Interview this week? The 5 questions volley that can win it for you!

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You’re expected to respond to questions – not ask them, right? Wrong. A good interviewer will always open the stage up for you to ask questions about the company and your role. Here are 5 questions you should always ask.

Well, that was a relief. You’ve come through the main part of the interview with flying colours. You believe your responses to the questions were adeptly handled and you presented yourself well – even if you do say so yourself.

Then there’s the one curveball you didn’t expect: do you have any questions for us?

It seems so innocuous, yet this question, which usually comes at the end of the conversation, can sometimes separate the good from the great candidate. It’s easy to forget – under the pressure of trying to present yourself as best you can – that an interview is a two-way street. You are entitled – and indeed sometimes expected – to ask some questions.

As always, it’s best to be pre-prepared. Have something in mind to ask.

Here are 5 prompters to get you going:

Why does this vacancy exist?

Is it a new role or are you replacing someone else? If so, why did they leave? The response may give you some clues as to the happiness of employees and whether or not you can expect career progression. A new role, on the other hand, may bring its own challenges and expectations – for both yourself and the employer.

How will you assess my performance?

Employers are either ‘old school’ when it comes to performance management – once or twice yearly reviews, little to no interaction between manager and employee between those times – or they will be more contemporary in their approach. This latter approach has been adopted by smaller start-ups as much as by multinational giants (GE, Accenture etc). It scraps the annual formal review and replaces it with regular performance catch-ups – sometimes daily or weekly. There is no formal ‘points’ allocation on a 1-5 performance chart and remuneration/bonus’ are treated separately from performance. The key is transparency and instantaneous feedback.

Who will be my direct manager/supervisor?

We all know that people join an organisation and leave a manager. Indeed, research from Gallup reveals that the impact of a direct manager can have significant impact on employee happiness – and as much as a 70% variance in employee engagement scores. Are they in the interview with you? If not, you can still ask: How long they’ve been with the company? Are they based in the same office? (perhaps they are based in another city or even another country). And most importantly, how do they find working there (if they are being honest they should be willing to share).

How is the company planning to handle x?

….where ‘x’ is a key challenge or potential upheaval. In an age of ‘disruptors’ (look at the publishing world struggling with digital, taxis dealing with Uber and travel agents taking a hit from AirBnB) it pays to ask what’s in store. Not only does it show that you have given some thought to the organisation (and possibly even the department in which you will work) and the industry in which it operates, but you might also gain some insights into what may well be a very legitimate concern and provide a glimpse into the strategic vision of the company leaders. For example, is the competition about to launch a new product line or service that will redefine the industry? Ask and gauge the reaction.

What opportunities do you have for professional development?

Let’s face it: even in the most altruistic business it’s every person for him or herself. You need to look out for number one – yourself – and one way to do that is by keeping your skills fresh. So, what’s on offer? Many employers now recognise the importance of continuous learning as a retention tool and will offer everything from short courses to mentoring/coaching, through to longer term commitments like co-funding Masters degrees. Asking this question also highlights that you plan to build a career in the company. With ‘job hopping’ the norm for many employees today, this might just hit the mark with an employer keen to retain people for a little longer.

Standing out from the pack

You should of course know the company inside out prior to going for an interview, but asking the right questions will not only provide you with valuable additional information to factor into your decision-making process, but may also just be the thing to help you stick out from the competition.