



"So, What Questions Do You Have for Us?"

Impress Prospective Employers by Asking Great Questions

Almost anyone who has interviewed for a job is familiar with the point at which the prospective employer asks, "So, do you have any questions for me?" Not everyone prepares for this moment, however, and "No, I don't think so," remains a surprisingly common response.

Candidates who decline to ask questions in an interview pass up a significant opportunity to advance their interests. Worse, this lack of initiative can leave the impression that either a) they don't particularly care whether they get the position, or b) they aren't knowledgeable enough to anticipate the types of issues involved in the work.

By contrast, asking thoughtful questions in a job interview allows candidates to:

- show you understand the types of issues facing the company,
- demonstrate how you would develop strategies to address such issues,
- highlight your critical thinking and problem solving skills, and
- underscore your interest by taking the time to research the individual company.

In a pool of otherwise equally qualified candidates, asking suitably crafted questions can help you stand out, and at the same time give you valuable information to help you decide whether you would accept an offer there.

1. What not to ask...

It should go without saying that an initial interview is not the time to ask questions about salary, vacation, or other benefits. Similarly, questions relating to turnover rates, how quickly staff are promoted, how often people move between practice groups, and where people go when they leave the job should wait until after an offer is made.

Remember that basic rules of interview etiquette continue to apply as you articulate what it is you want to know. Your interests are not advanced by coming across as a know-it-all, challenging why the company has or has not taken certain actions, or opining on matters you really don't know much about. You leverage the opportunity to showcase your skills only when the questions you pose are both substantive and appropriate in the context of an interview.

2. Use the opportunity to sell yourself...

While the interviewer is asking questions, candidates are well advised to respond directly to what is being asked. Once you have the floor, however, you can emphasize particular

skills, knowledge and experience that have prepared you for the job by incorporating them into your questions.

Example: “In my work on the Hill, I prepared a speech that Senator Jones gave at the annual meeting of a state-level PAC that had lobbied for reform. In researching the issues, I facilitated focus groups of his constituents, including local corporate executives, as well as interviewed senior federal officials in DC. I found that the obstacles to building support for this industry were tied to a lack of awareness of the impact on international markets. Have you found that to be the case?”

3. Show that you know something about the company...

Employers always like to see that you have done your homework and researched the company specifically. Demonstrate that you have done so by using this information in crafting your questions.

Example: “I saw on your website that the company has three divisions reporting to the General Counsel’s office. I was wondering to what extent attorneys in these divisions work together. How are matters that overlap those assigned areas handled?”

4. Anticipate issues that would confront you on the job...

Companies like to see that candidates are familiar with the issues they would confront on the job as it indicates you are more likely to “hit the ground running.” These issues can range from how the work gets done internally, the role of external partners, to policy, operational, PR, and legal considerations. You don’t necessarily have to resolve these issues—though, ideally you would cite an example of how you dealt with a similar issue in the past—but at least show that you are aware of them.

Examples: “What is the working relationship between the company’s attorneys and government lawyers from the agencies that regulate the area?” “How has the court’s interpretation of the Smith Act impacted the field?”

Examples: “How is work assigned to staff attorneys?” “Does the office have discretion in deciding whether or not to take on a particular case? What are the criteria used to decide?”

5. Pay attention and follow up...

Make sure that you listen carefully to the interviewer’s answers so you can analyze the information you receive and ask a follow-up question when appropriate. Starting a conversation can help them think of you as a colleague.

Example: “How would you distinguish the role of the Inspector General’s office vis-a-vis the other divisions involved in an investigation?”

Follow-up: “In the course of conducting an investigation, what interaction do attorneys in the IG’s office typically have with non-legal professionals--such as analysts, auditors,

investigators--throughout the agency?" "How open is that working relationship?"

6. Express interest in the interviewer's background...

Almost everyone likes to talk about themselves, and it is totally appropriate to ask about the interviewer's professional background and individual perspective. By asking for his opinion, you can often learn about career paths in the field and get a sense of the pros and cons of different work environments.

Examples: "Can I ask how you came to work here?" "What do you find challenging about this work?" "How does working in this office differ from your work in a law firm?"

7. Demonstrate interest in the company over the long term...

Interviewing and hiring people is expensive, so employers want people who are interested in staying in the job. You can indicate such an interest and also demonstrate that you understand the business by asking about the company's plans for future growth.

Examples: "Where do you see the company in ten years?" "What's the fastest growing practice area?" "Is there a particular skill set you think the company will need as it expands its practice?"

This article was written by Kate Neville, a graduate of Harvard Law School and founder of Neville Career Consulting, LLC in Washington, DC. Kate offers Lateral Link Members a complementary initial consultation.
