

# STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES



Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

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## Job Candidates and Recruiters:

Your most important question.

In a New York Times interview (2017), Republican U.S. Senator from Nebraska Ben Sasse relates a story that took place when he was President of Midland University:

A group of Midland students were tasked to decorate a 20-foot Christmas tree, but they dressed only the bottom seven feet---the branches they could reach. Senator Sasse described himself as

“shattered” to discover his students did not have the mental flexibility or the initiative to find a way to success.

This story is the theme behind Senator Sasse’s book, **The Vanishing American Adult** (2017). He expresses concern that indulgent parents plus social media is creating a generation of Americans less open to new ideas than previous generations. In our recruiting, a critical concern that is often expressed by employers is that university graduates lack “grit.” We translate this into low conscientiousness combined with low openness to new ideas.

This article will focus on openness to new ideas as a key variable for job candidates.

### **Janet Asks “The” Question:**

Janet is a former CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and a candidate to become CEO of a private equity (PE) portfolio company. She was excited about the opportunity. Janet was familiar with the industry and even knew some of the company’s key customers. In preparation for a meeting with the recruiter, Janet had made site visits to multiple store locations and had informal conversations with key customers about the company and its competitors.

She was brimming with new ideas to turn the company around. In preparation for Janet’s meeting with the recruiter, we suggested that she ask the recruiter this one question:

*“On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always) how open is the leading private equity partner to new ideas? Pick a number and explain your response.”*

We informed her that a score 8 or higher was positive. 6-7 was neutral. And a score of 5 and below was negative.

To Janet’s consternation, the recruiter replied, “somewhere between a 2 and a 3.”

The recruiter explained that this PE Partner had no industry experience but had a plan for growing revenue. The former CEO was slow to implement the PE Partner's plan and had been fired.

The PE Partner believed he had invested too much money in the company already and was not prepared to put more money into growing the business.

This one question opened the door to the reality that the PE Partner was not seeking a real Chief Executive Officer: he was looking for a Chief Operations Officer who would be given the title CEO.

### **Sheila Can't Find a Partner:**

Dr. Sheila Smith is a dentist actively considering retiring from her independent dental practice at age 59. The physical demands of constantly bending over patients had damaged her back. She was in chronic pain.

Why close a profitable dental practice? Why not hire a younger dentist to join her practice with the goal of acquiring it? Sheila replied that young dentists were relatively inflexible regarding working conditions and compensation. Again, the issue of openness of new ideas surfaced as a critical issue.

### **Big Five Personality Factors**

In a 2014 PSYCHOLOGY TODAY article, Stybel Peabody provided an overview of the Big Five Personality Factors and described that Openness to New Experiences as one of the critical personality five attributes.

Openness to New Experiences is not a universal good or bad. It requires nuance.

High Openness to New Experiences can be negative in business if it means that the person is so intellectually curious, the person can never

“settle” on a practical solution. Some people are just meant to be academic researchers! (Griffin and Hesketh, 2004).

High Openness to New Experiences can also be negative if it means that the person is so open to internal feelings, he/she can get paralyzed by fear or anxiety. The little daemons in our head may never stop chattering. We chose to be selective in how much we pay attention to the chattering.

Of course, high openness to one's emotions might contribute to originality and creativity in certain artistic roles.

### **Openness to New Ideas--Job Analysis:**

Not every job requires a high degree of openness to new ideas. Success in jobs like insurance underwriters, bank tellers, and janitors requires a willingness to stick with routine and being comfortable with consistency. Even insurance sales cold calling can be a bad fit for someone high in Openness to New Ideas. The Big Five personality attribute of being conscientious becomes more important than openness to new ideas for jobs like these.

When drafting job descriptions employers might consider this question:

*"On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always) how open should the successful incumbent in this job be to new ideas? Pick a number and explain your response."*

### **Openness to New Ideas—Candidate Reference Checking.**

When we conduct reference checks in our retained search work, we ask this question:

*"On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always) how open is this candidate to new ideas? Pick a number and explain your response."*

A high number is not necessarily positive and a low number is not necessarily negative. Much depends on the nature of the job and the

explanation provided. We usually ask reference to give us specific stories to illustrate why they selected the number they selected.

### **Openness to New Ideas—Job Candidates.**

Job candidates might consider asking a prospective boss this question:

*"If I had the opportunity to speak with your direct reports, how would they respond to this question: On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always) how open are you to new ideas? Pick a number they would give and explain your response."*

The answer you hope to get is a number 7 or higher combined with an invitation to ask direct reports this question. But if you ask this question, you must also be prepared to receive the answer the recruiter gave Janet. A phony smile and a "we'll see" about providing contact information of direct reports is a clear response.

If you get a negative response, does it mean you lost a job opportunity or successfully dodged a bullet?

### **Summary and Conclusions:**

Effective hiring is complex but there seems to be one question that is validated by solid research and also by clinical observation:

*"On a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always) how open are you to new ideas? Pick a number and explain your response."*

What would your colleagues and direct reports say about you given this question?

Are you open enough to new experiences to put your prediction to a test?



Source: Pixabay/Mohamed Hassan

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Maryanne Peabody

Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

[peabody@stybelpeabody.com](mailto:peabody@stybelpeabody.com)

stybelpeabody.com

boardoptions.com

