



The Exact Expertise to
Ignite and Sustain Performance™

LSA Global | White Paper



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Recruiting: "Magic Bullet" Questions

The most assertive, "no-nonsense" participants in our interviewing seminars are usually looking for sure-fire techniques that will give them the edge in any interview.

What they think they want are "magic bullet" questions that trip up well-coached candidates while also revealing required analytical skills. Unfortunately, we have to tell them that this approach simply doesn't work.

Here is one story of how the quest for a "magic bullet" question backfired. Not only did the bullet miss its target, but it also led the candidate to silently mock the interviewer's skills.

An American, let's call her Rachel, received her degree this year from St. Andrews College in Scotland. She was then hired into an intensive two-year financial analyst program with a London investment bank. During callback rounds with seven investment banks, at least one interviewer—and sometimes several—in each bank asked the same question to measure her analytical skills.

The question was: "How many degrees are there between a clock's two hands when the clock reads 3:45?" (Try to figure it out yourself before you read any further. The explanation is at the end of the article). Rachel knew the answer only because she saw it on the Internet before her first interview. She found it on a web site specifically designed to coach would-be investment bankers on what to expect in their job interviews.

To her surprise, all seven banks used the identical question, often with the glee of a Cheshire cat. None learned a thing about her analytical skills from this question—though all thought they had.

This is a cautionary tale for impatient interviewers seeking a "magic bullet" question. In today's world, it's quite likely that a number of competing firms will latch onto the same question. The result is that all companies will lose credibility in the eyes of potential hires.

What's more, the new brainteasers have a short shelf life. Remember the question: "How many gas stations are there in the United States?" It was supposed to reveal on-the-spot reasoning skills. The question was popular several years ago, but quickly lost its luster when candidates saw it on the Internet and began developing prepared answers.

Both McKinsey and Microsoft learned this the hard way. Their recruiters would show up on a college campus in the morning with specific case study or brainteaser questions, and by noon students would often have posted those questions on the Internet. That meant candidates seen in the afternoon knew all the answers.

But let's return to Rachel for a minute. Each time she heard the clock hand puzzler, she used the same dramatic response: "Wow, that's a tough question. Is it okay if I look at my watch? I'd say it would be 180 degrees. No, wait a minute. It couldn't be 180 because the hour hand is already three-quarters of the way towards four. Since there are 30 degrees between each number the answer must be—let me think—oh yes, 157.5 degrees."

One banker was so impressed with her "analytical skills" in response to this question that he cut her answer short and told her, "You don't have to go any further; it's obvious you have the skills we're seeking."





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She didn't feel guilty about her charade. She had already lost respect for the interviewers who thought they could assess her analytical skills with a single contrived question.

Better than a "magic bullet"

We believe every interviewer should use a method that helps him or her learn enough about the candidate to be able to predict future on-the-job behavior and performance. It should be a structured method, yet one that can be applied in a conversational way.

Once you understand "how" and "why" candidates act the way they do, you can then relate each person's unique qualities to what's required on the job and make a hiring recommendation or decision. This is necessary for anyone you interview—future analysts, engineers, lawyers, and so on.

Unfortunately, many busy people consider interviewing as just one more task that keeps them from doing their real job. As a result, they just want short cuts and a list of the right questions to ask.

But what this usually gets them is a series of close-ended, generic questions that aren't geared to a particular candidate. The conversation can become an interrogation. Not only are such questions rarely useful, they often telegraph the right answer.

Interviewing isn't something you do for just 30 or 45 minutes. Rather, it's a critical skill needed to bring new talent into your company or firm. In essence, it's something you do for the rest of your career. Interviewing is an artful game—not a game show. That's why magic bullet questions just don't work. The point isn't to try to eliminate candidates with questions no one can solve. The point is to identify the best people and hire them.

The "magic bullet" question explained:

"How many degrees are there between a clock's two hands when the clock reads 3:45?" At 3:45, the minute hand is pointing at nine, but the hour hand has moved three-quarters of the way from three to four. Since there are 360 degrees in a circle and twelve numbers on a clock, each number is separated by 30 degrees. The hour hand is only one quarter away from four or 7.5 degrees (one-quarter of 30). Add this to 150 (the degrees from four to nine) and you get the answer-157.5 degrees.

About LSA Global

Since 1995, LSA has helped organizations create and maintain competitive advantages through people. Over 85% of our business comes from repeat clients and our customer satisfaction rating is 97.5%. Our clients tell us that we are different. Our clients tell us that we save them both time and money. Our clients tell us that they appreciate access to experts across many areas.

Our Leadership and Management clients report that we decrease their costs by up to 50%, while helping increase speed-to-productivity by 60% and decrease unwanted attrition by up to 40%.

Our Sales clients confirm that they have grown sales by 40%, increased units sold by 42%, increased average pricing by 12%, and closed over 50% of their pipeline.

Our Project Management clients inform us that, by regularly completing projects that meet or exceed expectations, they have become an anomaly in the world where most projects disappoint or fail.

Our clients succeed in the marketplace through increased revenue, decreased costs, and higher productivity. They maintain that our rigorous assessment, implementation, and measurement capabilities bring them tangible results. As an organization, we are fiercely devoted to supporting their success.

