



HIRING GUIDE

Hiring for Behaviour — Our Guide to Hiring Beyond Skills

You know how people always say 'hire for skills, fire for behaviours'? Let's change that — skills should be a given, and character needs hiring for too.

Skills should be a given in the roles you're hiring for, if you're working with us. But character should be a given too. This guide walks hiring managers through the traits and characteristics worth digging for in candidates, and — crucially — how to actually measure them.

THE CASE FOR CHARACTER

Why Bother Hiring for Character?

Finding candidates with the right skills is the easy part — you can run a competency test and measure it, measurably. Behaviour is harder, not least because every candidate is on their very best behaviour for the hour they're in front of you. We won't always get the moment of clarity we got once in France, when a candidate put her feet on the desk and told us she didn't really like working.

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I don't really like working.

— A CANDIDATE, FEET ON THE DESK, MID-INTERVIEW IN FRANCE

Hiring for character is something most companies skip entirely, let alone do well. But candidates who are a genuine cultural fit stay longer, work better and integrate more happily into a team — and candidates who clash with that culture will, one way or another, leave or be asked to. This guide works through the traits we think hiring managers should be watching for, positive and negative, and how to surface them in an interview setting.

Graft

Conscientiousness

Self-development

Resilience

Ambition

Humility

Emotional intelligence

Nutshelling

Positivity

Adaptability

Accountability

Across nearly every trait below, our advice is the same: get conversational. A more relaxed, conversational interview style — managed correctly — lets you dig into how a candidate applies themselves to things, especially outside of work, in a way a straight Q&A never will.

TRAIT 1 OF 11

Graft

Also known as grit, determination, staying power — graft over grift. We're looking for a genuine desire to succeed, a willingness to put in the extra hours, and the application needed to actually improve results. Every junior marketer will tell you they work hard and can produce a story to prove it from their limited experience so far. The real signal is what they do outside of work.

Look at interests and qualifications that have nothing to do with the job. Someone learning a language — have they gone beyond a school syllabus or a few minutes of Duolingo a day, into films and books in that language? Musicians working through grades will have had to graft seriously to get them. If a candidate isn't musical or linguistic, find out what they do at the weekend and how seriously they've applied themselves to it. For more junior candidates, dig into recent education or apprenticeships and how they improved specific skills — real grafters will show a method, sometimes several.

- How do you respond when you find something difficult?
- Tell me about how you handle boring tasks.
- What is something you've given up on, or something you've persisted with?

TRAIT 2 OF 11

Conscientiousness

Try finding a young person's CV that doesn't claim an eye for detail. We once had a CV from a copywriter who described themselves as a copyrighter — we challenged that one.

Conscientiousness is a step up from graft: graft is about working hard, conscientiousness is about wanting to do things well and getting the basics right.

Start with the CV itself — a conscientious person writes a conscientious CV, with no grammar slips, no punctuation errors, and no alignment issues (Canva makes alignment easy, so there's no excuse there either). You need these people for anything public-facing, or anything involving data entry or data analysis. In interview, they'll often double-check the time of the meeting, turn up on time, come with questions about your organisation, and pause to consider an answer before giving it — one of our favourite colleagues did exactly that throughout her interview, and it told us a lot about how she thinks.

- Walk me through your process for (e.g. setting Google Ads live, proofreading a PR piece).
- How do you ensure quality in your work?
- How do you meet a tight deadline while still producing high-quality work?

TRAIT 3 OF 11

Self-Development

Digital marketing never stops moving, so a digital marketer who isn't keen to learn isn't likely to succeed for long anyway. What we're after is a constant learner — someone working through books, subreddits, blogs and podcasts, chasing qualifications and certificates, ideally with a mentor, or someone stuck somewhere they're not learning and actively looking to fix that.

Constant learners tend to be vocal about it — their LinkedIn feed is usually the best evidence, full of certificates and what they're reading (we wouldn't recommend trawling Instagram for this, even for an Instagram-facing role). In interview, ask what they read, what they've learned most recently, and how they've applied it at work. For the really committed ones, ask about learning that has nothing to do with the job — the piano, coding, a new language.

- Tell me how a business book has had a specific impact on your work performance.
- What learning tools do you like to use on a regular basis?
- What advice would you give a young starter on how to get into digital marketing?

TRAIT 4 OF 11

Resilience

Resilience gets thrown around a lot in coaching circles, but it's a genuinely important trait in digital marketing, especially agency-side, where clients can be demanding and deadlines tight. Any candidate can claim to be resilient — plenty are about as resilient as cheap kitchen roll in a storm. A bad hire costs somewhere around £30,000 once you count lost productivity and our fees for the replacement, so it's worth getting right. Dig into specific high-pressure situations and probe past the first answer rather than taking it at face value.

£30,000

is **roughly what a bad hire costs**, once you count lost productivity and our fees for the replacement.

One legitimate, if slightly nasty, technique: find a difficult question before the interview — a short-term role on the CV that wasn't a contract, or signs of under-performance you can actually check (an SEO with no page-one rankings after a year, for instance). It isn't a nice question, but it reveals a lot. Co-interviewing gives you the option of a light good cop / bad cop as well, watching how the candidate reacts to pressure from two directions.

- Tell me how you have dealt with difficult clients.
- What do you regret in your career?
- Give me an example of when your team's marketing performance has been poor, and what you did to resolve it.

Ambition

Ambition is like salt — too little and there's no flavour, too much and it goes in the bin. Some roles need high ambition, some need less, and matching the two is what determines how long someone stays. Get the match wrong and you'll be replacing them, and paying for it, sooner than you'd like.

Ambitious people are usually easy to spot — they dress and talk the part, and their CV tends to read as promotion after promotion, KPI after KPI. Almost all of them will have a personal roadmap: a target to hit by a certain age, personal or professional, that won't change regardless of what you offer them. Your job is to work out whether that roadmap runs alongside yours, or somewhere else entirely.

- What is your personal roadmap for success — what are you planning to achieve? (Let this be personal or work-related, and listen for vagueness, which can signal a lack of ambition.)
- How do you cope if your targets are not met?
- What do we have to do to get the best out of you?

Humility

Nobody wants to hire a psychopath (present company at The International Institute of Psychopaths excepted, and even they need someone steady on the accounts). Everyone needs some humility, but there's a fine line to walk — humility is useful right up until it tips into indecision, and it's your job to work out where a candidate sits on that scale. A good leader is humble and decisive: they know when they're wrong, listen to other people, and then still act on it.

Most candidates arrive well-rehearsed on the 'time I got something wrong' question, so frame it slightly differently and then push past the polished first answer. Ask what the

metrics were, who else was involved, what they learned, and whether they changed a process off the back of it — a stock answer rarely survives a follow-up like that.

- How do you handle criticism?
- How do you get the best out of your team?
- Do you involve other people in your decision-making, or is it just you?
- How do you make decisions?
- Tell me about your biggest mistake.

TRAIT 7 OF 11

Emotional Intelligence

Hiring a web developer, you may not care much about emotional intelligence — quality of code and meeting deadlines matter more than whether they network well. Client-facing and heavily collaborative roles are a different story, and the real question underneath 'emotional intelligence' is simple: will we all get on? People without it tend to cause rifts in teams, and when they're the ones leading, or founding their own business, it gets expensive fast.

Everyone interviews on their best behaviour, so trust your gut on the small stuff — the handshake, the eye contact, the small talk over a cup of tea all tell you something. A pure interview room is a hard place to properly judge emotional intelligence, though; taking a candidate to a coffee shop, or just talking normally on the walk there, often reveals more. Listen closely to why they left previous jobs, how they describe conflict, and what they think their last boss would say about them.

- Give me an example of a difficult colleague — someone obstructive or hard to please.
- What would your last boss say about you?
- If you could build a marketing team, how would you go about it, and with what types of people?

Nutshelling

Digital marketers rarely get much time or space to make a point — clients have limited patience, copywriters have a limited word count. The ability to 'nutshell' an answer is underrated, and it's easy to test for if you're looking for it: ask a deliberately open question like 'introduce yourself', 'who are you?' or 'tell me about your last role', and say nothing more. The vagueness is intentional — you're checking whether they can answer concisely, without waffle or tangent, without losing the thread of the question.

It's tempting to jump in when a candidate starts waffling, but that just hands them an escape route. Let the open question run and listen hard — for storytelling, for crisp sentences, for a candidate who can hold a narrative and your interest. If you lose interest, you may well have the wrong candidate.

- So tell me, why are you here?
- What led you to apply for this role?
- Introduce yourself!
- Give us a potted history of your career to date.
- What interests you?

Positivity

We once knew an Irish colleague who was a bit of a Negative Nancy — a foreteller of doom, and often right too. Every team needs someone to balance the mood and offer an alternative view, but there's such a thing as too much negativity, just as there's too much positivity. Positivity builds teams and a can-do atmosphere; a bit of hesitation or scepticism keeps that grounded. If spending more always guaranteed better results, every budget would be unlimited — the sensible answer involves some realism about what actually works.

Entrapment is a legitimate, if devilish, interviewing technique here: present a scenario that looks overwhelmingly good or bad and watch how the candidate reacts. Tell them sales are up 75% year-on-year and revenue is up 125%, and ask what they do next. The tempting answer is to raise targets for next year; the right candidate pulls back and asks why the numbers moved, what drove it, and whether the conditions behind it will repeat.

- Team morale is low. What do you do?
- Our results are at an all-time high, and we've never made so much revenue. What do you do next, as our marketer?
- Sales have been falling every month for 18 months, and revenue is falling in line. How would you react?

TRAIT 10 OF 11

Adaptability

Also known as flexibility — bending to the world's will and just getting on with it as everything changes. It's nice to have principles and to know something inside-out, but it's far more useful to be adaptable and ready to change when the world does. Google changes the rules most months, channels come and go every year, and the economic environment doesn't let anyone rest for long. If you're not adaptable as a digital marketer, what exactly are you going to do?

Map the CV against the world around it. Younger candidates may have landed their first roles remote or hybrid, straight into a pandemic; more senior candidates may have lived through multiple recessions, industry-specific crunches, or conflict in their own country. What does the CV say about how they've reacted to external pressure, and have they found opportunity in it? In platform-specific roles, how did they respond to Google's move to Performance Max, the withdrawal of features they relied on, or Facebook's cookie-less reporting? One of us remembers Google shutting down a whole category of backlinks and having to pivot clients away from an entire activity overnight — it felt world-changing at the time.

- What was your first reaction when offices shut and you had to work from home?
- Tell me about a specific change on an advertising platform that you think made the experience better, or worse.
- What do you think the workplace will be like in 20 years' time?

TRAIT 11 OF 11

Accountability

'Yeah, results were bad, but it wasn't my fault, it was the people I hired' — that's the trait to watch for, and not in a good way. Taking credit when it's due is fine; refusing to shoulder blame when things go wrong is a warning sign. Understanding how a candidate views accountability tells you a lot about their worldview: who's at the centre of it, who gets blamed when things go wrong, and — for senior candidates — how they run a team and might grow into bigger leadership.

Try two versions of the same problem: a hypothetical one (a team member overspends on a Google Ads account — what do you do?) and a real one (tell me about a time you got something wrong, and how you fixed it). Look for a consistent approach across both. If they'd fire a team member for a mistake but don't think they should face the same standard themselves, that inconsistency is worth pushing on directly.

- Imagine SQLs are down for the last 12-month period you've been in charge. What do you do?
- How do you deal with an under-performing team member?
- Tell me about your biggest success.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

A Final Word

If you're interviewing, it really matters that you know what kind of character you're trying to hire. We focus too often on the skills a candidate brings — important, yes, but they

should be a given. You should only be sitting down with people whose skills are already a match for the role. The interview's real job is deciding whether this person is a cultural fit, and the best starting point for that is you: how would you describe yourself, your team, and your business's culture? What kind of team are you actually trying to build?

Not every role needs every trait — do you really want your creatives scoring highest on graft, or your salespeople scoring highest on humility? Good luck finding one of those. Pick three traits that matter most for the role and work on reading your candidates against them. Try to get past the good behaviour a candidate naturally puts up in an interview — take them for a coffee, walk to a coffee shop with them, make it more informal, and then bring the formal setting back only when you actually need a straight answer.

Before your next round of interviews:

- ☐ Describe yourself, your team and your business's culture
- ☐ Decide what kind of team you're actually trying to build
- ☐ Pick the three traits that matter most for the role
- ☐ Plan an informal setting — a coffee, or the walk to a coffee shop
- ☐ Bring the formal setting back only when you need a straight answer

“Hire for behaviour, and you're on the road to building a team that sticks with you for the long term.”

This report first went out in 2023, but the advice still stands the test of time. And if you're still looking for candidates who fit the bill: we speak to every candidate in depth, we screen for behaviour as well as skills, and we can build a detailed report on each candidate's cultural fit — so you can build the most aligned team possible. Get in touch if that's useful.



Example Recruitment — marketing-led headhunters for SaaS and FinTech startups and scaleups in New York and London.

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