

The Peanut Butter Question

By T. Scott Gross

What makes an interview question a great interview question? Predictability.

Thinking Point

The art and soul of employee selection is based on the belief that past behavior predicts future performance.

Discrimination is the purpose of an interview. We're talking legal, ethical, and moral discrimination. You are attempting to separate the wheat from the chaff, the good from the bad, the reliable from the no-shows, and that is a form of discrimination. No matter how well-intentioned you may be, you are walking a legal minefield of federal regulations that presume that your intentions are evil and that the thief or druggie or whatever they may be is attempting to get on your payroll, close to your assets, and is a mere victim of society who is in need of protection.

Screw up the interview, and you will quickly discover that one of the hallmarks of American jurisprudence (the idea that you are presumed innocent until proven otherwise), does not apply to employers charged with discrimination.

Discrimination is illegal for reasons of race, color, creed, national origin, religion, age, sex, and disability (including substance abuse, and in some places weight, height, criminal history, and sexual preference.) Not to worry. None of the above make much difference when it comes to the ability to turn in a good day's work. Discrimination is legal for reasons of sloth, dishonesty, rude behavior, failing to show up as scheduled, and all those other irritations that make employers nuts.

So what's an employer to do? Well, to start you have to avoid the seemingly innocuous questions such as "Do you have a car?" You think you are asking a simple question when in fact you are just about to hang yourself! It doesn't matter that your office is in the boonies and miles from public transportation—you can't blurt out such an invasive question! But you can ask, "Do you have reliable transportation?" How they get to work is none of your business and asking about vehicle ownership could be considered discriminatory (certain racial groups might be less likely to own a vehicle; therefore the question is discriminatory.)

Better to ask an applicant about peanut butter. What makes a question okay or not is whether it predicts a behavior that relates to a bona fide occupational qualification (BFOQ). The parishioners of a Catholic church might legitimately inquire of a potential new priest if he was a male and a Catholic. -BFOQ. Hooters Restaurants lost a squeaker when they failed to prove that looking good in tight shorts and a crop top (and being female) was important to serving hot wings and beer. Not a BFOQ.

So, peanut butter.

What if you had 200 store managers and discovered that of the fifty most profitable stores, forty-nine were run by managers who reported that that peanut butter was always a part of their breakfast? And what if you discovered that of the 50 least profitable stores not a single one

of those managers reported a penchant for peanut butter? You'd want to know, wouldn't you?

You might feel silly. You might ask your assistant to do the asking. But, by golly, you wouldn't be hiring too many peanut-phobics would you?

Thinking Point

What makes an interview question valid, or not, is its ability to legally predict future behavior.