

EFFECTIVE PROJECT MANAGEMENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Staffing IT project management teams with capable and competent project managers is a challenge. If the interview isn't structured with effective questions, it can result in a poor hiring decision or a missed opportunity. Screening candidates on PMP certification is not enough to determine if they are an effective project manager. Due to the influx of PMP certification preparation courses, aspiring project managers can pass the PMP exam by taking a weekend course. The market has fostered a culture where certification is earned by training to a test rather than validating key leadership behaviors and technical competencies. Fortunately, the market doesn't base the hire decision only on certifications.

Over the years, I've used the following key questions to help staff my project and program management teams. The questions help identify competent project managers that understand project management theory and also demonstrate the practical application. The questions are grouped into two categories—leadership behaviors and technical competencies. Project managers need to demonstrate a balance between the mechanics of project management and the leadership qualities required to deliver the project. The questions are tailored for an IT interview; however, they could be modified based on industry. They are open-ended and will help shape the conversation.

LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

Question 1:

Describe a recent project where you were responsible for managing multiple people or teams. What were some of the key challenges and how did you handle those challenges?

This question demonstrates a result-oriented leadership behavior. Project managers need to demonstrate delivery and a desire to attain the end goal. Staffing project managers who simply point out problems but do not help resolve them will not drive the project to completion. Effective project managers demonstrate how they've managed a project, coordinated across multiple teams, overcame obstacles and delivered the project's goals.

Question 2:

Describe a time when you implemented a new idea without being asked or pursued a new opportunity that could improve the project or company.

Demonstrating courage and a willingness to take action without being asked is a key delivery characteristic of effective project managers. Project sponsors entrust the project's goals, budget and their own reputations on their project managers. Project sponsors don't have all the

answers and need intelligent and motivated people to solve problems, identify new opportunities and take action without being prompted.

Question 3:

Describe a scenario where you had to balance competing customer demands with project constraints. How did you ensure customer satisfaction while maintaining the goals of the project?

Maintaining a customer focused approach while ensuring the project deliverables are completed on time is a delicate balance. Business partners don't understand all the technical details required to turn business processes into software solutions. They just want the system to work and accommodate their changing business needs. Effective project managers build rapport with their business partners, seek to understand the underlying needs and proactively address their concerns. It is a difficult balance as project managers commit to delivering the project scope while addressing a business customer's changing requirements.

“Strong relationships help solve problems and support project delivery.”

Question 4:

Describe a time when you had to balance quality management with a challenged project schedule.

As projects execute and schedule variances occur, there is a tendency to shorten the quality testing cycle to maintain a project end date. In some projects, the end date can be extended, and in other projects, the end date must be maintained. Effective project managers recognize the importance of quality management in the software development cycle and prioritize the test cases and test cycles that deliver the project's critical functionality. These project



managers successfully commit to a quality mindset and ensure defects are resolved or mitigated.

The project manager should also recognize the challenge of managing the triple constraint and maintain a commitment to quality. Recognizing delays in the schedule early will help project managers adjust testing schedules so the support team isn't called in from a day off or a holiday.

Question 5:

Describe a time when you had a difficult situation working with a vendor or another peer. What was your approach to resolve the issues while maintaining a positive relationship?

Without a cohesive team, a project manager cannot be effective. Projects often depend on vendors and supplier team members to provide services. The nature of the client-vendor relationship emphasizes mutually beneficial goals. However, the vendor doesn't always prioritize the client's interests as heavily as their own. The ability to effectively develop teams across corporate borders is critical to project delivery. Clients will always try to maximize services at a minimal cost while vendors are motivated to increase costs for additional services.

In a challenged project with strained vendor relationships, it becomes even more important to focus on the critical issues to work together and deliver the end goal. The same skill is needed when working with other peers who are not necessarily motivated to help the project team. Strong relationships help solve problems and support project delivery. The best project management system, tools and techniques cannot replace the power effective relationships have across multiple teams.

Assessing Communication Skills

In this set of interview questions, there is not a specific question that addresses the project manager's communication skill or style. The open-ended questions provide the interviewer with enough feedback to determine how well the candidate communicates using verbal and non-verbal communication. Communication is 90 percent of a project manager's job, and interviewers should look for project managers who can logically and clearly respond to the interview questions as well as demonstrate project management theory in practice.

These leadership behavior-based questions are just a few examples that identify a project manager's drive for results, commitment to customer satisfaction and focus on quality delivery.

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