

Accelerating Government Hiring: Q&A Guide

Questions and Answers

1. What is the purpose of the [Hiring Guide](#)?

The guide was developed by the [State Personnel Board \(SPB\)](#), [California Department of Human Resources \(CalHR\)](#), and [California Government Operations Agency \(GovOps\)](#) to streamline California's civil service hiring process while upholding merit principles. It aims to make hiring faster, fairer, and more defensible, reducing unnecessary complexity for hiring managers and applicants.

2. What defines a fair, merit-based hiring process?

Fair hiring evaluates all applicants based on job-related qualifications through a transparent, competitive process. Appointments are made solely on merit and fitness for the position, excluding considerations of protected categories (e.g., race, gender, political affiliation). The test is not whether someone else would have chosen the same candidate, but whether the process was conducted fairly, transparently, and based on job-related criteria.

3. Does the [SPB](#) support the [Hiring Guide](#), and is the guide merit-based?

Yes. The SPB fully supports the Hiring Guide and co-authored it.

As the statewide authority responsible for overseeing, adjudicating, and enforcing merit-based hiring, SPB's involvement ensures the guide aligns with SPB's expectations for a fair, transparent, and defensible selection process. This includes the documentation standards SPB applies during compliance reviews and audits.

In other words, the Hiring Guide is not only consistent with merit principles – it is also fully consistent with SPB's standards, because SPB helped create it and expressly supports its statewide implementation.

4. Can a hiring manager consider personal knowledge of an applicant's work performance during the interview and/or selection process?

Yes. Personal knowledge of an applicant's actual work performance is a valid, job-related factor. If a hiring manager has previously worked with an applicant and has first-hand knowledge that the applicant is a strong performer, this information may be considered along with all other merit-based factors. This may be an advantage for the applicant, but it is not an *unfair* advantage, because it is grounded in job-related performance.

5. Does personal knowledge of an applicant create favoritism or undermine merit principles?

No. Personal knowledge is not the same as favoritism. Favoritism involves giving preference based on personal affinity, social familiarity, or non-work relationships. The Hiring Guide clarifies that personal relationships should *never* be the basis for a hiring decision; however, job-related performance information gained through prior working relationships *can* be used fairly.

6. What if a hiring manager knows from experience that an applicant is a poor performer?

This information may be considered as well. If a hiring manager has first-hand knowledge that an applicant consistently performed poorly, the hiring manager may choose not to interview the applicant, since the individual would not be hired. In this scenario, the knowledge may disadvantage the applicant, but it is *not* an unfair disadvantage because it is grounded in job-related performance, not personal preference.

7. What types of “personal knowledge” are appropriate to use in hiring?

Only job-related information. Examples include quality of work, reliability, professionalism, problem-solving skills, communication, teamwork, and demonstrated performance over time. Social familiarity, personal preferences, or assumptions based on personality or background must *never* be used.

8. How should personal knowledge be documented in a hiring justification?

Briefly and factually. Hiring managers should note:

- The nature of the prior working relationship.
- The job-related performance observed.
- How that performance supports the applicant’s ability to succeed in the role.

This ensures transparency and alignment with merit-based expectations.

9. What is an Ideal Candidate Statement?

An Ideal Candidate Statement is a narrative description that outlines the key qualifications, skills, and attributes sought for a specific role. It provides a holistic view of what the hiring manager is looking for, beyond a simple checklist, and helps guide the screening and interview process. Departments may use either a bulleted list or an Ideal Candidate Statement, depending on their preference. The key requirement is that the criteria are job-related and applied consistently.

10. How is an Ideal Candidate Statement used in the hiring process?

The Ideal Candidate Statement is used to define and document the attributes sought for the role. It guides the screening of applications and helps interviewers evaluate how well each applicant aligns with the needs of the position. It should be included in the hiring file and referenced throughout the selection process to ensure fairness and transparency.

11. Is there a required format for the Ideal Candidate Statement?

No. Departments may use a concise bulleted list or a narrative Ideal Candidate Statement. Both formats are acceptable, and the choice depends on what best supports clarity for the hiring team and aligns with internal practices. The important thing is that the criteria are job-related and used consistently.

12. How should applications be screened for interviews?

All applications should be reviewed to maintain fairness and consistency. Screening is not an exam and does not require scoring. Instead, reviewers categorize applicants into three groups: “Interview – Yes,” “Interview – Maybe,” and “Interview – No,” based on how well each application reflects the documented selection criteria or Ideal Candidate Statement.

13. What is the purpose of the “Interview – Maybe” category?

The “Interview – Maybe” category allows reviewers to retain applications that may be reconsidered if the “Interview – Yes” pool is too small or if additional candidates are needed later in the process.

14. How are Minimum Qualifications (MQs) assessed?

MQs are essential requirements set forth in the job classification. HR professionals should generally assess MQs only for applicants selected for interviews, allowing for a faster process. MQs may be screened after interviews, but screening all applications for MQs is more burdensome and can unnecessarily extend time to hire.

15. Are there any special considerations for Career Executive Assignments (CEAs)?

Yes. For CEAs, the application is an exam and must be scored as an exam. Screening for CEAs is separate from screening done later by HR professionals to assess minimum qualifications.

16. Are there any guidelines for interview panel composition?

Yes. Panels should include at least two members: the hiring manager and at least one other individual at the same level or higher than the classification being recruited. This supports fairness and balanced evaluation

17. Can hiring managers use written exercises or simulations instead of interviews?

A: Yes. Departments may use other selection instruments, such as standardized performance demonstrations, written exercises, or role plays, as long as they objectively and fairly evaluate each candidate’s ability to succeed in the position.

18. How should interviews be conducted and documented?

A: Interviews are not exams and do not require numeric scoring. Panels should use open-ended questions to assess job-related qualifications and potential for success in the role. If notes are taken, they should be concise and job-related and must be retained with the hiring package. Panels discuss strengths and weaknesses and develop a preference order, optionally using the [Tiered Ranking Form](#).

19. What does “probing” mean in the interview process?

Probing means asking follow-up questions to get a deeper, clearer understanding of an interviewee’s answer. Unlike the exam process – which requires strict adherence to a script – interviews allow flexibility to ask additional questions when a response is vague, incomplete, or opens the door to relevant detail.

20. Is probing considered fair and merit-based?

Yes. Probing is fair when it stays within job-related topics and is used consistently for all applicants. The purpose is not to challenge or cross-examine applicants, but to ensure the panel fully understands the applicant’s experience and qualifications. Probing supports merit by improving clarity and reducing reliance on assumptions.

21. When should a hiring manager probe further?

Probing is appropriate when an answer is:

- vague (“I supported several projects...”),
- incomplete (“I handled the issue and it worked out.”), or
- particularly interesting and relevant (“We built a new tracking system...”).

Probing ensures the panel gets the full picture, rather than making inferences or guesses.

22. Does probing mean the interview becomes an unstructured conversation?

No. Interviews remain structured around core questions, but probing introduces *structured flexibility*. Interviewers start with agreed-upon questions, then use probes as needed to understand an applicant’s response fully. This improves accuracy without turning the interview into an exam or a free-form dialogue.

23. How does probing improve the quality of hiring decisions?

Probing helps uncover:

- concrete examples of the applicant’s behavior,
- context for decisions and problem-solving,
- the applicant’s actual role in a described scenario,
- measurable outcomes or impacts.

These details create a more complete picture of merit, improving fairness and defensibility of the final selection.

24. How is “best fit” determined and documented?

“Best fit” refers to how well an applicant’s qualifications, behaviors, and competencies align with the current needs of the role, team, and organization. The hiring manager drafts a brief justification memo explaining why the selected applicant best meets these needs, citing examples from the application, interview, references, and/or personal knowledge.

25. How does the guide address bias and fairness in hiring?

The guide provides practical strategies to mitigate common biases (confirmation, similarity, halo/horn, first impression, communication style). It emphasizes re-anchoring to job-related criteria, panel discussions, and documenting rationale for decisions. Protected characteristics must never be considered.

26. What is the [Tiered Ranking Form](#) and why does the Hiring Guide include it?

The Tiered Ranking Form is an *optional* tool provided in the Hiring Guide to help interview panels organize their evaluations and clearly identify their preference order among interviewed candidates. It is not an exam, it is not numerical scoring, and it is not required. It exists to support fair, job-related discussion and help panels finalize a ranked list of interviewees in a consistent, transparent way.

27. How do we actually complete the [Tiered Ranking Form](#)?

After each interview (or after all interviews are completed), assign each interviewee a unique rank from most competitive to least competitive. The ranking is not a direct comparison of interviewees to one another; instead, it reflects how well each interviewee aligns with the established job-related criteria or Ideal Candidate Statement.

You may not give two candidates the same rank. The first interviewee will initially appear in the first ranking box, but as additional candidates are interviewed, their rankings may shift based on your assessment of each individual's demonstrated alignment with the job criteria or Ideal Candidate Statement. The goal is to produce a clear, job-anchored preference order that reflects the panel's qualitative evaluation – not numeric scoring or exam-style grading.

28. Is the [Tiered Ranking Form](#) required for all interviews?

No. It simply provides a structured way to capture panel consensus. The form is meant to reflect qualitative professional judgment – not exam-style scoring or point systems.

29. How should departments handle applicants with no prior work experience?

Reference checks are not required, and some applicants may have no prior work experience. In such cases, focus on other job-related factors, such as education, skills, and demonstrated abilities.

30. Can hiring managers speak with references not provided by the applicant?

Yes. Hiring managers are not limited to references provided by the applicant, but should exercise caution, especially if the applicant does not want their current employer to know they are pursuing other opportunities.