How to judge a data candidate

A one-page scorecard for non-technical hiring managers · Carbon Data Solutions

My view, as the founder of a data company: you don't need to read code to judge a data candidate. You need to hear how they think about a real problem. Run these six questions in a first interview, score each 1 to 3, and pass the notes to your technical colleague for the next round.

1. Which data role is it?

Role	What the job actually is	Listen for	Listen for
Data analyst	Answers business questions with data and explains what the numbers mean.	Starts from the business question, not the chart.	Can say when a number looked wrong and how they checked it.
Data engineer	Gets data in from source systems and keeps it flowing reliably.	Talks about what happens when a pipeline fails at night: alerts, reruns, who gets told.	Explains a design choice in terms of cost, speed or reliability.
Analytics engineer	Turns raw data into trusted, tested tables and shared definitions the business reads from.	Has settled a disagreement about what a metric means ("what counts as an active customer?").	Mentions tests or checks on data, and documentation others actually use.
Data scientist	Uses statistics and models to answer questions or predict outcomes.	Can say how they knew a model or analysis was good enough to act on.	Describes a result that changed a decision, or one they chose not to ship.
ML / AI engineer	Puts models, including large language models, into products and keeps them working.	Talks about what happens after launch: monitoring, wrong answers, cost.	Can say what the model was compared against and why they chose it.

2. Six questions. Score each 1 to 3

Question and follow-up	3 · Strong	2 · OK	1 · Weak	Score
1. Problem framing **Ask:** Tell me about a problem you were asked to solve with data. What was the real question behind the request? **Probe:** How did you know it was the right question?	Restates the request in business terms, names who needed the answer and what decision it fed.	Describes the task clearly but not why it mattered.	Describes only the tools or the output ("I built a dashboard").	**__/3**
2. Depth on one real project **Ask:** Pick one project you're proud of. Walk me through it from the start. **Probe:** What would you do differently now?	Goes deeper with each follow-up; gives specifics on data sources, choices and results; names a change they'd make.	Clear outline, but runs out of detail after one or two follow-ups.	Stays at headline level or switches projects when pressed.	**__/3**
3. When things broke **Ask:** Tell me about a time the data was wrong or something broke in production. **Probe:** How did you find out, and what did you change so it wouldn't happen again?	Has a specific story, owns their part, describes the fix and the prevention.	Has a story but focuses on the fix only, not the prevention.	Can't recall one, or blames others entirely.	**__/3**
4. Explaining to non-technical people **Ask:** Explain that project to me as if I were the finance director. **Probe:** What did that person do with your answer?	Plain words, no jargon, leads with what it means for the business; you understand it.	Mostly clear, with some jargon they translate when asked.	Jargon-heavy, or you leave not knowing what they did.	**__/3**
5. Judgement and trade-offs **Ask:** What did you choose not to build, or decide to do more simply, and why? **Probe:** What did you give up by doing that?	Names a real option they rejected and the reason (time, cost, risk, who would maintain it).	Names a trade-off but in general terms.	Can't name one, or says every option was built.	**__/3**
6. Ownership **Ask:** Which part of that work was yours alone? What did you decide? **Probe:** Who would I call to confirm that?	Separates "I" from "we" without being asked; names their decisions and their results.	Mostly "we", but clear when prompted.	Only "we", or vague about their own part after prompting.	**__/3**
			Role signals heard: ☐ ☐ Total	**__/18**

3. How to use it

Before. Read the role spec and circle which role above it really is. Pick the two role-specific signals you'll listen for. Agree with the hiring manager what a pass looks like (for example, no 1s and at least three 3s).

During. Ask all six questions in order. Use the follow-up every time. Write down what they said, not your impression. Score straight after each answer.

After. Add the scores. Note any red flags. Hand the sheet to the technical interviewer so they test what you couldn't. Use the same sheet for every candidate on the role.

4. Red flags

- A list of tools with no story about using them.
- "We" throughout, never "I", even when asked.
- No failure story at all from someone claiming production experience.
- Can't explain their own project in plain words.
- Every answer is about the technology, never the business result.
- Title doesn't match what they describe owning. Titles vary; ask what they did.

Candidate: _____ Role: _____ Interviewer: _____ Date: _____

Want the skills tested too? Run a candidate you found through a skills assessment on carbon.talent. carbondatasolutions.com/recruiters