

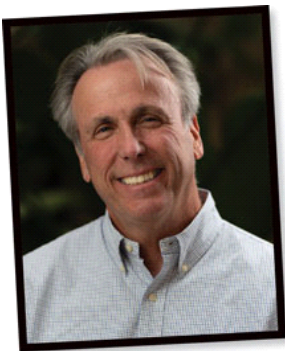
GROWERTALKS

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Culture-Fit Questions

Chris Beytes



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A Mike Rowe (from “Dirty Jobs”) video came across my Facebook page the other day. A big fan, I clicked to see what he was discussing with custom knife-maker Josh Smith of Montana Knife Company. Mike raves about the quality of Josh’s knives and the “made in America” business he’s built, and Josh raves about what Mike is doing with his skilled-labor foundation, MikeRoweWORKS.

Anyway, they were discussing employees, and Mike asked, “Are you more worried about a skill gap or a will gap?”

“I would rather hire a 21-year-old kid in my shop right now than a 45-year-old with a bad attitude and maybe a bunch of bad experiences in the workplace,” Josh answered. “I have found that the young kids that we’ve hired—if you ask the right culture-fit questions—are going to help an old gray-hair like me succeed in this next AI generation.”

It was the first time I’d heard the term “culture-fit questions,” but I knew immediately what it meant. Google defines it as “those questions designed to assess whether a candidate’s values, behaviors and work style align with a company’s culture, mission and team dynamics.” Or more simply put, “Will you succeed here? Or will you quit before lunch?”

Interviews are hard. You never quite know what to ask or even if you’re allowed to ask it. If there’s a resume involved, you talk about that. If not, you basically use your gut instinct and years of experience to determine if this warm body sitting in front of you is someone you want in your business 10 or 12 hours a day. Either way, not the best of vetting procedures.

Years ago, I stumbled upon the best interview question for identifying a good writer: “Who do you like to read?” Good writers tend to be avid readers. I don’t care who they read, as long as they name an author or two and do so with conviction.

Art Parkerson of Lancaster Farms in Virginia is a thoughtful, people-oriented sort of fellow, so I asked him if he’s discovered any tricks for finding good people.

“If it’s a field worker, showing up on time [for the interview] is basically all it takes to get a job offer from me,” he

admitted. “If it’s a more specialized role ... then I normally ask for a cover letter in the job ad. If they just send a resume, that’s a big clue that they don’t pay attention/want this specific job very much/follow directions. Sometimes I insert some other specific instruction (if a cover letter is not appropriate ... like for a truck driver) in the ad that separates the ‘drive-by applicants’ from the ‘actually want to work for me’ applicants.”

Then he surprised me by saying, “My go-to question in an interview: ‘What is $14 + 16$?’ Not kidding, it’s the one question I always ask.”

I joked that if I asked that of potential editors, most would weep, then run. But, seriously, if you can’t do basic math in your head, it reveals bigger issues.

One more tip from Art: “I have always offered a job to anyone who sent a handwritten note, card or letter after the interview—100% of the time, even if I didn’t think they were great before.”

Amy Morris of N.G. Heimos Greenhouses in rural west-central Illinois seeks out local talent who grew up in a farm environment. “Keepers,” she calls them. “City kids—NOPE—leave after a year under their belt for a bigger corporation.”

Amy likes to put candidates at ease by chatting casually for 15 minutes about who they are and where they grew up. And she shares her horticulture journey. “I feel that helps take the edge off of them and make them more relaxed so they talk to me and not [just say] what they rehearsed.”

And one of her favorite questions is, “Where do you see yourself in five and 10 years?” She says it reveals a lot about where they are today.

Curious about what AI might bring to the interview game, I asked chatbot Grok 4 for a question for horticultural workers using my writer question as an example. He (it) suggested, “What plant or gardening experience has inspired you the most in your work, and why does it stick with you?”

Grok said the answer could reveal passion, show depth, uncover emotional and intellectual investment ... plus it’s hard to fake experience and knowledge.

Of course, that doesn’t guarantee they’ll stay on past lunch the first day. For that, Grok suggests you ask, “Can you describe a physically demanding task you’ve completed in the past, especially in outdoor or challenging conditions, and how you handled any fatigue or discomfort?”

If that doesn’t scare ‘em, nothing will. Test it out and let me know if it works. **GT**