

INTERVIEWS: MUST-ASK INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Takeaway Points

- Asking questions during an interview shows the interviewer that you're prepared, interested, confident, and a good communicator.
- The questions you ask can help uncover the employer's hiring goals and what they'll expect from the person who will fill the position.
- Interviewers want and expect you to have questions. It shows that you're interested in the opportunity, not just the paycheck.

By: Team Pongo

An interview is supposed to be a dialog, not an inquisition. If you don't have any questions prepared to ask the prospective employer, you're missing a huge opportunity. At your next interview, be sure to present at least five questions to illustrate your preparedness, your enthusiasm for the job, and your desire to ensure a good fit.

Both you and your interviewers should have a say in evaluating the potential match between the organization's needs and your ability and desire to fulfill them. If you fail to ask questions, you're making it more difficult for the employer to get a balanced idea of your qualifications and your personality – key elements of selecting a new hire. In effect, you're forcing them to decide if the opportunity is right for you.

Job candidates who don't ask questions may be perceived as unprepared, uninterested, overly nervous, or lacking communication skills. Don't let any would-be employer gain such a misperception.

The Five Must-Ask Questions

Here's a list of five must-ask interview questions, each followed by an explanation of why you must ask it, and what you want and don't want to hear in reply.

1. What created the need to fill this position?

Why it's a must-ask: The answer will tell you whether it's a vacated or newly created position, which can indicate whether the company is growing or holding steady. The answer will help you understand the business issues that affect the position and the broader context in which you would operate.

What you hope to hear: That it's a new position because the business is growing, sales are up, or they're launching a new project and need the expertise you can provide. Or, if it's an existing position, that your predecessor moved to a role of greater challenge or responsibility thanks to skills developed in this position.

What you don't want to hear: That the company is experimenting with a new offering or entering a risky new market that could affect your job security. Or that the person who held the position left because of conflicts with management (an issue that may still exist), or that there has been high turnover in the role.

2. What do you feel are the key skills required to succeed in this job?

Why it's a must-ask: The people who conduct job interviews are not always the same ones who write the job descriptions. In addition, business needs are always changing, and job descriptions don't always keep up. If you find out each interviewer's unique opinion about what's important for this job, you can tailor your responses to address their actual priorities.

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What you want to hear: Specific skills or qualities that the interviewer is seeking. The way they answer this question will reveal how much they have thought this through and how familiar they are with how the job fits into the overall business plan. The more specific they are, the better equipped you will be to highlight your talents in terms that address what the company is seeking.

What you don’t want to hear: Vague answers that seem to express an unwillingness to disclose, or inability to define, the requirements for success. Or, a list of skills that are not close to your talents or that point in a direction that’s different from where you hope to take your career.

3. What are the three biggest challenges I would face in the first six months?

Why it’s a must-ask: The question itself tells the interviewer you’re serious about the job and want to succeed. Knowing what the immediate challenges would be for the job will help you determine if this is a job you can - and want to - perform effectively, and whether doing so will help establish you as a strong player.

What you want to hear: Challenges that seem positive and reasonable, and that give you confidence you can meet them. The answer should also give you assurance that you either have the requisite skills or will receive the necessary tools and support to meet the challenges.

What you don’t want to hear: Hesitancy or evasiveness on the part of the interviewer, which might indicate a lack of familiarity with the job, or a reluctance to admit some unpleasant aspects. Another bad sign would be a list of long-term problems that previous employees have been unable to solve. You don’t want to “inherit” responsibility for impossible challenges.

4. What has to happen in the first six months to convince you that you’ve hired the right person?

Why it’s a must-ask: The answer can help you determine how critical the position is to the company, reinforce whether the required skill set for the position matches yours, and give you an indication of whether you can handle the demands of the job while you’re getting accustomed to your new workplace.

What you want to hear: Realistic short-term expectations that give you a chance to prove your value, thus helping you move toward your long-term career goals. Specific work-related goals might be mentioned, in addition to such factors as adopting the company’s mission as your own. Ideally, you want to know that there will be tangible accomplishments you can add to your resume for the next time you’re job hunting.

What you don’t want to hear: Expectations that are far beyond what can be accomplished within the first few months at a new job, or worse, the interviewers can’t really tell you what their expectations are.

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Did you know?

Pongo's Interview Tips video program provides 12 how-to videos for every stage of the interview, plus printable checklists and interview guides.

5. How does this position relate to the achievement of the boss's (or department's, or company's) goals?

Why it's a must-ask: The answer will tell you whether this is a critical position in the company that helps fulfill a key financial goal, enhance market position, or provide valuable support.

What you want to hear: It depends on what you want out of the job. If you want to be a highly visible, key player, you'll probably want to hear that it is indeed a critical position that directly affects the bottom line and draws the attention of senior executives. On the other hand, you may want to hear that this job is one of many positions that contribute indirectly to the organization's success.

What you don't want to hear: Again, it depends on what you're looking for. Everyone has different goals in the workplace, so what you don't want to hear is an answer that does not align with your objectives.

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