

Effective Procurement Interview Questions



A properly staffed and empowered procurement team can have a very positive effect on your company's bottom line, business goals, and overall success.

Such teams don't simply spring into being, however—they need to be built.

Asking the right procurement interview questions can help you identify the ideal candidates to fill every position on your team of procurement professionals.

Just as your company relies on the procurement function to build value and implement cost savings, so, too does your procurement team rely on your company's hiring manager to find the most qualified and skilled applicants.

A little strategy and thoughtful consideration when asking common interview questions (and some not so common) can help ensure every job interview is designed to bring the brightest and best into your organization.

Basic Procurement Interview Questions

Anyone who's ever been either side of a job interview knows the first stage is basic information collection.

It's a chance for both parties to break the ice, and guide the discussion toward more advanced job interview questions in later phases.

▪ **General Questions**

Getting the lay of the land is the first step to evaluating a candidate effectively.

These questions help you identify what a candidate's looking for, their understanding of the job description, and whether they personally will be a good fit for your company's culture.

The answers are not necessarily "deal breakers," but can help set a tone for the interview and aid you in gauging a candidate's overall potential, as well as how well their goals mesh with your company's.

Effective examples include:

- What motivated you to apply for this position?
- What's your ideal corporate culture, and why?
- Are you currently pursuing additional educational opportunities?
- Where do you see yourself in five years? In ten?

These questions touch on a prospect's ambitions and goals, and topics such as loyalty, self-improvement, team building, and innovation.

Priorities and plans vary from individual to individual and from company to company.

And while you may not ask each candidate all 100 of the most common interview questions, they provide a solid foundation and can help distinguish "cookie-cutter" answers from thoughtful and relevant ones.

▪ **Basic Procurement-Specific Questions**

Whether a prospect is applying for the position of buyer/procurement specialist, procurement analyst, or even procurement manager, it's a good

idea to establish their understanding of basic concepts within the procurement function—and their capacities and capabilities within it.

Consider these examples:

How do you define and approach purchasing—and procurement as a whole?

The answer to this question makes it immediately clear how much your prospect knows about purchasing as a function of procurement, and speaks to their existing skill set.

Their response should include their views on, and knowledge of:

- Cost Reduction Strategies
- Risk Management
- Supplier Sourcing and Evaluation and Supply Chain Management
- Dealing with Internal and External Stakeholders

What do you like the most about procurement? What do you like the least?

Different procurement processes appeal in different ways to different people.

If a candidate (for example) has high subject matter expertise but doesn't necessarily care for supervising other people, they might make a poor fit for the position of procurement manager.

Which commodity/category (or commodities/categories) have you sourced in the past? Do you have a preferred category?

How a candidate answers this pair of questions offers additional insight into their specific subject matter expertise, as well as their experience with sourcing for direct and indirect spending.

As with the question about their personal procurement likes and dislikes, the answer to this question can also tell you whether they'll be enthusiastic about, or indifferent to, the specifics of the position.

How do you manage supplier relationships?

If a candidate will be working closely with suppliers, this question can

reveal how empathetic, adaptable, and capable they are in maintaining positive supplier relationships and building “win-win” solutions.

It also provides a reliable foundation for future questions about specific interactions and how a candidate overcame a challenge or generated significant cost savings for their employer.

To provide lasting value for your procurement organization, interviewees for the jobs you offer need to have relevant experience and the ability to handle the day-to-day activities of the position. But they also need to display flexibility, skill, and outside-the-box thinking in order to address new challenges or identify and exploit potential supply chain improvements.

Probing for Procurement Problem Solving

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To identify these aptitudes and attitudes, you might ask more complex, multi-part questions such as:

Please describe your top three career accomplishments.

A candidate’s accomplishments underscore not only their perceived competencies but how much value they place on key parts of the position on offer.

Maybe they restructured the purchase order process and implemented three-way verification to reduce rogue spending.

Perhaps they spearheaded the streamlining of the supply chain for additional cost savings, or establishing a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with a supplier.

Whatever the case, their answer should make it clear how they can put the skills they've used in the past to help strengthen your purchasing organization in the future.

Describe a situation in which you've overcome the objections of a difficult stakeholder.

Depending on their situation, this may very well prove to be one of a candidate's top three accomplishments.

Regardless, job seekers need to show they understand truly effective ways to engage with internal clients as well as external suppliers, and work together to accomplish initiatives and support both procurement and company-wide goals.

How would you implement a cost-saving, value-building initiative across the entire organization?

What technology and tools, such as procurement software, would you use to do so? And how would you engage with stakeholders to achieve total buy-in?

In answering this set of questions, the prospective employee has a chance to demonstrate their problem solving and negotiation skills, as well as their knowledge of existing tools and techniques.

It also speaks to their relationship management and interpersonal skills, and their ability to strategize cogently and capably under pressure.

What is the most difficult lesson you've learned during your time in procurement?

Much like the question about accomplishments, this deceptively simple query can reveal how a candidate will tackle the challenges that crop up on their new job.

Experience brings insight, and with it the potential for paradigm shifts that can benefit your organization with the right hire.

A Question of Leadership

If your company is interviewing applicants for higher-level positions, you may consider adding a set of "procurement manager interview questions," focused on a candidate's leadership style, industry knowledge, strategic and tactical

capabilities, and relationship skills.

Examples questions you might ask include:

Please describe your style of leadership.

Can the candidate not only manage, but inspire, the people under their guidance? Do they lead by example?

Can they readily and confidently explain their approach? The answers to these questions will give you clear insight into how an applicant will lead their team members and your business to greater success.

Have you built a procurement team from scratch?

If a position is brand new, or the job description has changed significantly and a new team must be established, this question is vital.

Their answer will help you assess whether they are sufficiently self-motivated to handle such a task, and the autonomy that comes with it.

Crafting a team also requires strong strategic skills, and a practical and creative vision for how the team will function in pursuit of departmental and company-wide goals.

Are you familiar with and/or certified by the Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS)? What about the American Production and Inventory Control Society (APICS)?

The specific needs of a given position may not only require enhanced industry knowledge, but benefit from the skills gained via specialized certifications.

Applicants who sit for exams from either CIPS or APICS will bring additional skills to a position and expanded knowledge on topics such as:

- Procurement Management
- Planning (Supply Chain)
- Planning (Capacity)
- Planning (Sales and Operations)
- Continuous Improvement

Better Questions, Better Answers, Better Candidates

Job interview questions are a deceptively crucial part of building a winning procurement organization—and a stronger, more successful business.

Asking the right procurement interview questions, and investing in those who can answer them honestly, intelligently, and creatively, is the first step to crafting a team of procurement professionals with the skills, experience, and talent needed to build lasting value for your company.

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