



# GETTING THE MOST FROM ONLINE PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS:

*Tips for Strategy and Process By Charles A. Handler, Ph.D. and*

**careerbuilder®**

## INTRODUCTION

Talent acquisition is about doing one thing and doing it well – hiring the right people for the right jobs. With so many candidates applying to jobs with great ease, savvy companies are using every available tool to identify the “cream of the crop” as quickly as possible.

While hiring the best talent possible has always been the primary mission of the staffing function, the highly competitive nature of our present labor market, along with today’s uncertain economic times, makes hiring the “A” players necessary to drive business results more important than ever. The increased focus on linking hiring decisions to business outcomes requires that organizations have a winning strategy and the right team in place.

This whitepaper provides an overview of one of the most cost-effective methods for adding value to the hiring process: the use of qualifying questions – or “pre-screening questions.” The information this paper provides will help “de-mystify” pre-screening and enable readers to understand the benefits of and best utilize automated pre-screening questions.

## PRE-SCREENING DEFINED

Pre-screening questions help hiring managers better understand an applicant’s ability to successfully perform the job in question. These questions, posed to the job seeker at the time of initial application, are used to rank an applicant’s qualifications and automatically remove unqualified job seekers from the applicant pool. Pre-screening questions, however, should not be confused with other forms of screening and assessment tools that typically come later in the hiring process.

The following pages examine how questions meeting the above definition provide companies of all sizes with the ability to achieve the greatest return on their investments by increasing both the efficiency of the process and the quality of the candidate pool.

## THE PROBLEM: UNQUALIFIED APPLICANTS

For years, big name companies could rely solely on their brand names to attract quality job candidates. These days, that’s no longer the case. Today, the Internet has emerged as a valuable recruitment tool, enabling companies of all sizes to easily and

# Getting the Most from Online Pre-Screening Questions

affordably communicate their brands to a large number of applicants – and recruit from a much broader applicant pool – by posting job openings online. Thus, in order to stay competitive, companies who once relied on their brand names have had to evolve their recruiting processes to focus on communicating critical information about the company and its job opportunities to candidates.

Yet while the Internet has created a way for companies to reach out to a larger number of applicants, it also has created a need to weed out the increased number of unqualified applicants who use the Internet to find jobs. Fortunately, technology has provided a way to meet this need.

## A KEY PART OF THE SOLUTION: PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

The increasing number of applications and résumés has created a need for technologies that allow hiring personnel to focus only on the most qualified candidates. The best strategy for ensuring successful hires is the development of a hiring PROCESS that systematically measures the key characteristics required for success. A good hiring process should involve the following:

### PROMOTING THE JOB VIA EFFECTIVE JOB POSTINGS

A good hiring process must begin with a clear, accurate job posting that clearly communicates key pieces of information about the job opportunity to the applicant.

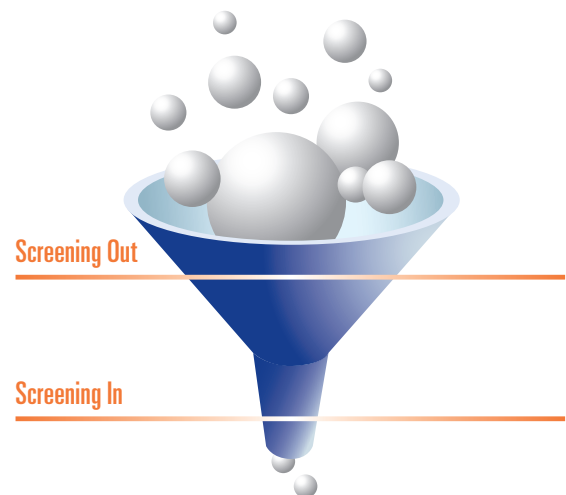
### “SCREENING OUT” USING PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS

Pre-screening questions represent one of the most effective ways to automatically reduce the information overload recruiters in organizations of all sizes face. One of the biggest advantages of pre-screening questions is that they function in an automated fashion. The role of pre-screening within the recruiting process is to classify the applicants using the fewest number of questions possible. By quickly classifying candidates, organizations are able to eliminate or “screen out” candidates who do not meet the minimum job requirements.<sup>2</sup>

### “SCREENING IN” VIA MORE IN-DEPTH EVALUATION:

Once unqualified applicants are “screened out,” staffing personnel can focus on more in-depth evaluations of qualified candidates. The end goal is to end up with a final slate of candidates who show the greatest potential for success – within both the role and the organization.

To understand the difference between “screening out” and “screening in,” visualize the hiring process as a funnel.



The largest volume of applicants is found at the top of the funnel. Thus, it makes the most sense to use tools that can “screen out” applicants at this phase. Automating the screening out process saves time and money that could be invested later in the process in more comprehensive candidate evaluations. Then, as one moves down the funnel, the focus becomes on screening in qualified candidates through assessments and interviews.

## RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

One of the best arguments for using automated pre-screening questions is found in the data surrounding their usage and the success stories from those who use them.

Research clearly shows that many organizations benefit from the use of automated pre-screening tools. For instance, the annual pre-screening and assessment usage survey conducted by Rocket-Hire in the fall of 2007 and released last spring indicates that 57 percent of respondents use online pre-screening tools. Of those respondents, 65 percent felt that pre-screening questions add value to their organization. This value came through the ability to eliminate, pass through, and sort job candidates early in the hiring process by collecting basic information about qualifications.

Rocket-Hire’s findings have remained relatively consistent throughout the annual survey’s five-year existence. Expert analysis indicates that the reason for this trend is the relative simplicity with which basic job qualifications – such as industry knowledge, degrees earned, location, and years of experience – are collected and evaluated.

Finally, Rocket-Hire’s latest results demonstrate that pre-screening is becoming a strategic element in the hiring process: fewer organizations implement this approach on a piecemeal basis and more organizations lean toward a more complete and consistent hiring strategy across domestic and international operations.

There is a good deal of evidence indicating a direct link between pre-screening and ROI. For instance, when McDonald's realized that simply getting the right message in the marketplace was not enough to increase ROI, the company developed an online questionnaire for candidates to complete. The questionnaire includes 35 pre-screening questions that cover topics such as dependability, efficiency and leadership. In an interview with Workforce Management, Rich Floersch, executive vice president of worldwide human resources at McDonald's, reported positive results from the program. The hiring subjectivity was taken out of the hands of the line manager, and hires from the program were stronger.

These success stories are undoubtedly just a few of many, as increasing numbers of organizations continue to adopt pre-screening as a core part of their hiring processes.

## THE QUESTIONS

In getting the most from pre-screening, organizations should pay close attention to two key areas. The first area involves the work required to set the stage for successful pre-screening. The second involves the mechanics of writing the pre-screening questions themselves.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR EFFECTIVE PRE-SCREENING

When it comes to pre-screening questions, it pays to do some up-front work to get the most value for your efforts. The following represent key issues that should be addressed in order to create the foundation required for success:

### CREATE A VALUE PROPOSITION:

Pre-screening can add tremendous value to the candidate selection process. Yet, according to the Rocket-Hire survey, one of the major obstacles to implementing pre-screening assessments was the decision-makers' belief that they do not add value to the hiring process. Thus, it is critical that you make an effort to document this value as part of the candidate selection process to get buy-in from decision makers.

Begin by documenting the problems that led to the decision to adopt pre-screening in the first place and identifying important metrics. Use the collected data to build a business case supporting the impact of pre-screening. These efforts not only prove pre-screening's value to the organization, but they go a long way toward gaining buy-in for future initiatives.

### BUILD A SOLID FOUNDATION:

Before starting any pre-screening initiative, it is critical to systematically define the key criteria required for candidate

success. After all, you can't hire people who have what it takes unless you first define what "it" actually is. Such criteria include minimum qualifications, experience levels, required skills and competency models, among others. Systematically collecting this information for all jobs within the organization is a best practice and a cornerstone of many HR activities.

### BE CONSISTENT:

It is critical that every applicant for a given position be asked the same pre-screening questions. Using pre-screening inconsistently not only causes potential legal problems, but it also reduces the effectiveness of your hiring process. Therefore, it is important that hiring managers and recruiters do not change pre-screening questions after posting a requisition.

### INCLUDE A SCORING/REVIEW PROCESS:

Once candidates have completed the pre-screening process, organizations must have a standard method for reviewing and scoring the questions. Most screening systems available today have functionalities that provide for scoring and ranking the results of the pre-screening process.

There are several advantages to scoring and review, but all boil down to two things: providing hiring personnel with a way to view the results of the pre-screening process, and providing documentation for the pre-screening process. The ability to display results of the screening process allows hiring personnel to view candidate qualifications relative to both other candidates and the job requirements. Evaluating the performance of applicants against a standard provides a solid foundation for making effective decisions. Documentation is important because collecting and saving data from those applicants who were screened out is a great way to gain insight into the effectiveness of your process.

Collecting and reviewing scoring data from all applicants should be a part of the pre-screening right from the start. This consistency is critical for providing and understanding ROI and helps ensure the program is legally defensible.

### CONSIDER BOTH HIRING PERSONNEL AND CANDIDATES AS CUSTOMERS:

The success of the pre-screening initiative hinges on acceptance from its two main customers: staffing personnel and job seekers. Staffing personnel must have input into the creation of pre-screening questions and clearly see how these questions make their jobs easier. One way to involve staffing personnel in this process is to create a shared library of pre-screening questions that they can revisit on a continual basis and revise as necessary. Job candidates, on the other hand, need a pre-screening experience that

# Getting the Most from Online Pre-Screening Questions

is pleasant and has a clear, job-related purpose. Failure to address the needs of both key customers for pre-screening questions can lessen the value proposition they provide.

## **UNDERSTAND WHAT IS REASONABLE TO EXPECT FROM PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS:**

Pre-screening does have limitations. While pre-screening questions identify applicants who lack key job qualifications, they have limited value for actually predicting job performance. For instance, a candidate who claims to have certain skills may make it through the pre-screening process, but there is nothing in place to verify these claims. Companies that expect pre-screening questions to effectively identify the top 10 percent of candidates are probably setting themselves up for disappointment. It is best to leave such predictions to more in-depth methods used to “screen in” applicants.

The main purpose of pre-screening is to remove the bottom half of the applicant pool, not sort the top half. Pre-screening is most effective as part of a strategic process that includes behavioral assessments and interviews designed to “screen in” applicants who pass through the first gates in the hiring process.<sup>4</sup>

## **THE MECHANICS: WRITING EFFECTIVE PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONS**

Writing effective pre-screening questions can be a tough task because the process requires a clear understanding of success both within the open position and within the organization. Getting the most out of pre-screening questions requires attention to a number of best practices. While there can be a great deal of variation in the specific content of pre-screening questions depending on the job in question, the organization, and other variables, the following practices help ensure you get the most out of your pre-screening efforts.

### **KEEP IT JOB-RELATED:**

The #1 way to ensure the legal defensibility of any component of your hiring process is to establish clear links between hiring criteria and specific aspects of job performance. Demonstrate direct relationships between the content of pre-screening questions and job requirements, especially if you are using questions to eliminate applicants from the candidate pool. For instance, if you wish to include questions about a candidate’s ability to use Excel, it makes sense to first document the fact that Excel is critical to job performance. This documentation could be in the form of job descriptions that are the result of a process such as job analysis or competency modeling.

### **KEEP IT SIMPLE:**

The goal of pre-screening questions is to classify candidates with as few questions as possible. Hone in on the most important attributes for the ideal candidate, and use interviews and other tools for understanding a candidate’s soft skills, like motivation and attitude. For example, if the position requires that the employee work on Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m., ask the question, “Are you available to work on Saturday’s from 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.?”

### **MAKE IT CLEAR:**

Be as specific as possible in your pre-screening questions. Candidates are more likely to stretch the truth when answering questions from a computer than in a personal interview. In order to collect the most accurate data possible, create specific pre-screening questions that make it more difficult for candidates to fib. For example, instead of asking a candidate how competent he or she is with Power Point, ask if he or she has ever created automated presentations in Power Point. By asking a very specific question, you are able to more accurately assess the candidate’s ability to meet requirements for the job.

### **ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL:**

Candidates are willing to answer screening questions as long as the questions are relevant to the job and the process doesn’t take what they feel is an inappropriate amount of time to complete. (Candidates could spend anywhere from five to 30 minutes answering pre-screening questions, depending on their interest in the position.) Because every candidate and every position is unique, however, it is important to tailor the pre-screening questions to each position. For example if you are hiring a truck driver, the most important question might be, “Do you have a valid and clean CDL license?” The same organization hiring for an accountant is going to want to remove this question and replace it with, “Do you have your CPA?”

### **KEEP IT LEGAL:**

It should go without saying that pre-screening questions be legal and non-discriminatory. It is also important to make sure that questions do not violate any EEOC regulations and that they are not offensive to applicants. Be wary of letting hiring managers write their own questions unless they are well-versed in EEOC hiring guidelines. It is easy to write questions that seem job-relevant but are actually illegal. For instance, asking applicants if they have a car is often an illegal question, but asking them if they have a reliable way to get to work on time is not. Avoid asking questions that may leave applicants wondering, “Why are they asking me this?” Such questions could be construed as offensive. If you are in doubt, consult a lawyer or visit [SHRM.org](http://SHRM.org) for the most current information regarding updates to ADA, FMLA, Drug Free Workplace Act, EEO

and Affirmative Action regulations. Additionally, do not open yourself for legal issues by changing the questions once the recruiting process begins.

Finally, documentation is a critical part of a legal hiring system, so be sure that you are aware of all data collection and reporting requirements that apply to your organization, and plan for compliance as part of implementation.

### **FOCUS ON “HIGH IMPACT” QUESTIONS:**

The goal of pre-screening is to remove the maximum number of unqualified applicants with the minimum number of questions. Avoid questions that the majority of candidates will answer the same way, as they do little to distinguish among candidates. For instance, asking applicants if they have a “can do” attitude probably does not make sense, as most applicants eager to land a job will surely answer “yes.”

Also, avoid questions that reflect “nice to have” concepts. For example, some pre-screening vendors recommend asking if candidates are interested in using certain skills. Again, most candidates eager to land a job will be likely to say “yes” to this question. Research shows, however, that candidates who indicated their skill level to be intermediate or higher also expressed a medium to high level of interest using the skill, suggesting that little useful information is gained by asking about interests.

In general, limit the focus of pre-screening questions to specific experiences and requirements, and use more in-depth assessments to get at soft skills like motives, interests and competencies.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is commonly understood that hiring the wrong person can represent significant costs to organizations. Research by Bradford Smart of “Topgrading: How Leading Companies Win by Hiring, Coaching and Keeping the Best People”, identifies that, on average, a mis-hired manager earning \$100,000 actually costs an organization \$1.5 million in missed opportunity. With this type of monetary exposure in mind, it is more important than ever for organizations get the right people in the right positions from the start.

A well thought-out, scalable talent acquisition strategy is crucial to identifying and hiring the top performing candidates, ultimately driving your business to the next level. Effective pre-screening questions can help businesses quickly identify the most relevant candidates for their openings, ultimately making for a more efficient and successful hiring process.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Dr. Charles Handler is an Industrial/Organizational Psychologist specializing in staffing and pre-employment assessment. Throughout his career he has specialized in developing effective, legally defensible employee selection systems. Charles has taken what he learned developing recruiting and selection solutions for a wide variety of organizations and combined it with his love of technology to help clients develop new models for employee selection.

His philosophy focuses on combining sound science with innovation and practicality to create online hiring strategies that provide ROI and demonstrate the value of human capital. Charles has a master’s degree and doctorate in industrial psychology as well as PHR certification from SHRM. Charles is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and SHRM.

### **ABOUT CAREERBUILDER**

CareerBuilder is the global leader in human capital solutions, helping companies target and attract their most valuable asset – their people. Its online career site, CareerBuilder.com is the largest in the U.S. with more than 23 million unique visitors, 1 million jobs and 31 million+ resumes. CareerBuilder works with over 300,000 employers, providing resources for everything from employment branding and data analysis to talent acquisition. More than 9,000 Web sites, including 140 newspapers and broadband portals such as MSN and AOL, feature CareerBuilder’s proprietary job search technology on their career sites. Owned by Gannett Co., Inc. (NYSE:GCI), Tribune Company, The McClatchy Company (NYSE:MNI) and Microsoft Corp. (Nasdaq: MSFT), CareerBuilder and its subsidiaries operate in the U.S., Europe, Canada and Asia. For more information about CareerBuilder solutions, please call: **1-877-FILL-A-JOB.**