The ultimate guide to creating and optimising your interview process

The better you conduct job interviews with candidates, the better-informed your hiring decisions will be. Not only does a great interview process ensure you hire the best person for the job, but it will also positively impact employee retention. And although holding a job interview may seem difficult at first, it really doesn't have to be!

This guide will teach you best practices on how to interview someone and find the best candidate for your job opening. This way, you ask the right questions during every step of the interview process.

Made with love by the JOIN team.

What's included in this guide

① The stages of the interview process
  - ✓ The different interview types
  - ✓ How to arrange your interview process in stages

② How to make your process fast, consistent, and efficient
  - ✓ How to efficiently prepare for each interview
  - ✓ How to organise interviews with your team
  - ✓ How to avoid bias and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

③ Interviewing a candidate

④ After the interview
  - ✓ How to reach a hiring decision
  - ✓ How to proceed with a yay or nay
  - ✓ How to offer a job

Have you ever hired an employee too soon, to find they were a complete mismatch for the role and your company? Perhaps you were excited about a great candidate, but they got scooped up by a competitor before you made the offer?

Chances are, you could've avoided this if your interview process had been better optimised. With a strong interview process in place, you'll hire top talent more quickly, efficiently, and accurately.

It also increases your chances of delivering a polished and professional recruiting experience to potential candidates. And large-scale research by PwC has shown that almost half (49%) of job seekers in in-demand fields (like technology) say they've turned down a job offer due to a negative recruiting experience.

Moreover, Jobvite's 2021 Recruiter Nation Report found that recruiters highlighted improving quality of hire (48%) and time to hire (28%) as their two biggest priorities in recruiting. To do so, you need a foolproof interview process.

> **Right now, truly great talent has about a 12-day hire cycle. This means you need to be super quick. Optimising your interview process is an important step in achieving this and ensuring you can hire the best talent more quickly and efficiently.**

Dennis Wegener
Head of HR, JOIN

This complete guide helps you do just that. Don't worry, we've made it easily digestible and we'll guide you through each step with examples and handy infographics. Read this guide, and you will have your new and improved interview process up and running in no time. Let's go!

Part 1

The stages of the interview process

The interview process includes much more than just the interviews themselves. Before you invite a candidate, you want to define the structure and different stages of your process and outline what is needed at every step. This ensures efficiency and consistency, leading to a faster, better-streamlined process.

Now there are many ways in which you can interview a candidate. And your interview process can (and most likely will) include a combination of multiple different interview types.

Overview of the most common interview types and elements:

1:1 interview
Just the candidate and one interviewer

Group interview
Several candidates being interviewed at the same time

Panel interview
The candidate and several interviewers

Unstructured interview
Questions asked depend on the answers the candidate gives

Structured interview
Questions are fixed, picked beforehand, and the same for each candidate

Informal interview
A casual conversation rather than a formal interview, often held off-site, like in a coffee shop

Face to Face interview
Can be either in the office or off-site

Phone interview
Phone call, generally between one interviewer and the candidate

Video interview
Virtual interview via video-conferencing tools such as Zoom

Written interview
This could be through a pre-screening survey or via email, often used as a form of blind hiring

Behavioural interview
Questions aimed at assessing how a candidate would deal with a situation

Competency-based interview
Questions aimed at assessing skills and experience

Cultural fit or add interview
Questions aimed at assessing how a candidate might fit in with or add to the company culture

Stress interview
The interviewer purposefully asks odd questions to see how the candidate deals with stress

Case interview
The candidate is given a realistic business situation that they have to solve

Interviews often contain a mix of two or more of these elements, while the process as a whole will contain several interviews.

Throughout this guide, we'll explain which type of interview is the best suitable for each stage of the process, and how you can best use each type to your advantage. Since every organisation, industry, and position you're hiring for is different, what steps need to be included in the interview process can vary.

However, there is a common structure that companies tend to follow. This includes the following five interview stages.

Stage 1

Screening

The first stage is generally an initial screening interview that follows after you selected one or more potential candidates from the applications you received. This interview aims to assess if the candidate has the basic skills to perform the role and if they have the right expectations of your business.

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> **We use JOIN to easily screen candidate applications, collaborate internally with the team to come to a decision, and then communicate the outcome with the candidate. All within the same tool!**

Francesca Sacchi
Teamlead Patient Care Italy & France, Fertilly

The screening interview stage is normally done one-on-one, by phone or by video call, and is kept relatively short (around 15 minutes). It helps the hiring manager or recruiter quickly narrow down the number of applicants, which is called shortlisting.

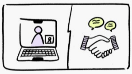
Screening interview questions tend to focus on assessing a candidate's hard skills and practical work experience.

Stage 2

First interview

After a round of screening interviews, you will end up with a shorter list of candidates that seem suitable for the position. Now it's time to really get to know them and test whether they would work well within your organisation.

This stage is often still done one-on-one, although it will often involve a different stakeholder. For example, screening is typically done by a recruiter or HR employee, while the first interview tends to involve the team lead who will be directly managing the new hire.



At this stage, video or in-person interviews are better as they help you build rapport with the candidate more easily than during phone interviews

Interview questions will be more tailored to finding out how the candidate might actually perform the tasks specific to the role and your organisation. You will also try to dive deeper into their work experience (beyond just bullet points on their CV).

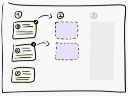
Furthermore, you will simultaneously focus more on getting to know their personality and how they might work within your team.

Stage 3

Second interview

You're really starting to narrow it down now! At this stage, you should only have a few candidates left who are all serious contenders for the position.

The second interview is generally done with more than one interviewer (panel interview) and often involves the candidate meeting their direct team. For in-person interviews, a tour through the office might be included and, in some cases, even a team lunch (either on or off-site).



There are no set rules on the number of candidates you should invite for each stage, and the number will depend on the role and urgency of hiring. But as a rough guide, you should by now have about 2-3 serious contenders left for the role.

Interview questions are typically more behavioural and situational (see the [interview question type examples] for more information) to further get to know the person and their way of working.

Stage 4

Third interview

Many companies skip this step and combine it with the previous one. Whether you want to have two or three interviews in your process will depend on factors such as the seniority, complexity of the role, and urgency of the hire.

We always recommend adding this step to raise your chances of finding the perfect candidate. It's one extra interview now, but it can save you from having to repeat the entire process from the start in case of a bad hire.

The content of this interview may vary, but often some form of skill assessment or business case is presented to the candidate, which they either finish before or during the interview (case interview). For example, they might be given a business case that they then present during their interview. This interview can be done both virtually or in person.

Interview questions may be related to the task, or be more situational in nature. Meaning, these questions are asked with the candidate being hired in mind.

Stage 5

The hiring decision

The final stage is where you reach a final decision: To hire or not to hire. The interview process will officially be finished as soon as you send out a job offer.

Any contract negotiations and additional communication between you and the candidate will fall within the broader hiring process, but not within the interview process. As soon as the contract is signed, the onboarding process starts.

The 5 stages of the interview process

Screening	1st interview	2nd interview	3rd interview
What? Short phone/video call (15 min)	What? 1:1 interview, in person or virtual (30 min)	What? Panel interview, meet the team, in person or virtually (1+ hour)	What? Panel and case interview, often in person (1+ hour)
Why? Narrow down the	Why? 1:1 interview, in	Why? Assess how the	Why? Further assess

number of potential candidates	person or virtual (30 min)	candidate will fit into the company and role	compatibility with the company and role

The hiring decision

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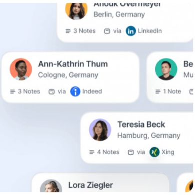

Part 2

How to make your process fast, consistent, and efficient to hire the best talent

Deciding on the stages of the interview process is one thing. Now it's time to further fine-tune and shape the process. How will you collaborate with your team members? And how will you structure the interviews themselves? Find out below with these 6 top tips!

Tip 1

Create an interview scorecard

An interview scorecard ensures you can easily grade every candidate based on the exact same criteria. This way, everyone is judged fairly and equally. It also means it is easier for you to make an informed hiring decision.

When used effectively and consistently, an interview scorecard can limit the potential for bias in your scoring of candidates. More information on bias in hiring below.

If you read our guide on creating a job ad, you will have already done a lot of the groundwork for this step.

Recommended Reading

How to write a good job advert that attracts great talent

When creating a scorecard, carefully consider your job description for the role you are hiring for. What hard skills and soft skills does the candidate need? What certificates/qualifications are needed to be able to legally perform the job?

Tip 2

Outline the interview

A process within a process: An important part of the interview process is having a structured process for the actual interview(s) as well.

Ideally, you create a separate interview structure for each of the first four stages of the interview process we mentioned earlier (screening, first, second, and third interviews).

Outlining the interview beforehand helps make your interviews more structured and organised. And that improves the candidate experience as well. Because if you're unorganised and unprepared during the interview, your candidate will take you less seriously as an employer.

Here is an example checklist to use when you prepare for your interviews:

☑ **Checklist**

- ☐ Company and team introductions
- ☐ Who will be interviewing
- ☐ Practicalities (salary, location, etc.)
- ☐ Decide on interview questions
- ☐ Create a rough agenda for the interview
- ☐ Outline the next steps

We explain more about the actual interview further on in this guide in Part 3: Interviewing a candidate.

Tip 3

Brief the team

Let the team know who will be involved in the process and share all the relevant documents discussed in the previous points.

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> **Every step and action in your process adds up to the time to hire and reduces the chance of attracting the right talent. That's why it's incredibly important to carefully think of who is involved in every step of the process beforehand.**
>
>
>
> **Dennis Wegener**
> Head of HR, JOIN

Also, ensure you provide regular updates on progress. These updates can include the number of applicants, the number of rejections, and who will be invited for an initial interview. Many companies create a spreadsheet where they keep track of all these points.

This doesn't have to all be done manually, of course. If you use JOIN's applicant tracking software, you can easily organise all applications and move them through your hiring funnel using the intuitive kanban board inside the tool.

Try JOIN for free and find out just how easy it is to manage candidates inside our tool

Sign up – it's free!

Tip 4

Organise the interview

Now you have the basics in place, it's time to organise the interview. The steps to follow here will depend on what stage of the interview process your candidate is in.

Screening

- Will you interview via phone, video call, email, or perhaps just an online screening survey?
- If phone or video, agree on a date and time with the candidate
- Give an estimate of how long the interview will take (generally around 15 minutes)

Other interviews

- Decide on the format (video or in-person)
- When in person, decide on the location (office, cafe, etc.)
- Decide who needs to attend (see interview structure above)
- Schedule timeslot with candidate and attendees
- When virtual, add conferencing link
- When in office or off site, tell candidate where to go and book a meeting room if needed

Tip 5

Prepare the actual interview

Following the initial interview structure you created, now go more in-depth and plan and prepare for the actual interview and the specific candidate. This part is for both you and your colleagues participating in the interview.

Preparation

- → Who will take the lead in the interview?
- → Prepare the pitch about your company
    - → What are your values, mission, and vision?
    - → What about your product, service, and audience?
    - → How would you describe your company culture?
- → Familiarise yourself with the candidate. Read their CV, cover letter, and other information they might have shared with you during the application process.
- → What questions will you ask the candidate (see infographic below!)

Additional note to consider: *You might want to give the candidate a task to complete that will be discussed during the interview. If this is the case, ensure you share it on time with both the candidate and also the internal interviewers, so everyone is familiar with the task that will be discussed.*

5 question type examples

Opener questions

Questions meant to open the interview. They should be general, unspecific, and easy to answer.

- → What do you love most about your job?
- → Why did you choose this career?
- → What has your career journey been so far?

Behavioural questions

Questions focussed on the behaviour of a candidate in past situations and how they learned from them. They build on a candidate's soft skills.

- → Tell me about a time when you worked on a large project. How did you organise the workflow to ensure expectations and deadlines were met?
- → Describe a situation during which you had to collaborate with team members cross-functionally.
- → Give an example of how you handled a challenge in the workplace.

Soft skills questions

Questions to assess a candidate's communication, social, and interpersonal skills. They help uncover a person's personality.

- How do you handle stress?
- How do you cope with angry customers?
- How do you stay motivated in your role?

Hard skills questions

Questions that test a candidate's relevant experience. Can be closed questions ("do you have this qualification") or more process-related ("walk me through your process for this task").

- Which tools are you most comfortable working with?
- What training have you had in the past?
- Do you have a specific area of expertise within the field?

Situational questions

Questions aimed at discovering if the candidate's future actions match your company values, culture, and processes. Situational questions also test a candidate's problem-solving skills.

- Imagine you find out a colleague made a critical mistake. What do you do?
- Imagine your line manager tells you to do something, even after you already explained that you know from experience this is the wrong approach. What do you do?
- What would you do if you made a mistake, but nobody else noticed it?

Recommended Reading

5 types of interview questions (and when to ask them)

Tip 6

Be fair and avoid bias

We are all biased, but we can do our best to limit it. Of course, avoiding bias and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace and the recruitment process are extensive topics. So we can't possibly cover everything in this guide!

List of tips to avoid bias

- Use the interview scorecard you created consistently for every interview
- Don't share your interview scorecard, notes, or opinions with the internal team before officially documenting your findings
- Always back up your opinions and impressions with concrete examples and reasons—minimise the risk of "gut feeling" judgments
- Before placing judgment, try to step back and really consider whether the aspect you're judging is related to the actual position the person is being hired for
- Respect and be mindful of how everyone is different—some people might be very direct, others more formal, some less confident
- When describing your company culture, ensure you provide a holistic view, not just the part of the culture that you personally like
- Avoid first-impression error by not letting your first impression (either good or bad) influence your opinion

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> Diversity is the fuel of innovation. It should always be fostered and managed effectively, so that it represents a real source of richness, not an obstacle.
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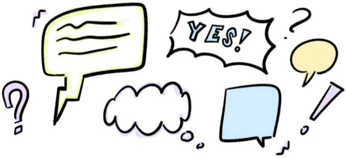
>
> **Lidia Mascio**
> Talent Acquisition Specialist, JOIN

Part 3

Interviewing a candidate



Defining an optimised interview process for your company helps you move candidates through your hiring funnel more quickly and efficiently. But you still need to conduct the actual interview as well. What questions will you ask, and how will you structure the actual interview itself? Below, we'll guide you through the steps of creating this process within a process.

Conducting an interview is like writing a paper for school. You start with an introduction, followed by the main part, and you finish with a conclusion. Let's see how you can streamline each part, step by step.

Step 1

Opening the interview

The opening is all about settling in and setting expectations. If you do this part right, you have a much higher chance of a fruitful interview. Here are the key points that should be included in the opening part of the interview:

Don't shy away from small talk. It helps the candidate feel at ease and less nervous, which in turn helps them provide better answers during the interview. It also means they'll have a more positive impression of you and the interview experience.

Introduce everyone. Start with yourself and your role in the company, followed by doing the same for any other interviewers involved.

Outline the agenda. Just like with any other business meeting, it's advised to have a clear agenda and to share this at the start of the interview.

Give your elevator pitch. To give your candidate some more time to get comfortable, we advise you to do the talking at first. So instead of getting straight to the questions, first introduce your business by giving a (short) elevator pitch.

Step 2

Conducting the interview

Now both parties have settled in and got to know each other, it's time to start the actual interview part.

You should have prepared a list of questions (see infographic above) that assess the right skills and experience. By preparing this beforehand, your interview will be well-structured. And by asking each candidate the same questions, it will be easier to compare candidates for moving forward.

Further points to bear in mind when conducsting the interview

Don't forget to take notes during the interview. Focus on the candidate's answers, but also on personal characteristics such as body language. Let the candidate know beforehand you'll take notes and that this shouldn't be misunderstood as a bad sign.

Ask your candidate if they have questions for you as well. This not only tests if they have prepared enough and done their research into your company, but it also gives them the option to find out if they like your company.

Try to keep an eye on the clock during the interview, so you don't spend too much time on one aspect of the interview. Candidates can be way too detailed in their answers, but it's also possible that you are talking too much yourself.

Stay focussed on the answers you are after. Although it's OK to sometimes go slightly off-topic, you should aim to steer the conversation in the right direction.

You might want to test a candidate's specific skills by giving them a skill assessment task or work assignment. You can either send this out before the interview or give the candidate some time during the interview (e.g., 30 minutes) to finish the assignment before discussing it.

Step 3

Closing the interview

This part should only take about 5-10 minutes, but it's an important part of the interview. At this stage, you can ask one final time if they have any further questions, after which you explain the next steps moving forward.

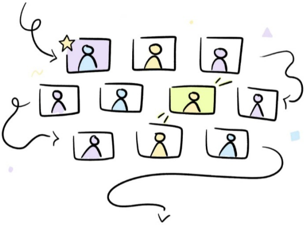
Clearly state how you will let them know the outcome, including via which channel (email, phone, etc.) and within what timeframe. Properly closing the interview like this means your candidate knows exactly what to expect from you.

Example of a closing statement

→ *The next step in the interview process would be a second interview. If invited, this interview will be with me, your potential future line manager, and a senior member of the team. Later today, we will discuss internally how the interview went and decide whether we would like to move you forward to the next step. We will let you know by the end of the day tomorrow at the latest.*

Part 4

After the interview



You're almost there! Now it's time to evaluate your candidate(s) and come to a decision. We also advise you to always review your own performance to see if there are ways you might improve and further fine-tune your interview process.

Step 1

Coming to a decision

Remember that speed is crucial in the interview process. The less time to hire, the better, or you risk the chance of your candidate dropping out of the process before you can make an offer.

Depending on the number of candidates you're interviewing, you should aim to share your decision within 72 hours at the latest. If you wait a week, the candidate might have already received an offer from your competitor.

So how do you come to a decision?

- Ensure you fill out your interview scorecard before talking to your colleagues to reduce influencing each other's opinions
- Ideally, you and your colleagues meet directly after this is done (the same day of the interview) to compare scorecards and discuss findings
- Also discuss any notes you may have made during the interview
- Don't forget to also take notes of this meeting, so you can always still go through what was said later
- Reflect on what's discussed (waiting till the next day is often a good idea) and come to a final decision

Step 2

Following up

Time to let your candidate know about your decision. Even if you decide to not proceed, we still advise you to always let the candidate know and provide feedback on why you made this decision.

Research has shown that rejected applicants who don't receive feedback are twice as likely to not apply to or do business with your company again.

When it's a yay

- Phone or email
- Share next steps
- Be quick to let them know
- Share next assignment (if applicable)
- If final interview: Send job offer
- Ask for their feedback

When it's a nay

- Phone or email
- Explain your decision
- Offer additional feedback/a call on request
- Offer an introduction to a different company or to add them to your talent pool for future roles
- Ask for their feedback

Step 3

Offering the job

Once you have sent the candidate a job offer, the interview process is officially completed. Here are some final pointers to keep in mind:

- Depending on your industry, you may want to perform background checks or contact references before sending your offer. Just ensure you always comply with GDPR regulations!
- Many companies first extend the offer verbally via phone, before sending the full offer via email.
- Ensure all internal stakeholders are aligned on the details outlined in the offer (e.g., employment type, salary, benefits, bonus)
- When sending the email, be clear and descriptive straight from the subject line, so you communicate your offer as clearly as possible.

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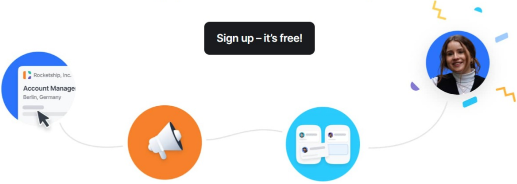

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