

Cheat Sheet Questions for Hiring Innovators



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Cheat Sheet

Questions for Hiring Innovators

The potential for innovation in your company increases with employees who demonstrate unrestrained thinking and the ability to connect seemingly disparate ideas. Is it possible to identify individuals with these capabilities during the first interview? Absolutely—when you're armed with the right questions.

THE INNOVATIVE SKILL SET

Innovation is less about expertise, and more about an eclectic approach to creating new things. It's about minds that can think through details while maintaining focus on the bigger picture. It's the aptitude for both the qualitative and the quantitative. It's also about the ability to mesh a wild idea with reality, and the fortitude to bring it to market.

We've designed interview questions and challenges that speak to the 11 skills and behaviors practiced by the world's best innovators. Reveal a candidate's experience and comfortability with this innovative skill set:

- Strategic Imagination
- Provocative Inquiry
- Creative Problem-Solving
- Agility
- Resilience
- Future-Focused
- Status-Quo Challenging
- Smart Risk-Taking
- Active Collaboration
- Continuous Learning
- Leadership

PRO INTERVIEW TIPS

While many of these questions are suitable for candidates at any level, note that some are better suited for mid- or senior-level, and others for candidates with leadership experience.

- Innovative thinkers can explain their approach and expected outcomes, so look for answers that reveal the candidate's process. Likewise, beware of candidates who generalize or toss around business jargon. If you hear words like "collaboration" or "inclusion" and "paradigm" without specific examples, you're interviewing an armchair innovator.
- Try asking these questions out of sequence—an agility question followed by a resilience question—to mirror the element of unpredictability that occurs in daily work situations.
- As you grow more comfortable with the questions, tailor them to speak to real-time challenges or add your own questions.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydM1i8VwGrU>



STRATEGIC IMAGINATION

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to dream with purpose and generate new ideas.

1. What inspires you?
2. If you had one month and a \$50,000 budget to tackle any work project, what would it be?
3. What defines a “breakthrough” idea? Is it better to have incremental or breakthrough ideas? Why?
4. We have 140 characters to instantly capture 100 new customers on Twitter: What words and/or image would you use in the tweet?

CHALLENGE: Offer people an everyday object (paper clip, scissors, etc.) and ask them to pretend they've never encountered it before. What does this new product do? What are its benefits and how would they position it?

PROVOCATIVE INQUIRY

Use these questions to determine a candidate's comfortability with smart and often unsettling questions.

1. How do you define “innovation?”
2. What are the unshakable industry beliefs about what customers want? How would you make a case that the opposite was true?
3. From a customer's perspective, why would you pay more for our product/service over XYZ competitor?
4. You have five minutes with our CEO; what question(s) would you ask that would make him/her rethink our business?
5. What's an example of a provocative or uncomfortable question you've asked to shake up people's thinking or get them engaged in a more productive way?

CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to apply best practices from diverse sources to create fresh solutions.

1. Tell me about a situation in which you tried to solve a problem with a totally different approach. What was the result?
2. What steps do you take when you need to make an immediate decision but don't have much data available?
3. In which situations do you seek the help of others for decision-making?
4. Which systems, methodologies, or standards were changed in your previous organization because of your suggestions? How did it benefit the company?
5. Describe a creative solution/idea/project/report that you set up to address a workplace problem.



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RESILIENCE

Use these questions to determine a candidate's track record of tenacity and courage in the face of obstacles.

1. Give me an example of when you failed at something. How did you react?
2. You've presented a great idea to management, but they're not buying in. What's your next move?
3. Tell me about a time when you were very much opposed to a change that affected your work practices. How did you get through it?

AGILITY

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to adapt and be resourceful in unanticipated situations.

1. Tell me about a work situation where innovation was required and how you responded.
2. Describe a time when there was a fundamental change in the way things were done in your workplace. How did you respond?
3. Give me an example of a time when you needed to make a decision and procedures were not in place. What did you do and what was the outcome?
4. What do you do when priorities shift quickly? Give me an example.
5. Tell me about a decision you made while under intense pressure.
6. Share an example of a time when you were given new information that affected a decision you had already made. How did you proceed?
7. Imagine you're leading one of our product development teams. You're months away from launch and your tech or marketing budget has been cut in half. What do you do?
8. Share examples from your recent work experience that demonstrate how you adapt to a variety of people, situations, and/or environments.

FUTURE-FOCUSED

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to understand and assess the impact of future trends.

1. Which external jolts or wild cards have the potential to significantly impact our industry?
2. Which new customer segments will emerge in five years? How will those customers discover our product?
3. Would you describe our corporate mindset as trend spotters, trendsetters, trend trackers, trend fighters, or trend followers?
4. Which companies do you consider innovative? Why?

CHALLENGE: Our company has decided to merge with a major auto/pharmaceutical/financial company. Name a new idea we could quickly implement together.



STATUS-QUO CHALLENGING

Use these questions to determine a candidate's level of comfort when questioning the accepted way of doing things.

1. What do you do that's "innovative?"
2. In general, what are the biggest barriers to innovation?
3. Tell me about a time when you found a better way of doing something, which proved to be an improvement on the existing system.
4. Can you give me an example of how you've been creative when fulfilling your responsibilities?
5. Describe an instance when you wanted to change the working style of your team, but others were reluctant to do so. What did you do?
6. Describe a work situation in which you were able to successfully persuade someone to approach things your way. What level was the person you had to persuade?

SMART RISK-TAKING

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to experiment within boundaries and timeframes for the purpose of innovation.

1. Give me an example of an innovative project you've led or been involved with. Was it a success? What challenges did you face?
2. Give me an example of a risk you took at work. What made you decide to take the risk, and what was the result?
3. What do you think holds companies back from innovating more?
4. Have you ever run with a new idea without being certain of the outcome? What did you do and was it a good decision?
5. Describe a situation where you created a new process or program that was considered risky. What was the outcome?
6. Have you ever created an advantage for your company even without having all the relevant data?
7. What was the last risk you took in the workplace? Was the long-term outcome favorable?

ACTIVE COLLABORATION

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to share works-in-progress and cooperate to collectively meet a common goal.

1. Do you consider yourself "collaborative?" Why?
2. Share an example of a collaborative project you worked on, and why it was successful or unsuccessful.
3. What could we do to engage more people in innovation efforts?

CHALLENGE: In your first month on the hypothetical job, you're tasked with adding revenue by innovating internally. How would you proceed?



CONTINUOUS LEARNING

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to constantly develop skills and knowledge to improve performance.

1. When was the last time you tried a new idea to improve your work performance?
2. What things would you like to change about your style of working? Why?
3. Which methods and systems would you change in your current organization to achieve higher efficiency at work? How? Why?
4. How do you apply customer or peer feedback?
5. Which measures and metrics do you use to evaluate whether or not your innovation efforts are successful?
6. In what ways do you think technology helps to achieve better efficiency at work?

LEADERSHIP

Use these questions to determine a candidate's ability to lead projects, teams, as well as demonstrate role modeling and authority.

1. What are three qualities you think are important for effective leadership? How have you demonstrated these qualities in your previous/current positions?
2. How have you helped develop the skills of your staff, colleagues, or superiors?
3. Tell me about a time when you were able to provide a coworker with recognition for work they performed.
4. Share a scenario in which you proactively took on additional responsibility.
5. Tell me about a project/idea that you initiated. Explain how you communicated progress to your team.
6. What have you done in your present/previous job that goes beyond what was required?
7. Describe a leadership situation that you would handle differently if you could do it again.
8. If you came on board and were hiring a group of innovators for this company, which traits would you look for?