

Your Turn to Ask Questions

In many situations, the questions you ask in an interview can be more revealing than the answers you give. Recruiters are looking for candidates who ask insightful questions throughout the recruitment process; they see candidates' questions for employers as clues about their analytical skills.

“[It's] always really disappointing to any interviewer when you get to the end of an interview and you ask, ‘Do you have any questions I can answer for you?’ and they say, ‘Nope, I think you answered them all,’ and that's the end of it,” says Kent Kirch, global director of recruiting at professional services firm Deloitte. “It's just really frustrating...I think as a candidate, part of the homework piece is having a really tough question for an interview. For me, I just love it when someone asks a really difficult question -- something that takes some guts to ask.”

Questions are also a sign of enthusiasm, something most recruiters and hiring managers desperately want to see. “The way to show interest is by asking follow-up questions, really taking interest in what they're doing and showing that you've done some research as well,” says Austin Cooke, director of global recruitment at Sapient, a technology consulting company.

The Best Types of Questions

There's no standard set of good questions to ask employers. “The questions should be thoughtful, not canned, because any good recruiter is going to know somebody told you to ask that question, and that's a turnoff,” says Jennifer Scott, head of recruitment for Petro, the nation's largest heating oil service and delivery company. “I hate it when people have a list of generic questions.”

Recruiters suggest asking questions specific to the company and industry you're exploring. The best candidates “ask really well-thought-out questions that show that you know the [interviewer's] business,” says Kirch. “You know their company to some extent, and you've thought about your question. It all goes back to preparation, and it tells the interviewer you thought about this interview before you walked in the door.”

Many recruiters also like to see someone latch onto a point from the interview and delve into it more deeply. “Show me you can think on your feet,” says Scott.

Five Starter Questions

While you should always customize your questions for the particular job and situation, here are five to get you started.

1. Can you tell me about the culture here?

Company culture can be a bit difficult to get a handle on until you walk through the door and experience it yourself. The interview is a great time to ask questions that reveal the company's personality.

2. Would you mind telling me about how your career got you to this point?

This question is good on two levels: It gives you a chance to learn a bit about potential coworkers or potential bosses, and it's also a nice ego rub for the interviewer. “People love to talk about themselves, so if you can get the interviewer talking about themselves, you're one step up,” explains Cooke.

3. Can you tell me about your management style?

If you're interviewing with the person who may be your boss, it's important to understand how he'll manage you and the people around you.

4. What do you think the company's biggest weakness is?

The interviewer's answer to this question should reveal a few things. It will give you a sense of some of the challenges you'll face if you end up joining the team, and it gives you a sense of how your potential coworkers handle sticky questions. It may also provide some insight about how forthright they are.

5. What's your biggest source of job satisfaction?

This question can help you understand both what makes your potential workmates tick and what they think the company's strengths are.