



Interviewing VISTA Applicants

Interviewing VISTA applicants may be a different experience from interviewing potential employees. Many projects find it helpful to use a phone or video call for pre-screening interviews and to interview candidates who would be relocating to serve. When preparing to interview candidates, be sure to cover:

- The expectation that the VISTA candidate will ask questions during the interview and prepare for it by reading any information provided by the supervisor
- Confidentiality of the interview
- Names and roles of interview participants
- Living allowance- don't forget to mention that it is taxed
- Physical location of service
- Housing options
- Explanation of the capacity-building role of VISTAs
- The VISTA member's relationship to his or her sponsorship organization
- Full-time; one-year commitment
- Expectations of the VISTA position
- Copy of VAD

Behavioral interviews are a supervisor's best tool for identifying VISTA candidates who have the behavioral traits and characteristics necessary for success in the VISTA position.

How to Conduct a Successful Behavioral Interview

The purpose of the behavioral interview is to ask the VISTA applicant to pinpoint specific instances in which he or she exhibited a particular behavior in the past. The supervisor will have already decided what skills are needed for the VISTA position and will ask questions to find out if the candidate has those skills. They will provide a scenario and ask candidates to talk about what they have done in similar situations, not what they think they can do. The question is always: "How did you behave?"—not "How will you behave?" As a best practice, the sponsor



should ask the VISTA candidate to identify at least two specific examples of how they addressed the scenario in the past.

Below are additional suggestions for preparing a behavioral interview to use with a VISTA applicant:

- 1) Start by identifying what you want the applicant to do in the position, using the VAD.
- 2) Determine the required outputs and performance success factors for the position.
- 3) Determine the characteristics and traits of the individual you believe will succeed in the position.
- 4) Narrow your list of traits to the top 3 to 5 for the position, including attitudinal traits.
- 5) Make a list of questions to ask each applicant during the behavioral interview. Use or adapt the sample questions provided below.
- 6) For each position, ask applicants the same set of questions so you can make the best decision based on consistent information.

Preparing for a VISTA Behavioral Interview Checklist

- Identify/re-familiarize yourself with the top-5 personal effectiveness competencies from the [VISTA Competency Model](#) the successful VISTA candidate will need to arrive with to perform successfully in the vacant project position.
- Identify the top-5 responsibilities the successful VISTA applicant will have to perform in the vacant project position.
- Identify the project goals and outcomes. Specify the 3-year goals and objectives and the goals and outcomes relevant to the current year the applicant is being recruited for.
- Identify the special skills and knowledge an applicant must possess and/or be willing to acquire to meet the responsibilities, goals, and outcomes of this position.



Share the following with the applicant prior to the interview:

- A copy of the position description and project overview.

- Information about the subsistence allowance. This will allow you to discuss the subject during the interview when the applicant has had time to think about his ability to manage on such a small allowance.

- That the position is full time, and that the expectation may be more than the typical 40 hours per week.

- A definition of the capacity-building role the applicant is applying for and what that means, including how the role coordinates with the sponsoring organization's responsibility for project sustainability.

- Your expectations for the time and length of the interview. If the interview is in person, where, when, and with whom will the interview will be held? If by phone, when and with whom will the interview be held and how much time needs to be reserved by the applicant? Also indicate if anyone else will participate in the interview.

- Your expectations for the applicant to ask questions during the interview based on his review of the VAD and the project goals, which should be read prior to the interview. He should be prepared to talk about the education, experiences, and strengths he has that will support his success should he be offered the position.

Set a time and date to convey the above information and identify someone to carry out this task (if not yourself).



Before a supervisor conducts the behavioral interview, they should choose the applicants with the characteristics and traits that best match the needs of the position. Be sure to narrow the final pool of applicants to those who most appear to have the behavioral characteristics, along with the attitude, skills, knowledge, experiences, and education you desire. The following pages provide sample behavioral interview assessment questions, as well as a list of illegal questions.

Sample Questions: Behavioral Interview

Give an example of a situation in which you had to manage multiple tasks and describe how you handled the pressure of the timelines.

Give an example of a very difficult goal you successfully achieved. What problems did you have to overcome and what strengths did you utilize to achieve your goal?

Have you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker? Describe the situation and how you handled it.

Tell me how you work under pressure and give me an example from your most recent employment or volunteer experience.

Have you gone above and beyond the call of duty? If so, how?

Have you ever had to convince a team to work on a project its members weren't thrilled about? How did you do it?

Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it.



What do you do when your schedule is interrupted? Give an example of how you manage your time in an unstructured environment.

Give me a couple of examples from your work history that demonstrate you are a self-starter and can take initiative.

Give me an example of how you used your problem-solving skills at your last place of employment.

Tell me about a time you failed or made mistakes at work. How did you deal with the situation and what kind of feedback did you receive from your supervisor?

Tell me what expectations you have for this VISTA position. How do they relate to your personal and professional goals?

What unique contribution do you believe you can make to this position and project that no one else can make? Why?

What in your background will help you live on a limited budget?

How would you characterize your relationship with your two most recent supervisors?

What do you expect from the person you report to? What can they expect from you?



What situation(s) cause you to feel anxious or nervous at work? How do you manage these situations? What helps you to become more comfortable and relaxed?

Are you a better decision-maker or problem-solver?

Thinking of your most recent employment, give me one example that illustrates your strengths and one example that illustrates your limitations.

Pretend I don't know anything about AmeriCorps VISTA. Describe and explain to me and what it would mean to your career and your future if you became a VISTA member.

Illegal Interview Questions

Various federal, state, and local laws regulate the questions a prospective employer can ask a job applicant. Questions for VISTA applicants—on the job application, in the interview (whether in-person, by phone, or internet), or during any testing process—must be related to the position for which they are applying. The focus must be on:

What do I need to know to decide whether or not this person can perform the essential functions of this position?

Questions should be behavioral and position-related and not used to find out personal information. Supervisors should not be asking questions about a VISTA applicant's:

- race
- gender
- religion
- marital status
- age
- disabilities
- ethnic background
- nationality



- sexual orientation
- arrest record (*however, we do need to have applicants disclose legal history- see below for how to address this question*)

Examples of Illegal and Legal Questions

Topic: Age

Illegal Questions: How old are you? When did you graduate from college? What is your birthday?

Legal Question: Are you over the age of 18?

Topic: Nationality

Illegal Questions: Are you a U.S. citizen? Where were you/your parents born? What is your “native tongue?”

Legal Questions: Are you authorized to work in the United States? What languages do you read, speak, or write fluently? (This question is okay as long as it is relevant to the performance of the position.)

Topic: Marital/family status

Illegal Questions: What is your marital status? Who do you live with? Do you plan to have a family? When? How many children do you have? What are your child care arrangements?

Legal Questions: Would you be willing to relocate if necessary? Travel is an important part of the position. Would you be willing to travel as needed to carry out the job’s responsibilities? (This question is okay as long as all applicants for the position are asked it.) The VISTA position is full time. Would you be willing and able to work longer than 8 hours a day, or weekends, if necessary? (Again, this question is okay if all applicants are asked it.)

Topic: Arrest record

Illegal Question: Have you ever been arrested?

Legal Question: Have you ever been convicted of _____? (The need to know criminal history should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question. Applicants are asked if they've ever been convicted on the My AmeriCorps application; intermediary or sub-site staff can ask about those disclosures.)



Topic: Disabilities

Illegal Questions: Do you have any disabilities? Please complete the following medical history. Have you had any recent or past illnesses or surgeries? If yes, list and give dates. What was the date of your last physical exam? How is your family's health? When did you lose your eyesight?

Legal Question: Are you able to perform the essential functions of this position with or without reasonable accommodations? (To ask this question the interviewer must have provided a job description and/or thoroughly described the job position. This is also a yes/no question – it is not permissible to discuss the type of accommodations an individual with disabilities will need prior to making them an offer to serve.)

In general, the interviewee is under no obligation to answer any question that is not assignment-related. If applicants choose not to answer an unrelated assignment question, this cannot be held against them, nor can the sponsoring agency choose not to select an applicant because they have answered the question in an undesirable way. In either case, not selecting the applicant for not answering the question or because you were not satisfied with the answer is considered discriminatory.