Questions to Ask in an Interview

If you’re preparing for interviews, you might be wondering about the questions you’ll be asked. That’s a good start—you need to anticipate interviewers’ interests and your answers to their queries. But what about your questions? Is it ever appropriate to come with your own list of items to be clarified or explained?

In a word: Yes. Not only is it appropriate to ask questions of your own, but not doing so puts you at risk for looking disengaged from the process. It can actually backfire for you to simply wait for each topic to be introduced by the interviewer. Think of it this way: Which is more fun and interesting when two people play tennis—for one person to repeatedly toss a ball for the other to hit, or for both to hit the ball back and forth in a natural rhythm? Of course it’s the latter scenario. When everyone at the interview table takes a turn at directing the conversation, the meeting produces better insights for all.

When and how to ask your questions

That said, if you’re the candidate, it’s important to recognize the nuances of this particular game of tennis. While you can (and probably should) come to the table with questions prepared, you shouldn’t assume that your questions take precedence over those of the interviewers. They wouldn’t be amused by a candidate who whips out a grocery list of concerns and begins to read. The better course would be to introduce your questions in one of these three ways:

1. By tagging the question onto the back of your answers to their questions. For example, “…and that pretty much covers the research project I’ve been on this year. Which brings me a question I was hoping to ask the committee: Can you clarify more about the role research would play in this position?”

2. By responding to their invitation, often near the end of the interview, when they might ask, “What questions do you have for us?” This can be an ideal time to bring your questions forward, but if the interview is running long, you may find that they aren’t fully attentive—watch for people closing their notebooks or checking their watches as signs that they aren’t as focused as you’d like them to be.

3. By connecting back to one or more interviewers after the meeting to ask your questions more fully. This can be a good technique if you forgot to bring up your concerns during the meeting, or if time was running short.

Which questions to ask?

It’s one thing to pose your questions at an appropriate time—but how do you know which questions to ask? This can be something of a double-edged sword. Refrain from asking any questions at all and you could look uninterested in the position; but ask the wrong questions, or at the wrong time, and you could seem shallow or un-informed, or just focused on the wrong aspect of the job or hiring process.

To avoid these kinds of errors, it helps to match your questions to each stage of the interview process. Here are three common interview stages and the questions you can safely ask at each point.

The Screening Interview. This is usually a phone or Skype session, frequently conducted by an internal or external recruiter. Since this person usually wouldn’t be working with you and may not even belong to the department or organization, questions about specific aspects of the job might not be very useful. On the other hand, this is an excellent time for questions about the hiring process itself, including:

- Can you tell me how many rounds of interviews you’re planning for this process?
- What kind of timeline are you trying to meet for bringing a candidate on board?

This might also be a good time to ask questions specific to the setting. For example, “I understand the hospital has two locations, about an hour apart. Would the person doing this job be working in both locations?”

The First In-person/Group Interviews. When you are invited to meet in person with one or more interviewers, you can ask more relevant questions. If the meetings are scheduled as a series of brief one-on-ones in tight succession, you might not have much time to squeeze in multiple questions. In those situations, you’ll be glad if you’ve conducted prior research on each person you’ll be meeting, as you can direct a question to his or her research or other specific details about the work you might be doing together.

On the other hand, if your initial in-person conversations are conducted with a panel of interviewers, or as a longer session with one person, you can go into more depth on
the issues that concern you. For example, you might ask for specifics relating to the practice or department such as:

• From my research, I can see this is a very busy practice. How many patients do the doctors typically see in a day?

• I understand everyone on the clinical research team also has an academic appointment. Can you tell me more about the teaching responsibilities I’d be handling?

**Additional In-person Interviews.** If you are spending the day on-site for a series of interviews, or if you’re invited back for more intense conversations, you have the opportunity for even more insightful questions. This is the time to confirm your understanding of the organization and the role you would play.

For example, if you were being considered for a private practice, you’d want to know more about the types of patients the practice serves, as well as some business metrics related to things like the geographic range covered by the practice, threats and opportunities posed by competing practices, and the composition of the clinical team you’d be working with. Likewise, if the position you’re considering involves research, this is the stage to ask about such logistics as protected time and the expected frequency of published journal articles for the person in the role.

Inherent in these types of questions is the assumption that you’re evaluating the organization as much as they’re evaluating you. At this stage of the process, this type of discussion is expected and welcomed, whereas it could have seemed presumptuous had you dived in so deeply in the initial conversations.

As you’ve probably divined by now, job interviewing is more of an art than a science. If you change up the order of these questions or ask something different altogether, you won’t be breaking any rules—you just need to have a strategy to ensure you don’t squander the time you have with interviewers by asking questions at the wrong level, or by missing the opportunity to ask questions altogether. However you decide to go about this, don’t forget to enjoy yourself. If you remember that some of these interviewers will be your future colleagues, you won’t have any problem holding up your end of the conversation.