

Unlocking the Secret to Great Hires: Essential Interview Questions for Dental Practices

by Adam McWethy



It's the end of the day on a Thursday, and you notice your long-term assistant lingering, trying to get your attention. As she walks up, you see she has a piece of paper in her hand, and your heart sinks as you realize it's a resignation letter. Immediately, you feel an overwhelming wave of sadness and worry. Multiple thoughts race through your mind: "Why is this happening? What did I do to cause this? I can't afford to lose her."

As you grapple with these emotions, you begin to consider the practical implications for your practice. Running short-staffed will add stress to the rest of the team, particularly in a practice where every day is fluid, running behind with a patient, or having to fill a hole in the schedule from last-minute cancellations. And the list goes on. Then you begin to worry about making a bad hire and what it will do to the morale of the whole office, not to mention relationships with patients. The reality is that these are valid concerns, as bad hires can cost you in many ways. Things like lost production, decreased teamwork, and extra time spent micromanaging a bad hire all cost the practice real money. In fact, the US Department of Labor estimates that a bad hire costs the business, on average, 30% of the employee's annual salary. So, the question becomes, what can you do in the hiring process to remove as much uncertainty as possible?

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Hiring the right people is one of the most critical tasks for any business leader. Large organizations have entire recruiting teams devoted to finding A players. However, even with all those resources, it is still a challenge to determine if someone will be an asset to an organization in what essentially amounts to a series of brief conversations. It can be an even greater challenge for you and your team as hiring is not something you are likely to do regularly.

When you begin to screen candidates, you need to think carefully about what you ask to make the most of your time with the candidate. Too often, the hiring process relies heavily on gut feelings rather than

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thoroughly examining a candidate's past experiences. Relying solely on gut feelings during hiring can lead to inconsistent results. Our instincts, influenced by subconscious biases, may not always align with the candidate's ability to perform the job. The unpredictability of gut feelings in the hiring process highlights the need for a more reliable method. For example, a candidate may be more charming or easy to talk to than the last several interviewees. This candidate would have the halo effect of following poor candidates and not being the best choice for the role. This is an example of one of the many unconscious biases that can emerge during the hiring process that affect how you ultimately make decisions. While intuition can play a role in decision-making, it is essential to dig deeper into what candidates have done in their previous roles. By diving deeply into their past behaviors, you can begin to form an accurate picture of how they will behave if you hire them, as past behavior is the most reliable predictor of future performance.

Purpose of the First Question

Commonly, the first thing you do in an interview is to have the candidate walk you through their job history. This question might be, "Tell me a little about yourself," or "Walk me through your resume." While these questions seem straightforward, they serve a vital purpose in understanding a candidate's experience and suitability for the role.

The first question sets the tone for the interview and provides a framework for the conversation. The goal is to gather detailed information about the candidate's previous roles and experiences, focusing on three key points:

- What They Were Hired to Do and Their Achievements
- Their Key Strengths and Weaknesses (from their manager's perspective)
- Reasons for Leaving Previous Jobs

What They Were Hired to Do and Their Achievements

When a candidate begins walking you through their resume, listen closely to understand what they were hired to do in each role and whether they accomplished those objectives. This helps you assess their ability to meet job expectations and contribute effectively to your dental practice, but it will also give you a glimpse into their understanding of their previous roles, which can be great information.

For instance, when hiring an assistant, their answer to what they were hired to do at their previous office may be a checklist of duties such as setting up rooms, inventory, sterilization, etc., or they might give you an answer that starts off with something about delivering care to patients. If you were to get the first answer, it would be a sign that the person was very task-oriented, while the second answer would let you know that they saw their role in the context of a bigger mission.

Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses

To gain insights into a candidate's strengths and areas for improvement, ask about their previous manager's perspective on their performance. Say, "When I call your previous manager for a reference, what would they say is your top strength, and what is one area you need to improve?", The key with this is to say when I call, not if I call. The idea that you will actually call tends to make people more forthcoming.

This question can uncover valuable information about how they were viewed in their previous role, giving you a more precise picture of working with them. For example, a dental hygienist might highlight their proficiency in patient education and gentle technique while acknowledging they had to improve their time management skills. Each piece of information is like a puzzle piece, and only by gathering enough of them can you begin to see the whole picture and how it aligns with your ideal candidate.

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Purpose of the First Question *(continued)*

Reasons for Leaving Previous Jobs

Understanding why candidates left their previous positions can provide insights into their career motivations and potential red flags. Look for candidates who were pulled to new opportunities rather than pushed out by negative circumstances.

Positive reasons include pursuing career advancement or seeking a role that better aligns with their skills. Conversely, frequent conflicts with management or unresolved workplace issues could be concerning.

Going Beyond The First Question

The key to these questions is to get the candidate to talk as much as possible, providing detailed responses that clearly show their experience and suitability. Simple follow-up prompts like “Tell me more”, “Can you elaborate on that?” or “Can you be more specific?” can help elicit more information.

Diving into their past with behavioral-based interview questions

Once you complete the resume walkthrough, you will want to dive deeper into the candidate's experience. Behavioral-based interview questions focus on specific situations in the candidate's past. These questions aim to uncover how the candidate has behaved in various scenarios, providing insight into their problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and capacity to drive business performance. With your ideal candidate in mind, you can listen for answers that exemplify your ideal characteristics. Past behavior best predicts future actions as people tend to approach problems and behave similarly over time. They can also be used to help assess cultural fit, as how someone has dealt with challenging interpersonal situations reveals a lot about how they will work with your team.

Examples of behavioral-based interview questions include:

- “Can you describe a time when you had to work closely with a difficult colleague? How did you handle it?”
- “Tell me about a time when you had to overcome significant obstacles to keep the schedule running on time. What was the outcome?”
- “Describe a situation where you identified an opportunity to improve the patient experience. What actions did you take?”
- “Describe a situation where a patient was committed to a treatment plan until they saw the cost. What did you do to help the patient see value and recommit to treatment?”

Interviewers can gather detailed examples of a candidate's past behavior by asking these types of questions, allowing them to assess how those experiences may apply to the new role.

Asking the right questions is only part of the interview process. You must also be able to parse the information to construct your picture of the candidate as an employee. Here's how to evaluate these responses effectively:

- **Specificity:** Look for detailed responses that describe the situation, the actions taken, and the results achieved. Vague answers might indicate a lack of experience or understanding. For example, when hiring an assistant, you may ask about dealing with a backed-up schedule. They should be able to go into detail about why the schedule was backed up, what tasks they had to complete to get it back on track, and what actions they took in a way that you cannot only envision them doing it but understand their logic for making the choices they did. Conversely, a vague answer, “*I just worked faster*”, does not tell you much at all and would indicate that the candidate is probably not a creative problem solver.

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Diving into their past with behavioral-based interview questions *(continued)*

- **Relevance:** Assess whether the situations discussed are relevant to the challenges and responsibilities of the position you're hiring for. This helps determine if the candidate's experiences align with the job requirements. For example, you might be hiring an assistant for a high-volume practice that has three chairs and two assistants and schedules every minute of their day in detail. This contrasts with a practice that has two chairs and two assistants, but where the assistants are also responsible for helping patients understand the care they have received and the care they need. In such cases, ask questions like, "How do you handle a patient who has forgotten why they came in and create value for their visit?" or "How do you calm a patient who has just received treatment and is nervous about going home with the work done?" These questions can help you gauge if the candidate can meet the specific needs of your practice.
- **Consistency:** Ensure the candidate's responses are consistent with their resume and cover letter. Inconsistencies can be a red flag, suggesting embellishment or dishonesty.
- **Growth and Learning:** Pay attention to how the candidate talks about what they learned from past experiences and how they applied those lessons. This demonstrates their ability to grow and adapt, which is crucial for long-term success. This is especially true of any questions you give them on areas they may have failed. You want to see not only how they adapted to the setback but also what lessons they learned so that they could sidestep a similar issue in the future.

Ultimately, making great hires requires more than a gut feeling. By asking the right questions in an interview, you increase your odds of identifying someone who will help move your practice forward. The goal should always be to uncover what they have done, as it will be the best predictor of what you will get out of them in the future. Whether you get that by diving deep into their resume or by focusing on behavioral-based interview questions, the goal is to uncover valuable insights into a candidate's past performance, helping you better predict their future success more accurately. This method helps select candidates with the right skills and experience and those who will fit well with your team and contribute to your company's long-term success. By digging deeper into past behaviors, you can make more informed hiring decisions and build a stronger, more capable team.

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- A list of behavioral interview questions for several practice roles
- An in-depth FAQ, helping you to dive deeper into the hiring process
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