

Tips for Effectively Interviewing SAS Programming Candidates

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ABSTRACT

As companies grow and change, the demand to find well rounded, qualified SAS® programming candidates grows. Finding the right person for the job is often difficult. It seems that every interviewer has their own standard set of questions and often a candidate is asked the same questions over and over. Does this approach truly find us the best candidates? Are there ways we can more effectively interview candidates in order to find the “perfect”.

INTRODUCTION

Even though this is written from the perspective of the pharmaceutical industry the concepts discuss transcend industry boundaries and apply to anyone looking to hire SAS programmers. We all have a need to find qualified candidates who will grow with our companies and become our leaders in the future.

While interviewers and needs vary greatly, the goal is always the same – find the right person for the job. This is true whether you are hiring SAS Programmers, Chemists or HR Representatives. When hiring to fill positions like SAS programmers, which require specialized technical skills, it is important to find a way to clearly identify whether a potential candidate possess those skills or has the ability to learn them quickly. It would seem that effectively interviewing for these types of positions should be fairly straightforward. However, I have found it very difficult and frustrating. This has led me to look for a better way and some of the findings are presented here.

After much thought and many interviews it has become apparent that interview questions primarily fall into three different categories. Can they do the job? Will they do the job? Will they fit in with the team? These categories cover the primary areas that most employers are interested in discovering.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

With growing demand for SAS programmers, hiring managers need to find more effective ways to identify the right people to fill their needs. It's hard to compare candidates when there is no consistent approach. There are as many different approaches to interviewing as there are interviewers. It seems that everyone does it a little different. There really isn't one right or wrong way to find the people you are looking for.

Some companies/interviewers prefer to interview using the panel approach where a candidate is presented to multiple interviewers at a time while others prefer to perform interviews on a one-on-one basis. Some come prepared with long lists of standard lists of questions while others “wing” it, almost appearing unprepared. These different approaches vary both across companies as well as within companies. These different approaches can be as difficult on the candidates as they are on the companies/interviewers performing them.

It would seem that if we could come up with one consistent approach it might just make our job of hiring a little easier.

TO QUIZ OR NOT TO QUIZ

There has been much discussion within my team at PPD whether or not we should administer some sort of formal programming quiz to our potential programming candidates. With the administration of a quiz it appears that the candidates true programming abilities would be apparent. Opponents to quizzing argue that it is difficult to create one quiz that is fair to all candidates. Also, a quiz will not measure a candidate's ability to easily learn and apply new information.

There are many things to think about when considering whether or not to administer some kind of quiz.

Considerations

- Should the quiz be written vs. computerized?
- If computerized, is there a machine available which is secure (does not link to the network)?
- How much time is allowed for administration?
- How will the quiz be "graded"?
- Getting approval from Human Resources → do we know our existing team would pass the test?

Any test given to candidates should test on skills required to the job (which could vary by grade or team) and also look to see what additional skills (the "nice to have") the candidate has. The test should focus on items that are important to your organization, for example:

- If PROC REPORT is your reporting procedure of choice, ask technical questions about it
- If specific SAS module knowledge is important, ask questions about those (e.g. specific SAS/STAT procedures, specific SAS/GRAPH procedures, PROC SQL etc)
- Are there common data step methods you require knowledge of? For example, do you need candidates to understand ARRAY?

GENERAL THINGS TO REMEMBER

When interviewing for any positions there are some basic things to remember. You want to introduce yourself so that the candidate knows who you are and what position you fill. You might briefly explain your role within the organization. Be sure to ask open questions versus closed questions. An open question is one in which you can not answer with a simple yes or no. This type of question requires more thought and can give the interviewer a clearer picture of the candidate's skills.

Open vs. Closed

- "Can you tell me what the PDV is?" – Even though you may be asking the candidate to tell you more about the PDV this question can be answered with a simply yes or no.
- "Please explain to me what you know about the PDV?" – This way of phrasing the question leaves the candidate no option but to talk about what the PDV is and what they know about it. The candidate may not know what the PDV is but he/she needs to answer with more than a yes or no.

It is also a good practice to ask multipart questions, such as "Tell me about your current role and what your aspirations are?". You are looking to see if the candidate will answer both parts of the question without you prompting them for the second portion. Are they paying attention? Did they give a long answer to the first part and forget the second part all together? How much attention to detail do you see in their answer?

Some other things to remember when interviewing include giving the candidate your undivided attention. This should be a given but we are all busy and often finding the time in our busy schedules to sit down uninterrupted for half an hour or so seems impossible. Have you ever felt like someone you are meeting with has something better or more important to do? How did this make you feel? Focusing on the interview shows the candidate that we are interested in them and that we are taking the process seriously. Also remember to make eye contact to ensure that the candidate can tell you are paying attention. Sometimes you will be faced with a candidate that tends to give very long answers or veers off course. It is important to try to keep the candidate on task and moving forward so that you will have plenty of time to ask all of the questions you need to without running out of time. You may want to take notes in order to remember specific points later.

It might also be useful to incorporate a phone screen into your interview process. This will help better identify candidates who have skill sets that are similar to those you are looking for. Unfortunately, some candidates just look better on paper. Be sure to remember that there can be problems with the connection. Both the interviewer and/or the candidate can have problems understanding questions or answers. A phone screen should be used to determine whether or not to proceed to the next step in the interview process; typically a face-to-face interview.

THE THREE QUESTION CATEGORIES

CAN THEY DO THE JOB?

This is the primary question interviewers are trying to answer. We want to know if the candidate has the ability to do the job to the level required. Be sure to ask questions that will get to the heart of the matter. What will you need the candidate to do on a daily basis? Is this an entry level position or a more senior level? Will the candidate be expected to work as a member of a team or will this be a more independent role with little or no supervision? Does the position require direct supervision of other members of the team? How much interaction will the candidate have with staff from other departments?

Examples:

- “Walk me through how you would set up your proc report statements in order to output a listing.” – You are looking for whether or not they can accurately describe the major statements. This type of question will help you see if the candidate has a strong technical background. They should be able to speak easily about their knowledge and experience with particular procedures by giving specific examples and knowing the major steps.
- “Please tell me about PROC SQL, ARRAYS, SAS/STAT, SAS/GRAPH procedures.” – This type of question is looking for how extensive the candidate’s knowledge is. Keep in mind that not everyone will have experience with all of these procedures.

WILL THEY DO THE JOB?

Now that we have a pretty good idea whether or not a candidate can do the job we need to know if they will do it. These are questions that get at the integrity and accountability a candidate possess. Do they love what they do? How do they handle stress? When the going gets tough will they stick with it? What motivates the candidate?

Examples:

- “If you were king/queen for a day what would you do?” – This may seem like a strange question to ask but it will help you get a glimpse of what makes this candidate tick.
- “What do you do to combat stress?” – We all know that the pharmaceutical industry can be extremely stressful at times. We also know that that stress can make our jobs much more difficult. Everyone handles stress differently and everyone needs a way in which to relieve his or her stress. This type of question is meant to determine whether or not the candidate has a mechanism in place to deal with the stress he or she will face on the job and is it appropriate.
- “How many different tasks/projects do you work on at any given time?” – For certain positions this can be very important. Can the candidate multitask or have they primarily been faced with single tasks.
- “Why do you want to join our organization?” – This question is meant to determine how much the candidate knows about the company you work for. Have they done their homework? Do they know what type of company they are interviewing with? Do they know what makes your company different from your competitors?
- “Why are you interested in living in North Carolina (or other state) (for out of state candidates)?” – If the candidate will need to relocate it is important to know that they have thought about what it means to live in somewhere new.

WILL THEY FIT IN WITH THE TEAM?

Now we need to know how well they will interact with other member of the team. We should think about other members of the programming team as well as members of the team from other disciplines, such as data management or statistics. We are looking for how well they communicate. Will they ask questions appropriately? Will they contribute to department/team goals? Will their personality mesh with the team or work against it?

Examples:

- “Give me an example of a time when you had a conflict with another member of a team you were working on. What did you do to resolve the conflict?” – We all know that conflicts arise from time to time – it is important to determine how the candidate will work to resolve this conflict. Do they face a problem head on or do they avoid it?
- “Please tell me what ‘team work’ means to you.” – Team work can mean different things depending upon the company and/or department you work for. Does the candidate’s definition match up with your company’s view of team work? Have they worked in a similar environment before?
- “In your career history what size teams have you worked on?” – There are many different sized organizations out there from teams of one to teams of hundreds. Does this candidate have experience working on a team similar to the size of your team?

CONCLUSION

While interviewing potential SAS candidates we all need to find the most qualified candidates who will become valuable members of our teams. This can often be very difficult but when we ask the right types of questions, and maintain focus on the three key areas (can they do the job, will they do the job, and will they fit in with the team), I firmly believe we can improve our chances of ensuring we make good hiring decision. A good hiring decision is a benefit for both the new employee (or consultant) and for the organization.

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