

SEO Employee Hiring Guide

Because there isn't a well-organized SEO professional organization to set standards and best practices, it can be difficult to assess the true skills of SEO candidates. We've written this guide to assist you in your hiring process, including helping you determine the necessary skill set for the position you are trying to fill and discerning the actual skill level of your candidates. We also maintain an [online list of salaries](#) so you can see how your pay range compares to other open positions across the nation.

Skill Set Expectations

Beginner:

- 0-2 years of experience, probably working on friend and family sites, most likely low volume / competition.
- Candidate might have learned "SEO" from reading online, which could include outdated / spammy techniques.
- May or may not be able to work effectively with an IT department / web team for site changes.
- Not suitable as sole SEO employee. Requires close supervision by experienced SEO.
- Do not expect the beginner SEO to self-initiate strategies.
- Expect some familiarity with Google Analytics, Google Webmaster Tools, on-page optimization, and HTML optimization.

Intermediate:

- 2-4 years of experience.
- If the 2-4 years was spent on a larger SEO team, or under the supervision of a skilled SEO, their knowledge will be deeper than 2-4 years of "self-taught".
- They may or may not employ spammy tactics, but should know if they do.
- It is recommended that the intermediate SEO is supervised by someone with more experience.
- Should be able to work effectively with an IT department / web team for site changes.
- Should be able to produce site performance reports.
- Should have a good working knowledge of Google Analytics, Google Webmaster Tools, Google Trends, content optimization, link building, and HTML optimization.
- Server configuration optimization and Google AdWords experience is a plus.

Advanced:

- 4+ years of experience. Keep in mind, an SEO with 4+ years of experience working with a site with 100,000+ monthly visits has a much more robust skillset than on with 4+ years of experience working with a site with 1,000 visits per month.
- An advanced SEO should have experience with multiple websites on multiple platforms in multiple industries.
- The candidate should be able to work easily with an IT department / web team to coordinate site changes, and even serve as a project manager when required.
- An advanced SEO can conceptualize and execute SEO experiments.

- The advanced SEO can command a top-level salary, so be prepared to pay Director or VP equivalent pay.
- Do not assume the advanced SEO can be an effective supervisor. If your candidate has supervision experience, be willing to pay a premium.
- The candidate should be able to create easy-to-understand site performance reports for executives.
- An advanced SEO may require some SEO programs or subscriptions to assist their efforts.
- The advanced SEO should have expertise in Google Analytics, Google Webmaster Tools, on-page optimization, HTML optimization, CSS optimization, server continuation optimization, CMS optimization. Google AdWords is a plus.

Interview Questions

What is your favorite part of SEO?

- Beginner: Really what you're looking for here is enthusiasm for a particular aspect of the job. Be sure to give plenty of tasks in this area to keep your employee interested.
- Intermediate: Look for a more specific answer like "The boost in ranking from properly crafted title tags." or "Increases in organic click through rates from description tag changes."
- Advanced: Expect an answer like "When an experiment I conduct causes a measureable increase in ranking and traffic." or "Fine tuning page load times and seeing subsequent increases in ranking."

What is your least favorite part of SEO?

Hiring professionals sometimes shy away from these loaded negative questions, but in the case of an SEO it's important to ask. Their answer can help you manage the employee or choose what aspects of the job to outsource to a consultant. At the very least, be diligent that whatever they say is their least favorite thing isn't a big part of the job or you can burn out your employee.

- Beginner: They might not have enough experience to give a proper answer. Their answers could range from technical aspects such as code editing and server administration or content creation.
- Intermediate: An intermediate SEO will probably respond with things that they don't quite have the experience to solve themselves. Some common answers are problems with Content Management Systems or link building.
- Advanced: The advanced SEO may respond with a wide range of things. Most likely it will be time-consuming tasks like content creation or manual link building. They could also answer with something that is bothering them at their current job, like lack of independence or red-tape for site changes.

What SEO sites / blogs do you read? Do you follow any SEOs on twitter?

- Blogs: SEOs must continuously read to stay up-to-date in this fast-paced industry. In 2013 alone, Google made over 2,000 changes to their ranking algorithms. Some extremely informative SEO related sites are WebmasterWorld, Search Engine Land, Search Engine Watch, Moz, Search Engine Journal, and our own SEOMike blog. Extra points if the candidate answers that they read

the Google Webmaster Blog because that is where Google announces new features and sometimes warns of upcoming algorithm changes.

- Twitter: There are hundreds of important SEOs to follow on Twitter but a couple of the most notable are Matt Cutts, Rand Fishkin, Bruce Clay, Lee Odden, Danny Sullivan, Alan Bleiweiss, and of course, SEOMike.

How familiar are you with Google Webmaster Tools and Analytics? Bing Webmaster Tools?

- Beginner: As a beginner position, don't expect proficiency. Some familiarity would be good, but there are plenty of training resources online if they aren't.
- Intermediate: In Google Analytics, expect them to be able to create custom dashboards, conversion goals, executive reports, examine traffic trends, identify weak content, and determine the site's effectiveness on mobile devices. Expect a good knowledge of Google Webmaster Tools and the ability identify items which require attention. Expect some familiarity with Bing Webmaster Tools, but don't be surprised if they don't use it.
- Advanced: Expect intimate knowledge of Google Analytics, maybe even certification. An advanced SEO should be able to take deep dives into analytics and quickly compile a list of action items based on the data they see. Their knowledge of Google Webmaster Tools should be intimate, and they should at least have used Bing Webmaster Tools.

Have you ever done link building? If so, did you do all the work yourself, or outsource?

Links remain a very important ranking factor to Google. Don't accept "any link building is spam" or "links don't matter" from an applicant because those statements are untrue. Link building is very important and extremely lucrative when approached from the mindset of relationship building. Do not outsource overseas if you have to augment your internal efforts.

- Beginner: Beginners have some experience, but probably lack the ability to identify potentially toxic link partners. Be very careful with what you expect them to do.
- Intermediate: Expect someone who has spent a lot of time trying to identify and acquire strong links. They should have a method to follow that yields success.
- Advanced: An advanced SEO should have a lot of experience with link building and some pretty advanced methods of identifying strong potential link partners. You may or may not expect them to conduct these efforts regularly. Be wary of burning out your advanced SEO on this task. Be sure to provide them with proper resources for content, collateral, design and development as these are all important parts of developing link bait.

What SEO tools do you use?

Some SEO tools are very good, if not required, to conduct a successful SEO campaign. However, be wary of applicants at all levels that rely heavily on SEO tools to conduct their daily tasks. They may lack the ability to conduct them without the tool. They might rely on some tools to do their analysis and guide their work on a site. If this is the case, they are relying on the knowledge of the person who created the tool *when it was created*. If it's an outdated tool, so is the advice. If the applicant comes from a larger company they may be used to tools that could be cost prohibitive for your organization. Some SEO tools cost well over \$1,000 per month.

- Beginner: None is an acceptable answer.

- Intermediate: An intermediate SEO may rely on some tools to automate their information collection. They should at least be familiar with tools to spider your website as Google does, as well as ranking reporting tools.
- Advanced: An advanced SEO should have experience with several tools and the ability to effectively use them to streamline their process. They should have a deep understanding of what the tools do and their limitations.

Do you know any programming languages? If so, which ones and how proficient are you?

- Beginner: Probably not strong on languages but should be familiar with HTML and CSS.
- Intermediate: Depending on their background they also might not be proficient in any language. Expect them to be able to interpret and troubleshoot HTML, CSS, Javascript, PHP, ASP.
- Advanced: May or may not be able to hand-code from scratch. Should be able to interpret, troubleshoot, and improve HTML, CSS, XML, Javascript, PHP, ASP, ASP.net, .htaccess, httpd.conf, and might even have knowledge of other languages.

What is your specialty within SEO?

If someone answers with server configuration or diagnostic / forensic investigation, you have a real winner. Regardless of their answer, dive a little deeper into their specialty. Caution: an answer of “I don’t really have one” or “I like it all” may indicate that they haven’t really faced any significant challenges to develop deep knowledge in any particular area.

- Beginner: Don’t expect a real solid answer because they probably haven’t been exposed to much.
- Intermediate: Their specialty is likely on-page optimization.
- Advanced: Their specialty is probably vague because they are probably pretty good at everything. They may call out some of their favorite tasks such as competitive analysis, server configuration, or on-page optimization.

Have you ever worked with server logs, AKA raw log files?

Raw log files are kept on the server and are the only way to analyze search engine robot activity on a website. If someone has experience with raw log files, and they are accessible on your server, go buy whatever program they want to use to analyze the logs. It is worth it.

- Beginner: “Raw what?” is acceptable.
- Intermediate: An intermediate SEO should have heard about them at some point and maybe even seen one before. They probably aren’t capable of any real decision making based on the contents.
- Advanced: An advanced SEO should know what they are, what information they contain, and what secrets they can unlock about search engine robot activity on your website. Ask them what their favorite log file analysis tool is because nobody does it by hand anymore.

Where did you learn SEO?

If a candidate references a training program they attended, take some time and investigate the course. See if they offer a certificate upon successful completion and examination. If they do and your candidate doesn’t have it, there might be an issue.

- Beginner: A beginner SEO might have learned from a more advanced SEO or an online course. Unless they are really sharp, beware of the self-taught because they would have a hard time sifting through the SEO myths that saturate the internet.
- Intermediate: Probably worked under a more experienced SEO and might have had online or in-person training. They may even have certifications from Google for AdWords and Analytics.
- Advanced: Probably self-taught but might have worked for a more seasoned SEO for a while. Probably took some training either at a conference or online.

Have you ever attended an SEO conference? If so, which one?

Conferences are pretty important in the SEO world for obvious reasons, but mainly because some valuable information is only passed verbally for fear that the secret would “get out” online.

- Beginner: Probably hasn’t attended any conferences.
- Intermediate: Has probably attended one or two conferences before. SMX, SMS, Mozcon, and Pubcon are some better-known conferences.
- Advanced: The advanced SEO is probably pretty well traveled. They should have a favorite conference. They probably attend Pubcon and SMX Advanced. They may even be a regular speaker.

What is the most impactful SEO thing you’ve done so far?

This is a hard one to answer because it can be difficult to pin down a single thing as “the most impactful”.

- Beginner: Expect answers regarding title tags, content, and error resolution.
- Intermediate: Answers will be a bit broader but will probably include code diagnostics, server issues, content optimization, and title / meta edits.
- Advanced: Expect a bit more confident response, but be aware that they aren’t likely to be too specific because they won’t want to give you any of their secret sauce until you hire them. They will probably have answers along the lines of intermediate SEOs, but with more challenging situations.

In what industries have you worked? (e.g. ecommerce, healthcare, financial)

The kinds of sites tell you a lot about their experience level. Small, niche sites usually have low competition levels so it’s relatively easy to rank well with a little effort. Industries like healthcare and finance are some of the most difficult. If your company is an ecommerce site, you need someone with an ecommerce background. Don’t expect them to give specific website names because they may be bound by NDAs.

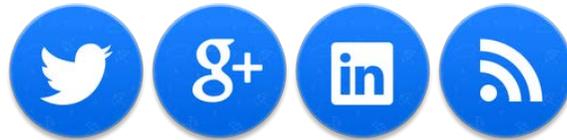
On what geographic areas have your efforts focused?

You want to ascertain if they have worked on a local, national or international scale. Different geographic targets require different skillsets. Someone with experience with a locally-focused site may flounder when working with an internationally focused site and vice versa.

Final Words of Advice

It could take a long time to get enough applications for your open position to feel comfortable that you've found the right candidate. If you do find the right candidate, act fast because every other company they interview with will want to hire them too. Don't be afraid to augment your less-than-skilled SEO with the services of a consulting firm. Engaging a firm like ours to do high-level brainstorming for your employee to execute will give you access to much more experience than is available to hire.

Be sure your salary is competitive by checking our [salary comparison page](#). We update it monthly so you can compare the pay you are offering to the national average. We also provide cost of living normalization because \$50,000 a year in Alabama goes a lot farther than it does in California. Larger companies are willing to pay for a skilled SEO to relocate, so knowing how your salary compares to other states is important.



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