

The 7 Interview Questions You Must Ask

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There are no magic bullets when it comes to job interview questions, but the way you structure your queries is important: It's the interviewer's job to create a framework for the discussion and prevent it from running off the rails. Every company's needs are different, but a good basic strategy is to ground the interview in questions about past job performance. Then throw in some situational questions to evaluate practical decision making, and learn a little bit about how the job fits in with a candidate's biography.

Question #1: "How about those Yankees?"

Purpose: Develop the rapport needed to get the interview off the ground.

Every interview should begin with an icebreaker. It helps nervous applicants calm down and builds a sense of trust. If you have a 45-minute interview, you should spend at least the first five minutes trying to connect on a neutral topic. Make the person feel at ease and you'll solicit better information—and much more honest responses.

Alternate Version 1: "Did you go to the industry conference last week?"

Alternate Version 2: "Were you affected by the heat wave/cold snap?"

Alternate Version 3: "Did you have a good holiday?"

Question #2: "Talk about a time when you had to overcome major obstacles."

Purpose: Get a clear picture of the candidate's past performance.

Variations on this question should actually comprise your next several questions. Don't hesitate to guide the candidate through the variety of tasks (both tangible and theoretical) necessary to perform the job, and listen carefully to how he or she has handled such challenges. Pay attention to intangibles: some people are better at performing in interviews than on the job. If your candidate continually plays the role of hero or victim, that's a red flag that you're probably not getting the whole story.

Alternate Version 1: "Tell me about a time when you wrote a report that was well received. Why do you think it was successful?"

Alternate Version 2: "Describe a time when you hired (or fired) the wrong person."

Alternate Version 3: "If you had to do that activity again, how would you do it differently?"

Question #3: "What interests you about this position?"

Purpose: Find out how the candidate feels about the job and the company.

People apply for jobs for plenty reasons besides the obvious ones. Asking a candidate why he or she wants the position gives insight into their motivation. The answer may be personal (such as a narrative about what spurred them to seek a new job), or it may connect the candidate to the company: her experience with the brand, the mission statement, or the organization's role in the community. Any of these answers (or some combination) are acceptable—a personal answer can communicate trust, and a connection to the business indicates loyalty and a sense of ownership.

Alternate Version 1: "Where does this job fit into your career path?"

Alternate Version 2: "If you had to convince a friend or colleague to apply for this job, what might you tell them?"

Alternate Version 3: "What motivated you to apply for this job?"

Question #4: "Is there intelligent life in outer space?"

Purpose: Find out what kind of thinker the candidate is and how he deals with surprises.

This is your curveball, designed to make the candidate ad-lib instead of just reciting well-rehearsed answers. How much will he or she play along? As long as it's not too short or too long, virtually any response is a good one. But pay attention to attitude, the way the candidate approaches the problem, and the ease or difficulty they have in coming up with a response.

Alternate Version 1: "How many phone books are there in New York City?"

Alternate Version 2: "How do they get the cream filling inside a Twinkie?"

Alternate Version 3: "Why do people climb mountains?"

Question #5: "Imagine we've just hired you. What's the most important thing on your to-do list on the first day of work?"

Purpose: Learn about the candidate's judgment and decision-making skills.

This is an example of a situational question, which is like a behavioral question in that it's designed to assess judgment, but it's also like a curveball question because it illuminates the candidate's thought process. You want to see whether he demonstrates the competencies and priorities that are important to the job.

Alternate Version 1: "Say a coworker tells you that he submitted phony expense account receipts. Do you tell your boss?"

Alternate Version 2: "How would you handle an employee whose performance is fine but who you know has the potential to do better?"

Alternate Version 3: "What would you do if you got behind schedule with your part of a project?"

Question #6: "Why did you get into this line of work?"

Purpose: Measure the fit between the candidate's values and the culture of your company.

It risks a long, drawn-out answer, but this type of question will help you select candidates that fit your company's culture. It's not about finding people like you, or people with similar backgrounds that led them to your company, but about getting a sense of their values and motivations. Concepts like values and culture can be subjective and difficult to define, but you should be looking for someone whose work ethic, motivations, and methods match the company's. This isn't a quantitative measurement so much as a qualitative one. Coke and Pepsi may seem the same to people outside the soft-drink industry, but each houses people with different approaches to making cola and running a business.

Alternate Version 1: "What do you like best about your current job?"

Alternate Version 2: "When did you realize this would be your career?"

Alternate Version 3: "What keeps you coming to work besides the paycheck?"

Question #7: "But enough about you. What about us?"

Purpose: Find out if the candidate has done his or her homework.

It's a cliché to end an interview with the standard, 'So, any questions?' But the fact remains that you really do want to let the candidate ask a few things of you. Reversing roles communicates that the company seeks an open a dialogue, and it helps you ascertain just how curious and knowledgeable a candidate is about your company. If he doesn't ask any questions about the job or the business, it's a safe bet his heart isn't in it. Listen for insightful questions that demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the circumstances of the job, the company, the competitive landscape, or the industry.

Alternate Version 1: "Where do you think the company should be in ten years?"

Alternate Version 2: "What's your opinion of our new product?"

Alternate Version 3: "Have you seen the company's new ad campaign?"

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