

# Get the real reason why a candidate left their job



Ask a candidate why he left a previous position and you will likely hear a viable answer such as “I wanted more money” or “I hoped to find better opportunities.” Satisfied, many interviewers simply move on, which is just what the person in the hot seat wants.

“The first reason given is often a generic answer the candidate hopes you accept,” says hiring expert and author Carol Quinn, CEO of [Hire Authority](#).

Unfortunately, such a response could mask additional information vital to hiring decisions. Taking answers at face value often does little to truly know the candidate and determine what type of performer you have in your presence. Interviewers must go deeper in order to uncover substance.

Despite interviewing being a key way to learn about a potential new employee, research has found that 80 percent of interviewers have never been formally trained on how to hire. This deficit contrasts sharply with the interviewing skill set of modern candidates. With a plethora of information circulating on how to prepare answers to commonly asked questions and ace job interviews, savvy applicants become well-versed on making a good impression.

Employers who do not know someone’s history may be doomed to repeat it. Whether you’re dealing with an underachiever trying to mask a checkered past or a high performer who will leave your company for the exact

same reasons she ditched her last job, refrain from hiring until you get some *real* answers.

## Figuring out why a candidate left a job

Realize an interviewee may be reluctant to go beyond his prepared answer if not pushed a bit. Disrupting the flow by continuing the conversation rather than settling for a canned response sets the stage for nuggets of meaningful information to emerge.

Start by asking about the title and responsibilities for the past three positions on the resume. Are you hearing evidence of actual progression? If a career move seems lateral or even a step backward, point that out. Realizing that his “I left for a better position” answer now seems out of place, the candidate may talk more candidly. You might, for instance, learn that he was willing to settle for less to get out of a toxic workplace with a micromanaging boss. This information gives you a great selling point by showing how your organization promotes a healthier culture.

To further gain an understanding of the events that brought this person here today to interview with you, try asking job-change “trigger” questions such as:

- When did you make up your mind that you wanted to leave position X?

For most people, job hunting is not a particularly fun activity. It takes effort to research potential employers, scour listed openings, send out resumes, network, and go on interviews. Knowing the point at which circumstances became such that the individual either wanted or needed to enter the job market can be telling.

- What happened at Company X that got you to this point?

Figure out what finally made the person say “I’m going to go job hunting.” If, for instance, the candidate originally claimed money was the factor behind wanting to leave, ask about his last raise. You may discover that it came eight months ago at an annual performance review – meaning he did not start job hunting immediately upon notification of his new salary. While compensation might be part of the story, something else likely contributed to spurring him into action. Learning about this “something else” presents a more comprehensive picture.

- Did you have your next job waiting before you left your job at Company X?

People tend not to leave a job without another position lined up. Thus, learning of an exit made in the absence of another opportunity could be a red flag. Though some individuals who end up being high performers have terminations in their work history, knowing the circumstances can be insightful. The discovery also may make it worth your while to conduct very thorough reference checks before extending an offer.

## Reading between the lines



Another way to sniff out work history matters a candidate may not particularly want drawn to your attention is to request past employment dates be given as starting/ending month and year rather than only presented as years. Using this format makes gaps easier to spot.

For example, compare these two set-ups:

- XYZ Enterprises, June 2016 to January 2018

ABC Ltd., March 2019 to September 2020

- XYZ Enterprises, 2016-2018

ABC Ltd., 2019-2020

The first presentation plainly reveals a gap of more than a year between positions. The second set-up is not a lie, but it reads like the person held continuous employment. The interviewer must address the matter to fill in the holes. The reason could be something unrelated to a career, such as caring for children, moving to a new city and settling in, or dealing with a personal problem. However, the lapse also could signal something like getting fired from one job and experiencing difficulty finding another.

## Dealing with your findings

If you are an interviewer who finds playing detective a bit uncomfortable, don't think of your investigative measures as an attempt to "catch" candidates hiding information or spinning negatives into positives. Rather, consider your probe as beneficial to both sides.

By bringing to light the true reasons why the individual and past employers parted ways, interviewee and interviewer can better assess the potential fit of the position at hand. For instance, someone who departed a previous job because of its long hours likely won't be any happier at your company if overtime is commonplace. Honest communication upfront increases the odds of potential employer and potential hire getting what they want – a successful, long-term relationship.