



Hiring for Safety: Risk-Takers Need Not Apply

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In evaluating potential employees ask the applicant what it takes to reach and sustain zero injuries.

Selecting and developing employees is where the ultimate criticality lies in sustaining occupational safety excellence. Once a new employee enters the workplace, most organizations deploy mechanisms to ensure they are onboarded (assimilated into the cultural norms and performance expectations) in an efficient and effective manner. On the journey to excellence, is this an opportunity missed? With this new hire, have you introduced a complimentary safety mentality that will enhance the culture, or inadvertently introduced a new element of risk?

Assessing a Vendor's Culture

Many firms are beginning to understand the role that culture plays in incident prevention and have taken impressive steps to develop a desirable climate for employees to work within. Several organizations have added requests to their procurement processes to gain potential vendor safety information and measurements. Safety rates, costs, programs, practices and even culture are assessed to ensure new risk isn't introduced to their employees and processes.

While not ideal as a standalone tactic, having clients (or potential clients) assessing your safety performance can be an effective beginning motivator to improve safety if the intrinsic motivation within the company's leadership is missing. Furthermore, some of these companies are examining the safety indicators as a measure of other values and priorities.

In a private discussion recently, an executive of one such company put it aptly: "Good safety is good business. If you can't do something as important as safety well, what else aren't you doing well?"

Determining the impact of outside forces on your culture is an admirable advanced approach. But, what about an individual force? What about a single influential individual? Malcolm Gladwell referred to these individuals in his 2002 book, *Tipping Point*, as *Mavens*. Others use terms such as *influencer* or *change agent*. Consider the potential positive or negative impact an influential new hire can have on the existing culture. Helping organizations manage this type of predictive insight has neutralized risk prior to its introduction into the cultural and safety performance equation.

Understanding the Applicant

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, organizations have continued to enhance their pre-employment practices. Recent additions have included background checks (personal, professional, criminal, credit), reviewing driving history, assessments of competency (demonstrable knowledge, behaviors, and skills required to perform specific tasks) and personality profiling (tests to determine character, patterns of behavior, thoughts and attitudes).

A number of businesses now utilize advanced strategies to determine a candidate's thoughts on preventability and overall attitude towards safety, such as the *Locus of Control Scale* conceptualized by Julian B. Rotter in 1954. This questionnaire attempts to determine an individual's perception of the control over events that surround them by presenting statements indicating whether they are either more internal (I'm in charge of my life. I control my destiny. I can make a difference.) or external (What will be, will be. If it is to happen, it will. It's up to others.)

Other businesses have expanded or supplemented pre-employment approaches by determining a potential employee's degree of self-efficacy, a concept developed by Albert Bandura. Self-efficacy is most commonly defined as a person's belief in their own ability to achieve a successful outcome. While these are excellent tools and have offered significant insight into the psyche of the potential candidate, the approaches can sometimes be cost-, time-, or complexity prohibitive.



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If It's Simple, It's Implementable

Individuals who maintain responsibility for site succession planning and employment require simple strategies to ensure the right safety-minded candidates are selected, especially when the aforementioned tools are unavailable. Regardless of industry, resources have become scarce and the standard adage of "Do more with less" has become more pervasive.

There is no perfect list (quantity or quality) of questions that gather the complete, vital insight into the safety attitude of a potential candidate. Furthermore, providing the ideal pre-defined questions is counterproductive to the purpose of this article. Every company will be on a different point of their journey towards operational or cultural safety excellence. In addition, many organizations and certain countries have legal guidelines for what may or may not be asked during an interview. Thus, the nature of the questions could be different. The questions will also differ based on the level and responsibilities of the position and applicant.

The following four sample questions are posed to demonstrate the possible value that open-ended, safety culture interview questions could bring to your company during the hiring process.

Question 1: How would you define safety?

Does the individual define safety with the inaccurate and unfortunate standard statements, "Not getting hurt" or "Going home the way you came in"? Or do they have a more proactive mindset that indicates thought-provoking preventative strategies? Do they respond with positive statements, such as "controlling and eliminating risk"?

Question 2: What role does safety play in an organization?

Unfortunately, some people feel that safety is just another thing to do, rather than the way to perform work. Look for answers that identify safety as a guiding value that compliments operational activities. Responses that indicate an understanding of how safety adds benefit to the employee's personal lives, their families, the site morale, community standing, customer perception and overall market position would be desirable.

Question 3: What does it take to reach and sustain zero injuries?

During this answer, look for positive indications of a behaviorally demonstrated belief in the journey (i.e., body language, facial expressions, word usage, etc.). Those who are passionate about safety being part of their job will likely have given thought to this question prior to it being asked. If a large percentage of people within the culture do not believe in the destination, it will be extremely difficult to get there. Moreover, if the leaders or potential new leaders do not feel it is possible, the difficulty increases exponentially.

Question 4: What do you think the safety roles, responsibilities, and expectations are for someone in this position?

Answers for this can range from "making sure people don't get hurt" to behaviorally descriptive strategies that help create the desired outcome of zero injuries or 100% safe. Preferably, the candidate would respond in a way that outlines the actions an individual in that role would need to perform on a frequent basis to create the ideal environment. The candidate could even outline how the expectations could be measured.

Questions such as these have assisted multiple hiring authorities in identifying desirable and undesirable attitudes, perceptions, and personal safety perspectives. Determining this prior to new-hire onboarding practices helps an organization answer a critical, yet often overlooked, question: "Am I hiring a person that complements our evolving safety culture, or am introducing new risk into our company?" You won't know until you ask. If safety is truly an integral value within your organization, don't wait to demonstrate it during orientation. Incorporate the communication of safety values into your hiring practices. Consider the message this sends to prospective employees: Safety starts before day one, so risk-takers need not apply.