

Conducting Job Interviews

A Guide for Federal Judges

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Federal Judicial Center
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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgments | v |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Interviewing Guidelines | 5 |
| Sample Interview Questions for Unit Executive Applicants | 9 |
| Sample Interview Plans for Unit Executive Applicants | 19 |
| Sample Interview Questions for Law Clerk Applicants | 25 |

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Introduction

The Federal Judicial Center developed this guide to help federal judges interview applicants for two key positions: court unit executive (clerk of court and chief probation/pretrial services officer) and law clerk (both permanent and one-year). An advisory group of court unit executives provided input on the essential qualifications for each unit executive job and suggested questions that could be used to assess those qualifications. For assistance identifying law clerk qualifications, the Center consulted an advisory group of career law clerks who had experience helping judges conduct interviews for that position.

Do judges really need advice on conducting interviews? It is true that most will already have considerable experience interviewing law clerk candidates and will have developed particular approaches to the selection process. This guide can help them refine current methods. As for court unit executive positions, most courts are obliged to fill them relatively infrequently; it is likely therefore that many judges overseeing unit executive selection will not have had an opportunity to develop tried-and-true approaches to interviewing. This guide spells out a process for interviewing prospective unit executives that is simple, effective, and fair.

Effective interviewing not only aids in the identification of the best candidate for a job, it also indicates to candidates that the interviewer understands the position and the demands it will impose on the person selected. Asking the right questions is the key to effective interviewing. This guide provides examples of interview questions for both unit executive and law clerk positions. These questions can be used as is or adapted, or they can be viewed as models for developing other questions tailored to the needs of the court or judge. Additional suggestions about the hiring process for unit executives are also provided.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

A three-step process can help interviewers analyze a job and get evidence of experience needed to fill it. Step one is to identify the *knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)* needed to perform effectively in the position. Step two is to develop questions about how applicants have demonstrated those essential KSAs. Step three is to ask for specific information about past performance—a better predictor of future behavior than candidates' generalized assertions about their approach to work.

The strength of this three-step approach is that it focuses on experience

that is relevant to key job skills rather than on generalities. The interview questions in this guide require applicants to give specific examples of past behavior. Candidates may need some time to recall suitable examples before they respond. To streamline interviews, you may wish to provide candidates with the list of questions they will be asked half an hour or so beforehand. Experienced interviewers make clear that they are looking for specific examples and wait for the applicant to respond, rather than move quickly to the next question if the person seems to be having difficulty.

It is good hiring practice to ask all candidates the same basic questions, so that opportunities to discuss experience are more or less equal. You may, however, wish to tailor follow-up questions individually to explore candidates' answers to the basic questions. Frequently, candidates are seen by more than one person, either in separate interviews or in a group setting (panel interview). It is helpful to brief all interviewers in advance about what questions to ask.

Fairness in Interviewing

The Judicial Conference has adopted a Model Employment Dispute Resolution Plan and directed each court to create a plan based on the model. The model plan (and thus every court plan) prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age for people 40 or older (except for probation or pretrial services officers). These provisions apply to all judicial branch employing units, including chambers staff. Individual court plans may expand the categories protected.

Like all hiring officials, judges need to take care to avoid interview questions that create even an appearance of bias. The best way to do this is to make sure that questions address only the KSAs required for the position. Here are some examples:

- Rather than ask about a candidate's marital or family status, ask whether the candidate has any obligations that would prevent him or her from meeting the position's work schedule.
- Ask whether the candidate can work on Saturdays or Sundays, if such work is an expected part of the job, not whether the candidate's religion precludes it.
- Be wary of selective questions. Ask all candidates, not just female candidates with children, whether occasional travel would be a problem.
- Don't ask whether a candidate has a disability. Instead, after explaining the duties of the job, ask whether the candidate can perform them with or without reasonable accommodation.

Also, take care not to misrepresent job security in the courts, where personnel serve at will and (except for probation officers) can be removed without the courts showing cause. Avoid statements like “No one gets fired here without good reason” and “You don’t have to worry about your job as long as you perform well.”

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Interviewing Guidelines

Although general approaches to interviewing vary, there are basic procedures that all courts should follow in setting up and conducting job interviews. These procedures are listed below. Judges, of course, will delegate many of the administrative tasks to human resources staff and others. The *Human Resource Manual*, published by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, provides relevant information on the judicial branch's court personnel system, position classification, and other personnel matters.

Before the Interviews

- Identify the KSAs that are crucial for the job and that should thus be covered in the interview. If interviews of an hour to an hour and a half are planned, it should be possible to ask in-depth questions in about eight to ten different areas.
- Prepare a job announcement that accurately describes the KSAs considered crucial for the job. (Usually, assistance in writing and placing job announcements is provided by the court's personnel office or elsewhere within the clerk's office if there is no personnel office in the court.)
- Arrange for primary screening of applications. Whoever is reviewing applications needs to know what the essential criteria for selection are in order to eliminate applicants who fall short. It is a good idea to document the selection criteria being used, especially if there are multiple decision makers.
- Arrange for secondary screening of applications. Once applicants who do not meet basic criteria have been eliminated, review the remaining pool and select the top candidates to go on to the interview stage.
- Decide who will be involved in conducting the interviews and whether interviewers will each meet with candidates or will interview as a panel.
- Develop questions for each of the previously identified KSAs. (Questions may be drawn or adapted from the ones listed in this guide, or new ones can be developed using these as a model.)
- Decide on a time frame for the interviews. For instance, you may decide to limit each interview to one hour.
- Set up the interviews. Provide candidates with information about who

will be conducting the interview and what type of questions will be asked. Without distributing the actual interview questions, let candidates know they will be asked questions about specific instances of past experience. In addition, it is a good idea to send candidates any brochures or other printed information you have describing work benefits and the court/chambers generally and explaining how to get to the interview.

- Review the interview plan with all interviewers. Decide who will ask what questions. Review things to avoid, such as asking inappropriate questions and making promises of employment during the interview.

During the Interviews

- Greet candidates and set them at their ease. Explain the type of interview that you will be conducting. Tell candidates whom they will be meeting and how long the interview will last.
- You may wish to provide candidates with a list of the questions they will be asked about half an hour before the actual interview begins, so that they will have time to recall relevant experiences. This streamlines the interview.
- You may wish to open the interview with one or more questions designed to explore candidates' general background before moving on to questions about specific past experience.
- To reduce any potential doubts about the fairness of the interview process, ask all candidates the same basic questions about their past experience. Follow-up questions to explore answers given may vary from candidate to candidate.
- Take notes on candidates' responses to help you evaluate all candidates at the conclusion of the interview cycle.
- Towards the end of the interview, ask applicants if they have any questions they would like to ask you. For example, candidates for unit executive might ask the following:
 - *What performance expectations do you have for the unit executive?*
 - *What would you like to see accomplished in the first year?*
 - *Will spending authority be delegated to me?*
 - *How much latitude will I have to organize and manage human and financial resources?*

Candidates for law clerk might ask questions like these:

- *What is the work environment like? What is your leave policy? Will I typically be expected to work long days or to come in on weekends?*
- *What is the judge's involvement in cases? Does the judge read all parties' submissions or let the law clerk do that? Does the judge do the first review of material? Does the judge give the law clerk an outline to guide his or her writing or let the law clerk do a first draft and react to it?*
- *What's the proportion of civil versus criminal cases? What types of cases does this court typically hear? Do law clerks work on all types of cases that come into chambers?*
- *What is a typical day like in the position?*
- *What is the work configuration in the office? Who does what? How do people interact? Is work more collaborative or more independent?*
- *What is the pay for the position? How is it affected by bar membership?*

Applicants for either position may appreciate some information at this time about the city or area where they would be working if they accepted the position.

- Do not make an offer of employment during the interview. All scheduled interviews should be completed before a decision is reached.
- Tell candidates what the next steps are and how long the process will take. In particular, tell them when they can expect to be notified of a decision.

After the Interviews

- Call references for candidates still in the running.
- Before making an offer of employment, ensure that all interviews are concluded, that all candidates have been evaluated, and that reference checks are complete. A security check, if one is required for the position, should also be concluded before a final employment offer is made.
- Make a verbal offer of employment to the first-choice candidate. If the verbal offer is accepted, follow up with a written offer stating the conditions of employment. (It is a good idea to engage the court's personnel specialist, or person in charge of personnel issues, in the sending of written correspondence regarding hiring.) If the first-choice candidate does not accept the verbal offer, proceed to the second-choice candidate.
- After the position has been filled, notify applicants who have been interviewed but not selected.

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Sample Interview Questions for Unit Executive Applicants

Begin an interview with one or two “foundation questions” about the applicant’s general background to help break the ice. Foundation questions can also reveal what the applicant finds important. Sample foundation questions appear below. You may want to develop others based on applicants’ resumes and cover letters.

Next, ask several questions about operational KSAs to establish the candidate’s basic qualifications. This is the heart of the interview. Ask for specific examples of past behavior demonstrating the KSAs that you have determined will be most important for your court unit in the next few years. Excluding the foundation questions, the sample questions listed on the following pages are based on the Federal Judicial Center’s Court Management Framework; at least one question is listed for each KSA in the framework. Additional questions can be developed to reflect the special needs of your court unit.

Lastly, ask six to ten questions from the other categories on the following pages, focusing on areas of special importance to the court unit.

Foundation Questions

- What is it about this position that interests you?
- We have reviewed your resume and application. Please tell us what areas in your experience you think would qualify you for this position.
- Describe your style of supervising staff and subordinates. Tell me of an incident where that style worked well. Describe a time when you were disappointed in the results of your supervision. What did you do?
- Picture the best manager or supervisor you ever had. What about that person made him or her effective? Now picture the worst manager or supervisor you ever had. What about that person made him or her ineffective?
- What major changes or decisions have you made in terms of your career? Why did you make them?
- Why are you leaving your current position?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT KSAs

Operational KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Managing Resources | Fostering strategic use of resources; making resource decisions that enhance the organization's efficiency and effectiveness. | Give an example from the last year of how you managed resources in a way that enhanced your organization's efficiency and effectiveness. |
| Managing Human Resources | Ensuring effective recruitment, selection, training, performance appraisal, recognition, and corrective/disciplinary action; promoting employee well-being. | What is the most difficult challenge you have faced in managing human resources? What specifically did you do to handle it? |
| Managing Budget and Finances | Forecasting budget trends; preparing and justifying the budget; monitoring obligations; making decisions that enhance the organization's financial position. | Describe any decisions you have made about budget and finances that have had an especially significant positive effect on your organization's financial position. Describe a decision you made about budget and finance that in retrospect you think was a mistake. How did you reach the decision? What did you learn from it? How would you prevent such a mistake in the future? |
| Managing Automated Systems | Applying new technologies to organizational needs; encouraging staff to keep abreast of new technology; ensuring that staff are properly trained and proficient in using court-adopted automated programs. | What steps have you taken to ensure that staff in your organization have access to up-to-date automated systems and other technological support? How did you determine what would best meet their needs? How did you ensure that staff were properly trained in using technology? What telecommunication projects have you been involved in? What factors did you consider? How did you research aspects of the project, such as technologies, that you were not familiar with? |
| Managing Procurement and Contracting | Making purchasing and contracting decisions that maximize the use of funds. | Describe the largest or most difficult contracting or procurement negotiation for which you were responsible. What were the complicating factors? How did you deal with them? |
| Managing Space and Facilities | Assessing the need for space and facilities and allocating resources; planning, contracting, and implementing construction and renovation projects; managing a move from one facility to another. | Have you ever managed a large construction or renovation project? What approach did you use? What specific steps did you take? What challenges did you encounter, and how did handle them? |

Operational KSAs, continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Knowing Court Operations | Maintaining technical competence in relevant areas of court operations; accessing and using other expert resources when appropriate; understanding the court's culture and dynamics. | What actions have you taken in the last year to maintain your technical competence in the operations of your court or organization? What have you done to keep in touch with the culture and dynamics of your organization? |

Leadership KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Motivating Others | Encouraging and enabling others to achieve; fostering enthusiasm, a feeling of investment, and a desire to achieve. | <p>Have you ever had to implement a policy that you knew would be unpopular? What was the situation? What did you do to counteract a negative response?</p> <p>Tell us about a time when you wanted a person or group of people working for you to perform a difficult task or achieve a challenging goal. What did you do? What was the reaction? What was the result?</p> |
| Fostering Teamwork | Forming appropriate structures and teams to meet organizational goals; fostering a work climate in which collaboration and teamwork can flourish; managing team differences; rewarding group and team efforts that advance the court's mission. | <p>Have you ever been responsible for establishing a team or teams to work together on an issue or problem? How did you proceed? What challenges did you encounter? How did you address them? How successful was the team?</p> <p>Describe a situation in which a group or team under your direction was successful in advancing the mission of your organization. How did you recognize and reinforce their success?</p> <p>Tell us about a time when members of a team or group under your direction (or of which you were a part) were not working well together. What was the problem? How did you diagnose the cause of the problem? What did you do to get the team or group back on track?</p> |
| Influencing and Negotiating | Persuading; expressing ideas in ways that lead others, including judges, to share a common perspective and reach agreement; appropriately using negotiation, persuasion, and authority in dealing with others to achieve goals. | Describe a time when it was important for you to get a group of people with different perspectives to agree on a common course of action. What did you do? Describe any attempts of yours to persuade others or to negotiate a common position. |

Leadership KSAs , continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Influencing and Negotiating <i>(cont'd)</i></p> | | <p>Tell us about a time when you took the lead in establishing consensus about a common course of action in a group or organization. What did you do? How effective was your approach? Was there anything you would do differently today?</p> |
| <p>Appraising Performance</p> | <p>Clarifying work tasks and responsibilities; accurately assessing employees' strengths and areas for improvement; giving timely, specific performance feedback.</p> | <p>Tell us about a time during the last year when you gave someone specific feedback about his or her performance. How did you assess the performance? How did you provide the feedback? How often do you give individuals feedback on their performance?</p> <p>Describe a time when you had to give negative feedback about someone's performance. How did you assess the situation? How did you deliver the feedback? Did the behavior change as a result? If not, how did you handle the situation?</p> <p>Have you ever had to initiate an adverse action? Describe the situation and what you did.</p> |
| <p>Coaching and Developing Others</p> | <p>Coaching employees to enhance performance and expand skills; providing challenging assignments and opportunities for development; ensuring that staff receive adequate training.</p> | <p>What specific measures did you take in the past year to ensure that staff you work with received adequate training, whether in the form of formal training, informal coaching, on-the-job training, or other opportunities? How did you determine what was needed? How did you attempt to provide it?</p> <p>Tell us how, in the last six months, you provided employees with opportunities for development through challenging assignments, training, and so on. How did you decide what would be most beneficial? How did you introduce the development opportunity? What did you do to help the individuals rise to the challenge?</p> <p>Describe a time when you were instrumental in helping employees or associates expand their skills. What steps did you take? How successful was your effort? Did you encounter any challenges along the way? What were they? How did you handle them?</p> |

Interpersonal KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|------------------------|---|--|
| Communicating | Ensuring a consistent, timely flow of high-quality information within the court and to court constituencies; conveying information clearly in writing and in oral presentations; encouraging open expression of ideas and opinions. | <p>Describe specific examples of actions you have taken in the past six months to ensure the flow of accurate, timely information to everyone who needs it. What specific kinds of information do you make generally available to everyone, and what information is limited to certain groups or kept confidential?</p> <p>Tell us about a time when it was important to encourage the open expression of ideas and opinions. How did you do this? How did you make it “safe” to present controversial or unpopular opinions?</p> |
| Building Relationships | Creating supportive relationships around work; considering and responding appropriately to the needs, feelings, capabilities, and interests of others; providing feedback; treating others equitably. | <p>Describe a time when you needed to build a good working relationship with another person or group of people. What was the situation? What did you do? What challenges or difficulties did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?</p> <p>We have all run into situations where someone felt that he or she was not being treated fairly. Describe a situation in which you had to deal with a perception of unfair treatment. How did you become aware of the situation? What did you do about it? How did you ensure that the concerns of all parties were addressed?</p> <p>What was the most difficult situation in which you had to give someone negative feedback about his or her performance? When did you give the feedback? How did you give it? Was it a one-time occurrence or part of a pattern of feedback?</p> |
| Valuing Diversity | Recognizing the mix of similarities and differences among staff and court users; building respect for differences; drawing on the unique skills and background of each employee to build effective teams and enhance productivity. | <p>Tell us about a time when you were able to tap into diverse backgrounds and skills to the advantage of the organization or group.</p> <p>Today’s workplace is characterized by highly diverse backgrounds and skills among staff and court users. Tell us about a time when you encountered a challenge related to diversity. What did you do? What difficulties did you run into? How did you handle them? How did the situation turn out in the end?</p> |

Interpersonal KSAs, continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Managing Stress | Developing strategies that help staff maintain productivity and efficiency during stressful situations; creating a desirable and supportive work environment; providing a balanced perspective on work. | <p>Describe any specific initiatives, policies, or actions that you have implemented in your current position to create a desirable and supportive work environment for staff. Describe any actions you have taken in the last month in this area.</p> <p>What initiatives, policies, or actions have you implemented in your current workplace to help staff balance the competing demands of work and personal life?</p> <p>Staff may encounter stressful situations in the workplace or may have stressful situations in their private lives that cause problems at work. Describe specific actions you have taken to help staff maintain productivity and efficiency during stressful situations.</p> |
| Managing Conflict | Anticipating and seeking to resolve conflicts, disagreements, and confrontations in a constructive manner; mediating conflicts; building consensus. | <p>Describe a time when you worked to build consensus among different parties. How did you become aware of the need for action? What did you do?</p> <p>Unit executives often have to help resolve conflicts and disagreements among various parties. When was the last time you had a conflict or disagreement with someone at work? What was the issue? What did you do? How successful was your approach? What was the exchange like at its most heated point? How was the disagreement resolved?</p> |

Personal KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|------------------|--|--|
| Knowing Yourself | Learning from experiences; seeking feedback and modifying behavior based on feedback; actively pursuing learning and self-development. | <p>How would you describe your personal management style? Describe a time that this style worked for you. Describe a time it didn't work for you.</p> <p>What have you done in the last year to develop yourself as a manager? What aspects of this position do you think would pose the greatest challenges for you, and how would you prepare yourself to meet those challenges?</p> |

Personal KSAs, continued

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Knowing Yourself <i>(cont'd)</i></p> | | <p>Tell us about a time when you sought feedback on your own performance. What caused you to seek the feedback? How did you decide whom to ask? How were you able to put the feedback to use? What did you learn about yourself as a result? Do you routinely seek feedback on your own performance? How?</p> |
| <p>Acting with Integrity</p> | <p>Demonstrating principled leadership and sound ethics; building trust with others through openness; following through on commitments.</p> | <p>Some of the most difficult issues managers face have to do with integrity. Describe specific things you have done in your current position to establish and reinforce an organizational culture based on personal integrity.</p> <p>One of the foundations of good management is fostering the trust of colleagues and staff. Describe specific things you have done to build trust.</p> <p>Describe a difficult ethical dilemma that you have encountered in the workplace. How did you become aware of it? What did you do and why?</p> |
| <p>Making Decisions</p> | <p>Making timely and sound decisions; taking action and risks when needed; making decisions under conditions of uncertainty.</p> | <p>What was the most difficult decision that you have had to make in your current position? Why was it difficult? How did you go about making your decision?</p> |
| <p>Balancing Priorities</p> | <p>Setting priorities; focusing on the important, not only the urgent; delegating effectively; allocating time for renewal and development.</p> | <p>What have been your top priorities for your work and yourself during the past year? Tell us about a specific time when you had a conflict between priorities that were very important to you. What did you do?</p> <p>Often it seems that managers get caught up in dealing with one crisis after another, with little time left over to do the important, long-term work that could have helped prevent crisis in the first place or made it easier to deal with. In your current position, how have you made room for tasks that are important but not urgent?</p> |
| <p>Staying Flexible</p> | <p>Being willing and able to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, and rapid change; challenging the status quo and encouraging initiatives to improve court operations.</p> | <p>Describe a recent situation in which you had to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, or rapid change. How did you deal with the situation?</p> |

Personal KSAs, continued

Staying Flexible
(*cont'd*)

Tell us about a time when you saw a need or opportunity for change in the way things were done that others did not see. How did you come to notice this opportunity? What did you do about it? Were you able to convince others of the need for it?

Decision-Making KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Thinking Strategically | Considering a broad range of internal and external factors when solving problems and making decisions; appropriately adjusting actions to address strategic issues. | <p>Describe a time when you used strategic thinking to cope with a complex situation. What was the situation? What did you do? How did you figure out what to do? Did things go according to plan, or did you need to adjust the plan to account for unanticipated change? If so, how did you manage?</p> <p>Describe a situation in which you needed to consider a broad range of factors in solving problems and making decisions.</p> |
| Gathering External Data | Keeping current on what is going on in other courts, government agencies, and businesses; keeping abreast of laws, policies, trends, and issues that have an impact on the court; using information in decision making. | <p>In the last six months, what have you done to keep up with developments in other organizations in your field? How have you been able to use what you have learned?</p> |
| Planning | Developing short-range and long-range plans that are comprehensive, realistic, and effective in meeting goals; establishing policies, guidelines, and priorities; identifying required resources; coordinating planning efforts with others. | <p>What was the most complex project that you were responsible for planning and executing? Describe how you developed realistic plans, established priorities, identified resources, and coordinated efforts with others.</p> |
| Analyzing Information | Using quantitative information effectively to improve the court's efficiency, including assessing customer needs; defining standards for quality; and evaluating outcomes. | <p>What data have you sought out in assessing the needs of your customers? How did you collect the data? How did you analyze it? What statistical methods have you used recently for collecting and analyzing data?</p> <p>Tell us about a time when a problem was presented to you that required further investigation for you to solve it. How did you evaluate the problem and decide on a course of action?</p> |

Decision-Making KSAs, continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Thinking Creatively | Generating insights, new ideas, and solutions; fostering innovation; bringing perspectives and approaches together and combining them in imaginative ways. | Describe a time when you were able to apply unusual insights or new ideas to create an innovative approach to work or solution to a problem. |

System KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Creating a Vision | Creating a compelling picture of the organization's values, purpose, and direction; involving staff in developing the vision; facilitating needed organizational improvement. | One of the jobs of a leader is to help an organization articulate its values, purpose, and direction. Describe for us how you have helped your organization define a vision of where it is and where it is going. |
| Committing to Quality | Emphasizing the need to deliver high-quality products and services; setting quality standards and continuously evaluating court products, processes, and services against those standards; taking action to make improvements as required. | What specific steps have you taken in your current position to help your organization guarantee a high level of quality in the products and services it provides? What have you done to convince others to commit to quality? |
| Managing Change | Acting as a catalyst to pave the way for needed change; encouraging employee suggestions; assisting staff in accepting and implementing new policies and processes; managing court changes effectively. | What is the most difficult organizational change that you have implemented? Why was it especially challenging? How did you introduce and implement the change? What did you do to help others make the transition? |
| Focusing on Customers | Staying in tune with customers' expectations about quality and service; taking actions to meet customer needs and increase customer satisfaction. | What specifically have you done in the last year to help your organization assess and meet its customers' needs and increase customer satisfaction? |
| Championing System and Profession | Actively seeking opportunities to educate court constituencies and others about the court's mission and work; promoting awareness of the impact of employees' performance on the court and the community. | Part of the job of a court unit executive is to educate court constituencies and others about the court's mission and work. In your current position, what opportunities have you had to act as a spokesperson for your organization or profession? |

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Sample Interview Plans for Unit Executive Applicants

An interview plan should ideally include a mix of foundation questions, questions about operational KSAs, and questions about other KSAs that are particularly important for the court unit. Questions should be selected or developed according to the situation the court unit is in and the direction in which it is moving. Following are some examples of what might be included in interview plans for different situations. Naturally, each court would want to tailor its plan to capture the most important needs and preferences of the court. These sample interview plans are intended merely to show how to develop a core set of questions tailored to court needs.

It is important that interviewers adhere to the interview plan so that each candidate is given the same opportunity to address the KSAs that are central to success in the position. Follow-up questions may be asked to explore the implications of candidates' answers.

Sample Interview Plan A

Situation

Court unit A is in a large metropolitan district with a highly diverse population, a high turnover rate for staff, and a high volume of work. Priorities include helping staff to be effective while coping with the stress and conflict of a demanding work environment, improving the quality of basic operations, and putting a stronger emphasis on training to help staff develop their skills.

Questions

Open the interview with one or more foundation questions, then proceed to questions about operational and other KSAs that are particularly important for the court unit. Here is a sample list that could be used for the situation described:

- What was the most difficult challenge you have faced in managing human resources? What specifically did you do to handle it?
- Tell us how, in the last six months, you provided employees with opportunities for development through challenging assignments, training, and so on. How did you decide what would be most beneficial? How did you introduce the opportunity for development? What did you do to help the individuals rise to the challenge?

- Today's workplace is characterized by highly diverse backgrounds and skills among staff and court users. Tell us about a time when you encountered a challenge related to diversity. What did you do? What difficulties did you run into? How did you handle them? How did the situation turn out in the end?
- Staff sometimes encounter stressful situations in the workplace. Sometimes stressful situations in their private lives cause problems at work. Describe specific actions you have taken to help staff maintain productivity and efficiency during stressful times.
- Describe a recent situation in which you had to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, or rapid change. How did you deal with the situation?
- Often it seems that managers get caught up in dealing with one crisis after another, with little time left to do the important, long-term work that could have helped prevent crisis in the first place or made it easier to deal with. In your current position, how have you made room for tasks that are important but not urgent?
- In the last six months, what have you done to keep up with developments in other organizations in your field? How have you been able to use what you have learned?

Sample Interview Plan B

Situation

Court unit B is in a small rural district with a highly stable work force. The priorities of the court are modernization, including introduction of new automated systems, and improvement of outmoded work processes. The court also values and wishes to preserve a positive work environment for staff.

Questions

Open the interview with one or more foundation questions, then proceed to questions about operational and other KSAs that are particularly important for the court unit. Here is a sample list that could be used for the situation described:

- What steps have you taken to ensure that staff in your organization have access to up-to-date automated systems and other technology? How did you determine what would best meet their needs? How did you ensure that staff were properly trained in using technology?
- Describe any specific initiatives, policies, or actions that you have implemented in your current position to create a desirable and supportive work

environment for staff. Describe any actions you have taken in the last month in this area.

- Tell us about a time when you saw a need or opportunity for change in the way things were done that others did not see. How did you come to notice this opportunity? What did you do about it? Were you able to convince others of the need for the change?
- One of the foundations of good management is fostering the trust of colleagues and staff. Describe specific things you have done to build trust.
- Tell us about a time when it was important to encourage the open expression of ideas and opinions. How did you do this? How did you make it “safe” to present controversial or unpopular opinions?

Sample Interview Plan C

Situation

In the next few years, court unit C will be involved in the construction of a new courthouse. In addition to managing this project, the court unit executive will be in charge of investigating whether a reorganization of the current hierarchy is warranted. There have been persistent conflicts between factions within the court unit in the past few years.

Questions

Open the interview with one or more foundation questions, then proceed to questions about operational and other KSAs that are particularly important for the court unit. Here is a sample list that could be used for the situation described:

- What was the most complex project that you were responsible for planning and executing? Describe how you developed realistic plans, established priorities, identified resources, and coordinated efforts with others.
- Have you ever managed a large construction or renovation project? What approach did you use? What specific steps did you take? What challenges did you encounter, and how did you handle them?
- Describe a time when it was important for you to get a group of people with different perspectives to agree on a common course of action and pull together. What did you do? Describe any attempts on your part to persuade others or to negotiate a common position.
- Unit executives often have to help resolve conflicts and disagreements among various parties. When was the last time you had a conflict or dis-

agreement with someone at work? What was the issue? What did you do? How successful was your approach? What was the exchange like at its most heated point? How was the disagreement resolved?

- Describe a recent situation in which you had to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, or rapid change. How did you deal with the situation?
- What was the most difficult decision that you have had to make in your current position? Why was it difficult? How did you go about making your decision?

Sample Interview Plan D

Situation

Under the current unit executive, court unit D has successfully implemented a program to improve customer service. A great deal of work has been done to assess customer needs, set improvement goals, and improve work processes. The organization has also flattened out as teams have taken over some of the duties formerly done by supervisors. The court wishes to ensure that these successful efforts continue in the future and is looking for a progressive leader with forward-looking managerial ideas.

Questions

Open the interview with one or more foundation questions, then proceed to questions about operational and other KSAs that are particularly important for the court unit. Here is a sample list that could be used for the situation described.

- One of the jobs of a leader is to help an organization articulate its values, purpose, and direction. Describe for us how you have helped your organization define a vision of where it is and where it is going.
- What specific steps have you taken in your current position to help your organization guarantee a high level of quality in the products and services it provides? What have you done to convince others to commit to quality?
- What data have you sought in assessing the needs of your customers? How did you collect the data? How did you analyze it? What statistical methods have you used recently for collecting and analyzing data?
- What actions have you taken in the last year to maintain your technical competence in the operations of your court or organization? What have you done to keep in touch with the culture and dynamics of your organization?

- Tell us about a time when you wanted a person or group of people working for you to perform a difficult task or to achieve a challenging goal. What did you do? What was the reaction? What was the result?
- Tell us about a time when members of a team or group under your direction (or of which you were a part) were not working well together. What was the problem? How did you diagnose the cause of the problem? What did you do to get the team or group back on track?
- What have you done in the last year to develop yourself as a manager? What aspects of this position do you think would pose the greatest challenges for you, and how would you prepare yourself to meet those challenges?
- How would you describe your personal management style? Describe a time that this style worked for you. Describe a time it didn't work for you.
- In the last six months, what have you done to keep up with developments in other organizations in your field? How have you been able to use what you have learned?
- Describe a time when you were able to apply unusual insights or new ideas to create an innovative approach to work or solution to a problem.

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Sample Interview Questions for Law Clerk Applicants

The best interview questions ask for specific examples of past behavior showing how the applicant has used KSAs critical for the job. Which KSAs a judge considers critical for a law clerk will depend on how the work is organized and conducted in his or her chambers. The questions on the following pages are based on a list of critical skills developed by a work group of career law clerks. Since use of law clerks varies from judge to judge, some of the questions may not be suitable for a particular position. Also, since law clerk interviews reflect the working style of the judge more than that of the court unit, interview plans have not been included, as they were in the section on unit executives. Judges may nevertheless find the following interview guidelines useful:

1. Open the interview with a question or two designed to explore the candidate's general experience. For instance, ask about the applicant's work history beyond college and law school, or what the applicant has enjoyed about previous work. This should help you gauge the person's maturity, range of experience, and ability to "fit" into your work environment. Note: Focusing on relevant experience rather than personal circumstances (family or marital status, disability, etc.) will help you avoid questions that might be considered biased or improper.
2. Ask several questions about legal research KSAs to confirm basic qualifications (see pages 26–27).
3. Ask five to eight questions about communication and personal KSAs (see pages 27–29). Focus on the skills most crucial to job success.
4. Leave some time at the end of the interview to explain special job requirements, such as limits on political activity, and to allow the candidate to ask questions.

Some law clerk applicants will have extensive work experience. Others may be beginning their careers. The questions on the following pages for the most part are general enough for all applicants to answer. Encourage candidates with limited work experience to describe relevant experience conducting research, working on projects, participating in law review or moot court, performing summer jobs or internships, or doing volunteer work.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT KSAs

Legal Research KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|---|--|--|
| Using a Variety of Sources of Information | Knowing when and how to access various types of information, including treatises, digests, and case law; using online resources such as Lexis, Westlaw, and the Internet. | Describe a recent project or paper for which you had to conduct wide-ranging research. What resources did you use? How did you get organized? How did you know where to look to find what you needed? Did you finish on time? |
| Sifting Information | Searching through a voluminous quantity of records for relevant information; locating, reading, sorting, and organizing a large quantity of written information; keeping meticulous notes in order to be able to state the facts. | Describe the project or paper for which you had to sift through the greatest quantity of records and information. How did you organize the work? How did you find what was relevant? How did you keep track of the relevant facts and details? What strategies did you use to keep organized and productive? Did you finish on time? |
| Conducting Research Independently | Taking the initiative to research unfamiliar areas of the law; researching unfamiliar areas well enough to deal effectively with attorneys specialized in them. | Tell us about a time when you had to research an area of the law that was unfamiliar to you. What specifically did you do to get up to speed? What degree of expertise was required, and how did you achieve it? How long did it take? How satisfied were you with the results? Did you have any dealings afterwards with someone who was an expert in this area? What challenges did this present, and how did you deal with them? |
| Thinking Analytically | Applying the law to the facts of a case in reasoning that is logical and defensible; being willing to consider new ideas and approaches; weighing and balancing competing arguments judiciously; using critical thinking and a healthy degree of skepticism to probe beyond the surface of issues and arguments. | An important part of our work is to weigh and balance competing arguments and apply the law to the facts of a case in a judicious way. Of the cases that you have studied or are familiar with, describe one that presented a particular challenge for you in weighing competing arguments. What was it about this case that made it so challenging for you? Describe your thinking in analyzing the case. What was your final analysis? What did you learn from the case? |

Note: Another way to assess analytical thinking is to present candidates with a case study for analysis. The case should be typical of the sort of legal problems encountered in the court and district in question. Allow a suitable amount of time for the applicant to read the material and think about it, then question the applicant about what problems or conflicts arise from the case and how they could be addressed.

Communication KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Writing Clearly and Concisely | Expressing facts and ideas in simple, jargon-free language that is easy to understand; presenting arguments clearly and forcefully in writing; paying scrupulous attention to detail; drafting bench memoranda or opinions; writing clear instructions. | <i>Note: The best way to assess writing skills is to look directly at examples of candidates' writing. One way to do this is to request that writing samples be submitted before the interview as part of the screening process or brought to the interview. An alternate approach is to inform candidates in advance that part of the interview will be a writing test. Each candidate is then given the same scenario and asked to draft a few paragraphs. (To save time, doing research is not usually part of the test.) Judges who use this method find it more indicative of writing skills than prepared writing samples, which often have been heavily edited by others.</i> |
| Communicating Orally | Conveying information orally in a clear, concise, and forceful manner; summarizing key points from detailed fact patterns or case law; assisting the judge in exploring and understanding both sides of the argument or the law; effectively presenting alternative arguments or points of view; expressing one's own opinion comfortably. | <i>Note: Oral communication skills can be assessed from the candidate's general presentation during the interview.</i> |
| Asking Questions | Recognizing when additional information or clarification is needed and asking for assistance when needed, repeatedly if necessary. | Describe a time when you were given a task that was unclear or required information that you did not have access to. What did you do? Were you able to get all of the information you needed? |

Personal KSAs

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Acting with Integrity | Demonstrating principled judgment and sound ethics; building trust with others through openness; following through on commitments; avoiding actions that could reflect unfavorably on the court. | Describe a difficult ethical dilemma that you have encountered. How did you become aware of it? What did you do? How did you decide on the right course of action to take? |
| Staying Flexible | Being willing and able to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, and rapid change; learning new skills and tasks quickly. | Describe a recent situation in which you had to adjust to multiple demands, ambiguity, or rapid change. How did you deal with the situation? |

Personal KSAs, continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Working Independently | Taking the initiative to see what needs to be done and doing it with minimum supervision; maintaining motivation to cope with a large volume of work independently; demonstrating resourcefulness. | <p>Describe a specific time when you had a large amount of work to do on your own. How did you organize the work? How did you maintain the motivation to get it done? Tell us about a goal you set for yourself. What challenges did you encounter? How did you deal with them? How did you come up with the goal? What did you do to reach it? How successful were you?</p> <p>Describe a goal or task that presented you with challenges or obstacles. What was difficult about it, and how did you meet the challenges?</p> |
| Working Collaboratively | Dealing effectively and courteously with others; working effectively as part of a team; dealing constructively with conflict; keeping others informed; respecting the significance of other people's contributions. | Describe a specific project or major task that you worked on as part of a team. What was your role on the team? What was the most challenging part of working on the team for you? Why? What was the most rewarding part for you? Why? |
| Dealing with the Public | Maintaining a courteous, patient, and helpful demeanor when dealing with the public, lawyers, and court staff; serving as the judge's representative to the public; respecting confidentiality; refraining from giving legal advice. | In what role or roles have you been responsible for dealing with the public? Have you ever had to deal with a belligerent customer or member of the public or with someone who demanded something that you could not provide? What was the situation, and what did you do? |
| Attending to Detail | Ensuring that all aspects of a task are completed properly; revising written work patiently through multiple drafts; consistently checking for quality and errors; paying scrupulous attention to detail. | Describe a project or task that required you to do detailed work with a high degree of accuracy. How did you make sure that everything got done? How did you ensure the accuracy of your work? |
| Organizing Work | Keeping files and documents neat, organized, and accessible; planning daily activities and keeping on track with what needs to be done; adjusting to changes in plan without disrupting the flow of work. | <p>Describe the project or task that put the most demands on your organizational skills. What made it so demanding? What did you do to cope with these demands? How successful were you?</p> <p>How do you keep track of your assignments? What systems or methods do you use to remind you what needs to be done? Describe a time when you had competing priorities pressing for your attention under a tight time constraint. How did you handle the situation? Describe a time when you missed a deadline. What happened?</p> |

Personal KSAs, continued

| KSA | Definition | Questions |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Asserting Oneself | Clearly stating one's positions and opinions and backing them up with reasoned arguments; describing the consequences of alternative courses of action; being clear about what is and is not acceptable and when compromise is and is not appropriate. | Tell us about a time in law school or in the workplace when you challenged the decision or position of a person in authority. What did you do, and what happened as a result? |
| Acting Responsibly | Demonstrating commitment to duties and tasks and loyalty to the judge, colleagues, and team members; dependably meeting obligations. | We all have times when we commit to more than we can easily handle. Can you think of a recent time when your responsibilities seemed overwhelming? What did you do? |
| Accepting Constructive Criticism | Displaying willingness to remain open to criticism and to change behavior when appropriate. | Tell us about a time when you received constructive criticism from a superior. Did you agree with it? Did you think it was fair? What did you do as a result of the criticism? How did you feel about the outcome? What did you learn as a result? |