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Questions to ask your potential employer

The questions you ask during an interview are just as
important as those you answer

Particularly when vying for a management or executive position, intelligent questions showcase your intellect, your ability to dig up information, and your courage. Perhaps most importantly, they are the first step toward establishing a rapport with your prospective boss. Before you ask a single question, gather some background on the prospective company. Check the Internet for stories about the company. Look for profiles on top executives. Call an analyst who follows the company and conduct a brief phone interview. The information will allow you to ask detailed questions that show you are diligent and that you care enough to do some research. These 14 questions, suggested by executive recruiters, will not only tell you more about the prospective job, but will boost your chances of impressing the interviewer.

Goals & accomplishments

The first step to a winning interview is to find out what the employer expects of a topnotch employee:

- *What would you specifically expect me to accomplish in my first 6 to 12 months in the position?*

To excel, you need to know how the employer would measure your accomplishments:

- *What would be the specific criteria for measuring the success of my accomplishments in this position?*

By asking about specific goals, you can gauge the position's level of authority and responsibility:

- *What are your expectations for growth in the coming year? What are your sales targets? How much are you hoping to increase production?*

Problems & challenges

Going into the interview, you should be acquainted with the major strategic issues facing the company. It is very helpful, though, to get this information straight from the source. This is the perfect opportunity to display your familiarity with the matters at hand and to offer your own perspective.

- *What are some of the key challenges facing your business in the next six to 12 months?*

By asking about what is not going well within the company, you can gain valuable insight and show a willingness to ask a hard question:

- *What is the least satisfactory aspect of the company (job, unit)?*

Resources

A job interview is not the time to ask for improved manpower, budgets, and organizational support, but it can set the stage for future discussions so go ahead and ask about the current arrangement. You may want to suggest that specific resources could be granted to you incrementally, as targets, goals or deadlines are achieved. You can only be successful in your job if you have the support of your boss, and that support translates into money and talented staff. It is better to find out what the challenges are to getting adequate resources before you take the job.

- *How many staff members will I have? What are their strengths and weaknesses?*
- *Tell me more about the budget for this job. How is its use evaluated? Are there any limitations on how I could use that budget?*

Onward & upward

Getting a sense for what the possibilities for advancement are serves two purposes: it indicates ambition, but more importantly, it tells you if the position has the kind of future you want. And by asking about the potential for interacting with the senior executives on a regular basis speaks volumes about your confidence in yourself and your future.

- *Does the company promote from within?*
- *What directions can this position take me in the firm?*
- *What level of interaction would I have with the CEO or other top executives?*

Happy people

It is so simple, but so often overlooked. You should find out whether your potential colleagues enjoy coming to work. The best way to do this is to ask about turnover:

- *What is the turnover rate in this company (or division)?*

Asking questions that give you greater insight into the interviewer's place in the company will tell you if you are dealing with someone new who will not know the intricacies of the job, the company, or the people. It also turns the conversation onto the interviewer. People love to talk about themselves, and they often feel more positive about the interview without realizing exactly why.

- *How long have you been with the company? Why did you join the organization? What keeps you here?*

If you feel confident, it can be effective to inquire directly about what kind of background is best for the job. The interviewer's response may help you to assess the level of interest in you. And since recruiting, like courtship, is a series of escalating expressions of interest, it may just be appropriate. And remember, no one ever meets the profile of the perfect candidate:

- *What would the background of your ideal candidate for this job be?*

Another way to show ambition, not just to climb the ladder but to succeed in all jobs that you perform, is to ask a more general question:

- *What kind of person thrives at the company?*

And finally, there is always this one: If you were an animal, which one would it be? Just kidding. Humor can be a good tool in some cases but erring on the side of caution in your dialogue with a potential employer is always safer. The best advice is to follow the interviewer's lead and wait to see how they handle the discussion. Whatever the questions, the most important thing is to tell the truth. You want to promote the impression that you are opening yourself up to complete scrutiny. But be careful. Thoughtlessly revealing or overconfidently confessing too much to a potential boss can be a sure way to seem unprofessional and not get the job. Most importantly, you may have arduously researched the ins and outs of the company, but that does not mean you should proudly spout out questions and act like you are listening intently. Both may get you the job. But you will have missed some vital information that can make starting off, and succeeding, that much easier.