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## Barring Cheaters at the Door: Five Questions to Ask before They Cross Your Threshold

[By Charles Osaki]

Ask students about whether cheating goes on at their college or university, and you are likely to hear an alarming answer: yes, cheating is common. While it is disturbing to hear that cheating is widespread, it is arguably even more alarming that many students seem to have a nonchalant attitude about it these days.

Concerns about this problem were underscored by a survey of more than 36,000 students recently released by the Josephson Institute. The survey found that around 60% of American high school students owned up to cheating on a test, and 28% admitted stealing from a store. Yet 92% of the students said they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character. Michael Josephson, president and founder of the Institute, commented on the findings: "Unacceptably high rates of dishonesty have become the norm. It doesn't bode well for the future that so many kids are entering the workforce...with the dispositions and skills of liars, cheaters, and thieves."

That warning hits home for me because I am responsible for professional staffing for my firm, and I visit top college accounting programs to speak with potential candidates. When I talk to students about cheating in schools, the explanation I usually get is that many students don't think long and hard about doing it because the sanctions for getting caught will be relatively inconsequential — at worst a failing grade in the class, as opposed to expulsion or other more severe penalties. Presumably, most who cheat based on such a cost-benefit analysis will refrain from more serious types of cheating with more severe consequences. But the best predictor of cheating in school is whether that student has cheated in the past. There is no reason to believe that same dynamic won't apply to those who are fresh out of college and entering the professional workforce.

Companies, therefore, should avoid hiring those who have repeatedly cheated in the

past, if possible. But how do you identify those who continually demonstrate integrity, good judgment, and the propensity not to cheat when the opportunity presents itself? Faculty recommendations are useful in assessing the skills and intelligence of candidates. But since teachers are constrained by legal concerns about passing on their own suspicions about unethical behavior, recommendations are not likely to provide much help in screening out cheaters. That leaves the interview process as the primary opportunity and tool to assess the character of each job candidate.

### Behavioral Interviewing

There are several methods that are used by employers for both campus candidates and those with prior work experience: situational ("what if?"), historical, chronological, or behavioral (what the person has done) interviewing methods. A large proportion of initial screening interviews are performed within a 30 to 45-minute session and often by persons not formally trained in these methods or inexperienced in their understanding of the performance factors of practitioners of public accounting.

I have found that behavioral interviewing is the best method for screening out cheaters. The questions are designed to reveal the character of the candidate through evaluating evidence of past behaviors. The specific questions that are most useful to me in exposing true character are questions about altruistic, ethical behavior and judgment, because the past has a way of repeating itself in both positive and negative behaviors. To be sure, acts of altruism don't

correlate directly to whether or not someone is a cheater, but behavioral interviewing techniques can reveal the candidates' thought processes and thereby provide a window into their characters.

Though I work for an accounting firm, these interviewing techniques could be applied to any type of position in any type of business. They are especially useful in the accounting field, however, because CPAs are often considered their clients' most trusted advisors.

There is a pool of five questions that I like to ask to help me determine if candidates behave with integrity and good judgment. In the answers to all of the five questions, I'm looking for consistent evidence of behaviors that demonstrate either of these characteristics or skills, because after they are hired, the candidates' professional judgment will affect other people, including other employees and clients.

The questions are also designed to help me understand an applicant's decision-making process and how he or she is swayed in considering choices. Ultimately, the candidate may know what the ethical decision might be, but may also be influenced by peer pressure or other personal factors to make another decision. On the other hand, the candidate may decide that the reward is attractive enough to justify taking a risk. In observing how job applicants respond to these questions, my goal is to understand how those influences affect their decisions and the thought processes they use along the way. This is critical when using current information to evaluate future behavior and performance.



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I don't necessarily ask all five questions in an interview. And I'm rarely able to make a hiring decision on the basis of any single answer to a question, so it is important not to take any one answer out of the context of a 45-minute interview. But I ask everyone at least two of these five questions, which are all tied together on the ability to make right and wrong decisions about ethical behavior and good judgment.

**Question 1**

*In all aspects of your life, you face dilemmas — right versus wrong, moral versus immoral, ethical versus unethical. Tell me about one of the most difficult dilemmas you have ever faced, whether it was a school or work experience or involved an extra-curricular activity, and explain the decision-making process you used in solving (or resolving) your dilemma.*

This question, like the others, is open-ended. Answers that don't elaborate on the story and fill in details about who, what, where, and when are just too short and sweet. In other cases, the candidates may stutter and fumble around, trying to clarify an example. By asking them to elaborate, you can determine whether they are able to make a decision on their own. While a lack of independent thinking won't necessarily suggest that they would have a predilection for cheating, it could indicate that they may not be able to demonstrate the correct judgment at critical moments — when there's a lot of pressure and they are the ones accountable for the results.

**Question 2**

*Tell me about an instance in which you helped another person you didn't know, without having been asked, and why you did it.*

This question looks at altruistic behavior, which may be tangential to ethical behavior. It also addresses leadership skills because the answer will disclose whether the

candidate is capable of taking the initiative to act. For instance, one candidate answering this question told me about how on a trip to Europe, she saw a woman who dropped part of her groceries out of her bag. She helped the lady bag the groceries and walk across the street. When I asked why she did that, the young woman replied, "Well, because she couldn't help herself." She went on to say that the lady's smile of gratitude was one of the most memorable moments of her trip to Europe.

I knew then and there that this person possessed a great deal of initiative because she was aware of the moment and aware of her surroundings — someone who couldn't help herself needed help, and the candidate reacted to it. What kind of supervisor or trainer would she turn out to be? The answer is obvious. This person is probably going to be a strong supervisor and a great teacher. That's the sort of person you could ask to help you when you're trying to meet a deadline. That's the sort of person who will ask before he or she leaves for the day whether anyone else needs help.

**Question 3**

*Tell me about a situation when you went out of your way to assist someone, despite having a conflict, like another event to attend or lack of interest in the person. What did you do and why did you do it?*

This is a combination of the first and second questions. You have a conflict and someone needs your help. You have a decision to make. There is no wrong answer. The situation might be that someone in the student's dorm needed to move and his or her friends didn't show up to help with the move, and the applicant telling the story wanted to help but couldn't because he or she had to get to a social event or job. The thought process leading to the decision will reveal a lot about the candidate. Helping others was important, but the student may have relied on the job to pay his or her tuition and couldn't skip work. The reasoning tells you a lot about the candidate's priorities and values.

Sometimes applicants will say they can't come up with an answer on the spot and they will ask whether they can come back to that question later. On those occasions, I sometimes conclude that the situations they eventually come up with may have been fabricated or didn't contain a great deal of substance. The clues include the inability to describe a series of events, a change in the topic, or even questioning the examples they are using. If they are unable to provide further details in response to a follow-up question, that is a further indication that the example isn't valid. If it were a true story, they would remember the details, just like the woman who was on a summer tour in Europe. She certainly remembered all the details of helping the lady who spilled her groceries.

**Question 4**

*Explain a situation in which you helped someone who wasn't necessarily a friend of yours improve a skill or otherwise shared knowledge with that person.*

The person in the scenario may have been an acquaintance, a participant in a group project, or even a co-worker. The knowledge that was passed on may be as simple as information about a place the person will be visiting soon or trip-planning pointers shared over a drink after work. Or it could be coming to the assistance of someone who is having computer problems, just because they appear to be having difficulties. This reflects on the candidate's instincts as a teacher and also reflects on one's altruistic inclinations, which parallel other ethical behavior. What could be more ethical than helping those you wouldn't naturally be inclined to assist?

**Question 5**

*Explain to me about a situation when you witnessed another person whom you believe was "wronged." How did you react and what action, if any, did you take to remedy this situation or otherwise support the individual?*

Again, this question addresses ethical behavior and also leadership skills. It takes



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a strong person to stand up for another in whom they have no vested interest. An example of this came up in an interview with a job applicant who had been in a sorority in college. She vouched for the good character of a girl who wanted to get into the sorority, despite the insistence of another sorority member that the girl was not the right fit. Though the girl was from a different socioeconomic background than most other members, she turned out to be one of the best members of the sorority. The young woman I was interviewing was able to look back and realize she did the right thing, and in the process, undoubtedly earned the respect of other members of the sorority.

As with the other questions, there is not necessarily a wrong answer. It really comes down to who can best articulate and explain the chain of events that lead up to the decision. For the most part, those who have been most adept at answering these questions have turned out to be the best new hires at my firm.

## Conclusion

In over 20 years of experience in asking these types of questions of job applicants, I have learned that people can't just make up an answer on the spur of the moment. If they have not truly lived an experience they are purporting to recount, they can't consistently answer these questions. But in conducting the interview, you must be an active listener. While these questions don't amount to a lie detector test, applicants simply can't construct a detailed answer if they are not being truthful.

When I discuss these questions, I'm often asked what, if anything, the answers tell me about the person's job-related skills. My answer: what could be more important than understanding the motivations of those who are applying for work with your company? How and why they make decisions is much more valuable to me in predicting performance than learning the list of responsibilities they held in former jobs.

Merely knowing what they did in previous jobs or extra-curricular activities tells me nothing about how they did it. The answers to these questions, in contrast, give me much more qualifiable information about how they will behave in the long run, because the past predicts the future. And those who were unethical, indecisive cheaters in the past are almost certain to continue behaving the same way.

## About the Author

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