:** Phone interviews are often used as an initial screening for a first-round interview to see if you want to invite the candidate to an in person or virtual interview.

### ***Considerations***

- These interviews can be conducted with one or multiple individuals interviewing, so ensure your student employee candidate knows who will be and who is present during the call for transparency and understanding.

### **Presentation Interview**

**What:** A presentation interview is the opportunity for a candidate to share a short presentation about a topic related to the position you are interviewing them for. These presentations may be open to other members of the broader team, department, or community to attend and may range anywhere from 10 minutes to 60 minutes, based on the role, responsibilities, and impact of the position.

**Why:** Presentation interviews can help you assess a candidate's public speaking, communication, and innovation and allows you to see their skills in action. If you are hiring for a student position that will require a lot of presenting, workshopping, or public speaking, this may serve as a helpful layer of insight for you in the interview process.

### ***Considerations***

- Be intentional with your prompt. You could include a prompt that allows the student to solve a problem, answer a question, or deepen their understanding of the role.
- Ensure you provide them the prompt prior and plenty of time to prepare, based on the reasons for your presentation. If you are in an environment where there will be a short turn around and little notice on deadlines, consider that layer in your interview process.
- Presentations may be beneficial for graduate students who may have more experience and their roles may be more demanding, as opposed to a student employee who you are hoping to guide and support in their role with little expectation of skill building prior to the role.

## **Pre-recorded Interview**

**What:** Due to the popularity and convenience of video interviews, pre-recorded interviews have begun to be an alternative that adds a new layer of asynchronous flexibility. A pre-recorded interview is a one-way interview that can be used similarly to a phone interview as a screening tool for your working learner candidates. The candidate provides you with their recorded video responding to the questions you provide them and you are able to watch and review the interviews at any time that suits you alone or you and your committee members' schedules.

**Why:** A pre-recorded interview can be a great alternative if scheduling conflicts are preventing ideal interview scheduling and can also be a benefit to the students as they are able to answer the questions and record themselves within their own environment and may have less overall stress related to the process during the initial screening.

### ***Considerations***

- There are some disadvantages to pre-recorded interviews such as not being able to ask follow-up questions or allow your candidate the time and space to ask their own questions. Consider using this as a screening tool and ensuring there is a second-round interview that allows for mutual questions, quality discussions, and personal layers to the experience.
- When using pre-recorded interviews, think very intentionally about the questions and styles of questions you ask to ensure the candidate is set up for success and all necessary resources and expectations are shared with them transparently and consistently with each student.

## **Technical Interview**

**What:** Technical interviews focus their questions on specific technical skills rather than general questions about the candidate or their skills.

**Why:** If you are hiring working learners for roles that are very technical and require a knowledge base about specific technical programs, processes, or procedures such as within an Information Technology office or business analytics or operations, then a technical interview may be a great option for you as they provide the opportunity for candidates to showcase their technical skills and allow the interviewer the opportunity to see job-related aptitude in real time.

### ***Considerations***

- Similarly to the case, puzzle, and situational interview questions, consider incorporating technical questions into an overall interview to target those tangible and specific skills while also ensuring you gain insight into the student's other abilities, interest, and goals.
- If you are expecting a student to have moderate or extensive experience in a specific program, tool, or application, ensure you include this information in the job description and be open and transparent about that expectation from the beginning of the hiring process.

## ***Example Questions***

- Which development tools have you used?
- Which programming languages have you used?
- Which source control tools have you used?
- Provide an example of how you have applied your technical knowledge in a practical way.
- What elements are necessary for a successful team and why?
- What are your technical certifications and what do you do to maintain them?

## **Video Interview**

**What:** A video interview is an interview that is offered via the computer through a video calling platform such as Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, Teams, etc. This is carried out in the same way as an in person interview, but introduces some flexibility in scheduling and relaxes the experiences. If you are carrying out a video interview with multiple committee members, you can have everyone in one room and carry it out conference style with the candidate or ensure each member has the link and joins individually so everyone is on the screen individually for the candidate to meet.

**Why:** Video interviews can be really convenient, especially if you have multiple campuses or are carrying out your interviews during the summer and your student employee candidates may not be on campus. This can also be helpful if you are working with a lot of online learners who may be located all around the world.

## ***Considerations***

- Ensure your students are best prepared by sharing any expectations you have of them during the video interview such as requiring their camera be on, they use headphones, use a blurred background, or any other potential details you want to share with them.
- Incorporating technology into interviews can always bring about unexpected variables. Consider these when working with any students who have any technical malfunction or trouble and remember even the most prepared candidate can run into internet problems.
- Have a backup phone number and share with the candidate that you will call them if there are technical difficulties on either side.

## General Interview Questions Examples for Student Employees:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What do you know about this office/department/area of the college?
- What is your biggest strength and your biggest weakness or area of growth?
- What do you look for in a supervisor?
- Tell me about your leadership style.
- How do you best learn in new environments?
- What do you want to gain from this position?
- What specific skills do you have that relate to this position?
- What are you most excited to learn in this role?
- Why should we hire you?

## Supplemental Interviewing Considerations:

- Beginning any interview with an opportunity to get to know each other is valuable. Consider the “tell us about yourself” question in some format to provide the student the chance to share about themselves, their interests in the role, and the layers of themselves as a student they choose to share. This also acts as a built-in destresser and personal connection point for you and the candidate.
- A hybrid interview approach allows the candidate to select their chosen format, typically between an in-person or a virtual interview. This can be helpful based on the time of year you are hiring your students and the type of work being done (remote work opens up the pool to world-wide candidates). The option to choose also provides students the autonomy to consider their own needs such as transportation.
- Many student employee positions do not undergo multiple rounds of interviews due to the timelines, quantity of positions to be filled, and the typically entry level nature of the work being done and skills required by candidates. That being said, consider what works best for your circumstances and communicate next steps appropriately with your candidates if multiple interviews will be carried out.
- If you have capacity, it can be helpful to open yourself up to informational interviews by students who are interested in working for your office, department, or division but would like to know more about the values, projects, work, and environment you work within. An informational interview can be done off-cycle of your hiring or can be part of a hiring process when inviting students to learn more about the job as a screening technique.
- Though consistency and continuity should always be at the forefront of your approach, hiring managers and supervisors have the choice on a structured or unstructured approach to the interview itself.

## Additional Resources

[Career Resources & Employer Relations \(PennState College of Engineering\)](#)

[15 Behavioral Interview Questions to Ask Candidates](#)

[The Pros & Cons of Different Types of Interview Formats](#)

[Understanding Interview Formats: A Comprehensive 2024 Guide](#)