

Conscious Careering



Want to shine in the interview process? Ask lots of smart questions—and put them in context!

Matthew B. Youngquist

Every hiring manager has a few pet peeves and turn-offs when it comes to the interviewing process. In my case, nothing alienates me more from a potential candidate than when I ask if they have any questions at the end of the interview, and they come back with the flaccid response “Gosh, no, I can’t think of any. I think we’ve covered just about everything!”

Whenever I hear this answer, I want to reach out, shake the person, and say “Are you kidding me? In under an hour you think that we’ve talked through every possible aspect of this job and the specific challenges you’d be facing?”

Now granted, perhaps I’m a harsh critic when it comes to such things. After all, I’m a career coach by trade and likely to hold people up to some unfairly high standards when it comes to selling themselves. This disclaimer aside, however, I can’t help but penalize any candidate who fails to ask insightful, thought-provoking questions at the end of an interview when given the opportunity. In my mind, such behavior shows either a profound lack of interest in the position or an equally profound lack of intellectual curiosity, both items I consider to be enormous liabilities in an employee.

But believe it or not, the focus of this column isn’t merely to berate people into asking more questions in interviews. Most people have figured out that they need to have at least a few rudimentary items ready for the interviewer when the time comes. So let’s move on, instead, and talk about a more sophisticated interviewing technique that isn’t quite as well known—and has a far greater likelihood of setting you apart from your competition. It’s a concept I refer to as “tee-up questioning” and the basic rule of thumb is this: in the interview process, before asking any question, take a few seconds to put the question in context and explain *why* you’re asking it in the first place.

Let’s assume, for example, that you’ve suddenly found yourself in the job market and have managed to land an interview for a Marketing Manager position. You’re a little bit nervous, since it’s been a few years since you last had to “prove yourself” to a potential employer, but you’ve spent hours anticipating the likely questions you’ll face and feel pretty

well-prepared for the challenge. So finally the day of the interview comes, you breeze through most of the hiring manager’s agenda, and then you’re asked at the end of the meeting whether you have any questions, yourself. Knowing this moment would come, you jump right in, saying: “Yes, actually, I do. For starters, can you tell me the biggest challenges I’d face in the first 90 days if I was hired for this position?”

Not bad. Not bad at all. This is definitely one of the better questions you could possibly ask in this situation, since it gets the interviewer to disclose additional details about the job and will likely dislodge some valuable feedback you can use to promote your candidacy. If nothing else, it’s far superior to turkeys such as “Can you tell me what your company does?” or “How much vacation would I get, exactly?”

Before you pat yourself on the back too vigorously, however, hear me out. As good as this question was, there’s still substantial room for improvement if you truly want to interview up in the big leagues. Just asking a good question won’t be enough to set you apart from other savvy, well-spoken candidates. So instead of belting out your inquiry, without hesitation, try leading up to the question gradually, putting it in context, and explaining why the answer you’re requesting is important to you. Taking this “tee-up” approach, your revised statement might sound something like this:

“Ms. Smith, I do have one question for you, actually. Knowing that your last employee left this position rather suddenly, and having done a fair amount of hiring in the past, myself, I would imagine there are some important tasks and challenges you’re hoping the person you hire will be able to tackle immediately. Perhaps a few projects have been left unfinished or some key accounts haven’t received the level of service they deserve as of late. Do any issues like this come to mind with regard to this position? Or are there any other critical problems you’re hoping the person you hire will be able to get resolved within the first 90 days?”

As you can see, this latter approach adds an entirely new dimension of credibility to your presentation. While anybody can memorize a few canned questions out of a book, don’t miss this golden opportunity to show off the true depth of your experience. Add a couple of extra details at this point of the hiring encounter, reveal your thought process, and demonstrate to the employer that you have an empathic shared understanding of their needs and challenges!

MATTHEW B. YOUNGQUIST is a Bellevue-based career coach and outplacement consultant who has personally helped over 3,500 professionals address and overcome the unique challenges of employment transition. He currently owns his own consulting practice, Career Horizons, LLC, where he can be reached at (425) 450-4960 or via e-mail at matt@career-horizons.com.