



How to Prevent Resume Overload with a Questionnaire

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Do you receive too many applicants for your open position? Using a questionnaire to prescreen applicants may be a cost effective solution that lets you easily sort through all the applicants to find the best ones. And questionnaires are not as hard as you may think to use.

Background:

The job market has changed markedly from the boom times of the late 90s. We have gone from not being able to find enough live bodies (let alone qualified bodies) for open positions, to receiving hundreds of applicants for job postings. This has brought about a major challenge for hiring managers – sorting through all of these applicants to determine who is worth interviewing.

Solutions to managing resume overload generally involve throwing resources at the problem. You can hire a recruiter to do the job for you, or install some form of Applicant Tracking System to help automate it. But if you can't justify installing a system, and don't want to pay for a Recruiter, you end up dealing with the resume overload by hand.

The questionnaire solution:

But there is a relatively easy way to manage resume overload, and that is to use an automated prescreening system. One method is to use a questionnaire that the applicant would fill in when they apply for the position. Alice Snell of iLogos Research reported "A simple online questionnaire makes it easier than ever before to obtain skill sets from applicants. The recruiters can tailor the online questionnaires to detect the required skills, to meet the exact needs of a company, position, or requisition."¹

When to use a questionnaire:

A questionnaire could save time if you expect to receive many (e.g. 50 or more) applicants and the position has specific skill, experience, or licensing/certification requirements.

So, you would probably not benefit from using a questionnaire to find a CEO, because you likely wouldn't get that many applicants. Nor would you benefit when filling an entry-level position where you are willing to train the person hired, as there may not be any skill or experience requirements to screen on.

Where to put the questionnaire:

Now that you have decided that a questionnaire would help you, you need the questions to be in a place where applicants can access them, and have the data crunched to sort the applicants for you. The Internet fits this bill well.

The basic requirements for an Internet-based questionnaire are:

1. access to a web site where you post the questionnaire
2. determining the questions you want to ask
3. programming skills to create the questionnaire (basic HTML forms)
4. programming skills to create a program to process the applicant's data (often done with PHP or CGI), so you can differentiate between those who meet your requirements and those who do not

Your company probably already has a web site, so one possibility is to post the questionnaire there.

Advantages:

- Connects seamlessly with your company's web site, so has the same look and feel
- Using resources (web site) you already have
- You only need to set up one questionnaire, which could be used no matter where you post your opening and provides you with all the applicant responses in the same format

Disadvantage:

- You have to create the questions
- You need to find the resources to do the web programming to create the questionnaire and the processing program
- Some job boards make it challenging to have applicants apply by clicking the link to your questionnaire (they want the applicants to go through their system)

Understandably, companies often are not able to set up a questionnaire on their own web page. Thankfully, there are easy ways around this.

Some job boards now offer the ability to develop and use questionnaires. For example, both Careerbuilder.com and Monster.com have some questionnaire functionality available within their systems, and it is likely that more job boards will add this functionality to their system in the future.

Advantages:

- You don't need web programming skills
- It generally doesn't cost anything more than the cost of posting the job

Disadvantages:

- Not all job boards have questionnaires
- You usually have to develop the questions yourself
- The questionnaire is only used by applicants who apply through that job board
- You would have to set up a questionnaire for each job board you use
- Responses from different job boards will show up in different formats

Another option would be to have an outside company develop and host the questionnaire. There are companies that specialize in developing and hosting applicant prescreening questionnaires.

Advantages:

- You don't need web programming skills
- The questions can be developed for you
- You only need to set up one questionnaire, which could be used no matter where you post your opening and provides you with all the applicant responses in the same format

Disadvantage:

- You pay for the service
- Some job boards make it challenging to have applicants apply by clicking the link to your questionnaire (they want the applicants to go through their system)

How many questions should you ask:

It is tempting to try to make a questionnaire that will ask everything needed to find the one best applicant. This is not something we recommend.

Research has shown that job applicants are willing to fill out forms when applying for a position, but that willingness decreases as the amount of time it takes to fill in the form increases. 2 If it takes too long to fill in, you will start losing applicants.

Also, a questionnaire that covers everything will be very complex, and would take a lot of time for you to create. Yet, each additional question you use has decreasing benefits. This is shown in the results of one prescreen we did for a web programmer position.

Category	Hiring Company's Requirement	% who didn't meet this requirement
Need to relocate	Local only	39%
Programming Experience	2+ yrs	17%
Degree	BS	12%
Need a Visa	Not willing to sponsor Visa	7%

Using the most effective question (need to relocate) only, 39% of

applicants who did not meet this requirement were screened out. Using both this and the second most effective question (programming experience) brought us to 49%. Adding the third, we increase to 54%. And the fourth question did not screen any additional applicants out, as all who needed Visas also needed to relocate. As you can see, each additional question is adding a smaller amount to the effectiveness.

We have found that a questionnaire containing just a few questions can draw out enough information to really help you make a decision. This keeps the questionnaire short enough that applicants will be willing to answer the questions, and also minimizes the amount of time it would take you to develop the questions.

What questions to ask:

One of the challenges with setting up a questionnaire is creating the questions. In actuality, if you prescreen by asking just a few key questions, choosing the right questions is not that hard. You can cover most of what you need to know with three questions:

1. their education/degree - this could ask for general education level (BS, MS, etc.) or differentiate between different degrees (BSEE, BSCS, etc.).

What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

(select one)

2. their experience in the position – this question is aimed at drawing out their experience in handling the duties required for the position.

How much experience do you have in product management/product marketing?

(select one)

No experience
Less than 2 years experience
2-4 years experience
5-9 years experience
10+ years experience

3. their experience in the industry – this question should be aimed at drawing out their experience working with the technology and markets the open position would be in. Be careful not to make this too specific – if you ask for specific market experience which can only be obtained by working at your company or your one competitor, posting the position on job boards likely will not get you many qualified applicants.

How much experience do you have with B2B e-Commerce products?

(select one)

In many positions, you would use all three of these questions. For some types of positions, you only need one or two. For example, if you are

hiring a person for an enterprise software product marketing position, experience in the industry and position are important, but perhaps not the applicant's education. A biotech research position usually requires that the applicant have an MD or PhD, but there generally is leeway on the actual experience in the industry and position.

You may also want to consider screening with both minimum and maximum requirements. In the web programmer example, screening for applicants with at least 2 years experience in programming only screened out 17%. But the hiring firm was not filling a senior level position. 39% of applicants had 5+ years of experience, and some 10+ years. They decided to also screen out the highly experienced, as they were concerned that they would either demand too high a salary or not stick with the company once the economy improved.

Along with the three basic questions, you may want to consider asking a few more questions which you would use to red-flag applicants who don't meet the requirement:

- Specific licensing, certification, or similar requirement. Some specific examples are "What is your 100-ton Masters License Massachusetts state crane operator's license status?" or "Do you have your CPA?"
- If you are not willing to pay the additional costs of relocating a new hire, you could ask whether the applicant needs to relocate to take the position.
- If you are not willing to sponsor a Visa for a new hire, you could ask their work authorization status.

Are you authorized to work in the United States? (select one)

- authorized to work in the US for any employer
- authorized to work in the US for current employer only
- not currently authorized to work in the US

Preventing Lying:

If applicants think it will help them get a job, they may answer your questions with what they think you want as the answer, not with what is actually true about them. If they do this, it would reduce the value of the questionnaire, so you should take a couple of simple steps to reduce the likelihood of this happening.

One step would be to inform the applicants that the answers to these questions should be treated like the information on their resume, and a reminder given that any false statements would be enough to reject the applicant.

We have also found it effective to ask both "how long have you" done something, which they answer by picking a year range, and then "describe in detail" which they answer with an open ended description.

How much sales/account management experience do you have?(select one) Briefly describe.
Include Co. names
and positions held.

Where an applicant may chose a number greater than their true experience if you only ask for their experience, they are less likely to lie when they also have to describe in detail what they did. An additional benefit is that this open-ended description provides additional details that help you understand the applicant's skills and experiences as they relate to your requirements.

Conclusion:

Many job openings receive too many applicants, causing challenges for those who have to sort through all these resumes. Using a questionnaire is a simple way to pre-screen the applicants who apply to your open position and help prevent resume overload.

Reference:

1 - "Resume Volume: Can You Handle It?" by Alice Snell of iLogos Research.
http://www.ilogos.com/en/expertviews/articles/process/20020409_AS.html

2 – "Perception vs. Reality: Jobseeker Behavior Online", iLogos Research
<http://www.ilogos.com/en/ilogosreports/>.

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Peter Donohue is the Business Development Manager for HELPUHIRE Solutions. HELPUHIRE Solutions develops and hosts applicant prescreen questionnaires, so that company can easily and inexpensively determine which applicants are worth interviewing for their open positions.

Peter holds an MBA from State University of New York at Buffalo and has experience on both sides of the staffing table through his 12 years experience with various tech companies (along with all too much time job hunting). He has always been interested in understanding how things work, and while job hunting, started delving into understanding the process and tools used by hiring managers. This has made him a perfect fit with HELPUHIRE Solutions.