

Interviewing the Interviewer

John Kador

(An excerpt from 201 Best Questions to Ask On Your Interview by John Kador, to be published by McGraw-Hill, January 2002.)

The landscape for job seekers today is more treacherous than at any time in recent memory. If you want a job today, you may actually have to work for it.

"Now, Do You Have Any Questions?"

There are great questions and dumb questions and, worst of all, no questions at all.

The interviewer's last question is frequently the most important one. That's when the interviewer smiles and says: "Now, do you have questions for us?" Your response at this point often determines if you continue as a job seeker or transform into a job getter.

But first a quiz.

Of the following five behaviors candidates exhibit in job interviews, what behavior do you think recruiters find most unforgivable?

1. Poor personal appearance
2. Overemphasis on money
3. Failure to look at interviewer while interviewing
4. Doesn't ask questions
5. Late to interview

The answer is number 4. Surprised? Candidates who do not ask any questions represent the number one behavior that causes recruiters to lose confidence, according to my admittedly survey of over 150 recruiters, job coaches, and hiring managers. Still, it's not too bold to make this statement: you cannot succeed in a job interview without asking a number of well-considered questions.

Of course, even great questions will not get you a job offer if you come in with other problems. Here, in order, are the ten attitude strikeouts that most often condemn job candidates.

1. Doesn't ask questions
2. Condemnation of past employer
3. Inability to take criticism
4. Poor personal appearance
5. Indecisive, cynical, lazy

6. Overbearing, over aggressive, "know it all"
7. Late to interview
8. Failure to look at interviewer while interviewing
9. Unable to express self clearly
10. Overemphasis on money

Every job, interview, if the job seeker is lucky, gets to this stage of the job interview. What you do now controls whether or not you get an offer. The resume gets you in the door, but whether you leave as a job seeker or employee depends on how you conduct yourself during the interview.

"I want to know that the candidate in front of me is vested in the job interview," says Janice Bryant Howroyd, founder, CEO, and chairman of Torrance, CA-based ACT-1, the largest female, minority-owned employment service in the country. "If the candidate doesn't have any questions, that really clouds my estimation of their interest and ability to engage."

In fact, Bryant Howroyd's practice is to ask just one question, and then immediately throw the ball to the job seeker. Bryant Howroyd's first question, after greeting the job seeker, is:

What is your understanding of our meeting today?

How's that for turning the interview topsy-turvy? But Bryant Howroyd understands she can tell more from candidates by the quality of their questions than by the quality of their answers. The next instruction is even more surprising:

I would now like you to ask me seven questions.

Depending on the quality of the applicant's response to the first query, Bryant Howroyd invites the applicant to ask her from three to seven specific questions. The higher her initial estimation of the applicant, the more questions she requests. What's more, Bryant Howroyd gives the applicant permission to ask her any questions at all. No limits. And then she listens. "I learn a lot more about people by allowing them to ask me what they want to know than by having them tell me what they think I want to know," she says. True, the hiring company owns the identification of the applicant to be selected, but "the applicants I most admire insist on being full partners in the selection process," she says.

Now, are you really ready for an interview with Janice Bryant Howroyd?

Robin Upton is a career coach at Bernard Haldane Associates, the largest career management firm in the US. Based in the Dallas, TX office, Upton coaches her candidates to ask two questions of the hiring manager. The first question is:

Now that we have talked about my qualifications, do you have any concerns about me fulfilling the responsibilities of this position?

Does it seem counter-intuitive to ask the interviewer to articulate his or

her concerns? Many candidates think so. But they are being shortsighted, Upton argues. Once objections are stated, the candidate can usually address them in a way that is satisfactory. Unstated objections will doom the candidate every time.

Upton's second question is:

As my direct report in this position, what are the three top priorities you would first like to see accomplished?

This question, she says, effectively identifies the hot buttons of the hiring manager, demonstrates that the candidate understands the priorities, and underscores the candidate's commitment to action by the final word in the question. Remember, "accomplish" is a term dear to the heart of every hiring manager.

If you don't ask questions in the interview, many recruiters will wonder if you will avoid asking questions on the job. "If I set up a scenario for a technical candidate, and they don't ask qualifying questions, I really wonder if that is how they would approach an application development project," says Kathi Jones, Director of Employee Central at Avenail, a Seattle-based provider of extranet services. "Are they letting ego get in the way of asking the hard questions? Do they play on a team or play against the team? I think you can learn as much from someone's questions and their thought process as you can from the answers," she adds.

Here's another wrinkle. Recruiters expect candidates to ask enough questions to form a good opinion about whether they want the job or not. If you don't ask enough questions, recruiters who may otherwise be willing to make you an offer may nevertheless reject you because they have no confidence you know what you would be getting into. "At the end of the day, as the interviewer, I need to feel satisfied that the candidate has enough information on which to make a decision in case I make an offer," says Richard Kathnelson, VP of Human Resources at Syndesis, [Inc. in](#) Ontario, Canada. Open-ended questions that generate information-rich answers signal to Kathnelson that he is talking to a resourceful candidate who knows how to make informed decisions, a skill vital to any job.

Listen to Susan Trainer, senior Information Systems recruiter with RJS Associates in Hartford, CT. She interviews hundreds of candidates to determine if they represent a good fit for her client companies. "It makes me crazy when I ask a candidate if they have any questions and they respond with either:

No, you have answered them already, or

How many vacation days does your client give?

"There are so many things you can screw up in a job interview and not asking thoughtful questions when you have the opportunity is probably the biggest one. Interviewers want to know how candidates collect information, and the easiest way to know that is by listening to candidates ask questions," Trainer says.

"This is a real chance for a candidate to shine and set themselves apart from all the other job seekers. When I am prepping a candidate to go on an interview, I usually give them two or three very pointed questions to ask in the interview, and then we talk about another three for them to formulate," she adds. Her two favorites:

In what area could your team use a little polishing?
Why did you come to XYZ Company?

"The questions you ask, and how you ask them, do as much to differentiate you from the competition as the questions asked by the interviewer," Trainer insists. As you prepare for the job interview, your questions have to be as carefully coordinated as your suit and shoes. If you miss the opportunity to leave your interviewer with any one of these impressions, you risk losing the main prize.

Thoughtful questions emphasize that you are taking an active role in the job selection process, not leaving the interviewer to do all the work. Active is good. Great questions demonstrate that, far from being a passive participant, you are action-oriented and engaged, reinforcing your interest in the job.

Asking questions is an excellent way to demonstrate your sophistication and qualifications. The questions you chose indicate your depth of knowledge of our field as well as your general level of intelligence. Asking questions also enables you to break down the formal interview/candidate relationship, establish an easy flow of conversation, and build trust and rapport. The matter of rapport is critical. Remember, most finalists for a job are more or less evenly matched in terms of qualifications. What gives the winning candidate the nod is rapport.

Your questions steer the interview the way you want it to go. Questions are a form of control. You can also use questions to divert an interviewer's line of questioning. If you sense the interviewer is leading up to a subject that you'd rather avoid-your job hopping, for example-ask a question about another topic. After a lengthy exchange, the interviewer may not return to her original line of questioning.

The more senior the position you are seeking, the more important it is to ask sophisticated and tough questions. Such questions demonstrate your understanding of the subtext and context of this position, as well as your confidence in challenging the interviewer. Hiring managers will judge you as much on the inquiries you make as on the responses you provide. If you don't ask sufficiently detailed questions, it will demonstrate lack of initiative and leadership qualities that a senior level position demands.

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