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INTERVIEWING

ask to succeed

Can I eat at my desk?

Why is this position vacant?

How will I know I have met your goals?

Where should I call for

What do you think will be tough to do?

A Question of Competence

The questions you ask during an interview often determine whether you get the job.

By Debra Donston-Miller

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE. It's the point in the job interview when you've answered every question thrown at you in a pointed, authoritative, relevant manner.

"Now, do you have any questions for me?" the interviewer asks.

This is the make-or-break moment of the interview, say experts, especially in a market with more candidates than jobs. It's your chance to demonstrate your insight into the organization at which you're interviewing, your industry acumen, your communications and people skills, and your desire for the job.

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The First Questions to Ask On the Job

You've outgrown new-kid jitters; the first days in a senior position are no time to clam up.

By Debra Donston-Miller

YOU'VE BEEN OUT OF WORK FOR MONTHS.

You got the interview.

You nailed the interview.

You got the job.

You can't screw up.

You have to hit the ground running.

Now what?

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- Walk Out of a Job Interview in a Blaze of Glory *Page 6*

What did you think of this package? Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at matthewr@theladders.com.



Who's Asking the Questions Here?

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

AS A REPORTER of many years' standing, I'm used to asking lots of questions. Here at TheLadders, I ask my colleagues for their insights into the job search, I ask job seekers and HR pros for perspectives from both sides of the desk, I ask my team to go out and explore the trickiest questions that might arise in the employment market. ... I may even have asked you a few questions about your experiences!

But even for a professional questioner, it's hard to shake the notion that a job interview is primarily a place

for me to *answer* my prospective employer's questions, not ask my own. (Maybe it's because candidates are accustomed to talking about job interviews as if they were oral exams that they can pass or fail.)

As Debra Donston-Miller reports in this week's package, what you ask both before and after you're hired can be every bit as important as what you *answer* — especially when jobs are scarce.

Now, I assume anyone in a senior position realizes that you need to demonstrate some focused interest in the

job. But in the big leagues, it's essential that your questions in interviews and during your first weeks in a new position demonstrate the same experience, insight and drive as your answers. Follow the directions in these articles to "walk out of your job interview in a blaze of glory," to quote contributing columnist Scott Ginsberg.

Now, one final question: What questions have worked for you in *your* career? Write me at matthewr@theladders.com with your stories and suggestions. ■

How to Answer the 'Tell Me About Yourself' Interview Question

Don't be afraid of this question; instead use it as an opportunity to position yourself for success.

By Lee E. Miller

WHEN I WAS a human-resources executive doing hiring interviews, I almost always began my interviews with candidates by requesting, "Tell me about yourself." I did that for a number of reasons, the most important of which was to see how the candidates handled themselves in an unstructured situation.

I wanted to see how articulate they were, how confident they were and generally what type of impression they would make on the people with whom they came into contact on the job.

I also wanted to get a sense of what they thought was important.

Most candidates find this question to be a particularly difficult question to answer. That is a misplaced view. This question offers an opportunity to describe yourself positively and focus the interview on your strengths. Be prepared to deal with it. These days, it's unavoidable. Like me, most interviewers start off their interviews with this question. A lot of interviewers open with it as an icebreaker or because they're still getting organized,

but they all use it to get a sense of whom you are.

The wrong response

There are many ways to respond to this question correctly and just one wrong way: "What do you want to know?" That tells me you have not prepared properly for the interview and are likely to be equally unprepared on the job. You need to develop a good answer to this question, practice it and be able to deliver it with poise and confidence.

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*Beck*

“The worst thing you could do in an interview — other than passing gas — is to say, ‘I don’t have any questions — you’ve answered them all,’” said Mitch Beck, president of Crossroads Consulting, an executive search firm and employment agency. “Who wants to work with somebody who doesn’t have

any inquiries about the company? It shows that you have no brains.”

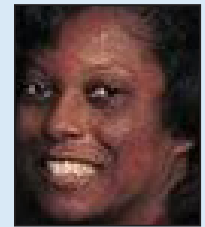
It’s your last chance to win over the interviewer, and this scenario puts pressure on the candidate to enter the interview prepared to ask thoughtful, focused questions of their own, said Cheryl Palmer, a certified executive career coach and the founder of Call to Career, a firm that provides C-level executives with career coaching and resume-writing services.

“That’s your last opportunity to really show to that employer, ‘Yes, I’m the best candidate for the job,’” Palmer said. “I always advise people to do their homework and to work any information they’ve gleaned from their research into their questions so that they really come across as well-prepared candidates.”

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Now, ask the questions you didn’t, or couldn’t, ask during the interview. The ones that will help you do everything from effectively managing your budget to knowing what to wear on Fridays. It’s also your chance to find out about the culture and personality of the company at a level of detail that would have appeared presumptuous to ask during the interview phase. But job seekers still need to respect protocol and mind their manners in approaching their future co-workers and managers, experts said.

“The first thing I would tell people is keep it positive,” said Cheryl Palmer, a certified executive career coach and the founder of Call to Career. “For example, ask a co-worker, ‘What do you like most about the boss?’ Don’t ask, ‘What do you hate about the boss?’ When you’re first starting out, you want to be on good terms with everybody.”

*Palmer*

Veterans of the organization are also likely to be suspicious of newcomers digging for dirt, she said. “Those who know the ropes don’t want to be seen as being negative about the company or the boss or anything else,” Palmer said. “The best thing is to keep it positive, and people are more likely to want to answer your questions.”

The right response

To help you prepare, I spoke to a number of career coaches on how best to respond when faced with this question. Heed the career advice that follows to ace this opener.

The consensus of the coaches with whom I spoke:

- Focus on what most interests the interviewer
- Highlight your most important accomplishments

Focus on what interests the interviewer

According to Jane Cranston, a career coach from New York, “The biggest mistake people being interviewed make, is thinking the interviewer really wants to know about them as a person.

They start saying things like ‘Well, I was born in Hoboken, and when I was three we moved...’ Wrong. The interviewer wants to know that you can do the job, that you fit into the team, what you have accomplished in your prior positions and how can you help the organization.”

Nancy Fox, of Fox Coaching Associates, agrees. She notes that “many candidates, unprepared for the question, skewer themselves by rambling, recapping their life story, delving into ancient work history or personal matters.” She recommends starting with your most recent employment and explaining why you are well qualified for the position. According to Fox, the key to all successful interviewing is to match your qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. “In other words, you want to be selling what the buyer is buying.”

Think of your response as a movie preview, says Melanie Szlucha,

Good question

J.B. Bryant is president at Strategic Alignment Group, a management consultant that helps businesses identify their competitive advantages. He said job hunters should look at the questions they ask during an interview as their opportunity to create brand equity.

“Something has to set you apart, more so, maybe, in this economy, because the employers are churning through so many potential people,” he said.

A safe way to impress an interviewer is to know everything there is to know about the company, the industry and the interviewer herself.

“Know everything you can about a company before you interview,” Beck said. “Do a simple thing like Google the person you are going to interview with.”

The questions you bring to an interview help the employer determine whether you are a good fit for the company, but they also help determine whether the company is a good fit for you.

Prospective employees may be tempted to take any job port in an economic storm, especially if they have been job hunting for an extended period of time, but a bad fit won't benefit anyone in the long run.

“I think it's helpful for candidates being interviewed to come up with good, thoughtful questions that are going to accomplish two purposes,” Palmer said. “They need to

One particularly thorny issue for new hires is how to deal with internal candidates you beat for the job, some of whom you will need to work alongside or manage in the future. Kelley Rexroad, founder of KREX Consulting, a human-resources consulting firm, recommends new hires identify any internal candidates whom were overlooked in the hiring process and reach out to smooth feathers you wouldn't otherwise know were ruffled.

“You want to be sensitive to their feelings and hear their ideas,” she said. “The person could feel passed over, think you are making more money than they are. Without that knowledge, you may feel a cold shoulder and wonder why. You can win over the person with something like this: ‘I understand that you applied for this role. What about it interested you?’ Then engage him or her: What do they think will be tough to do? What do they think the priorities are, and what do they want to work on now? It may be possible to turn that person into a successor in the future.”

Lisa Quast, president and founder of Career Woman Inc. and a certified executive coach and author, recommends new hires reach out both to their new boss and new co-workers.

Ask your new boss about goals and objectives but also about what keeps her up at night. “I like to find out what worries my boss the most so I can determine creative ways

a coach with Red Inc. “The movie preview always relates to the movie you're about to see. You never see a movie preview for an animated flick when you're there to see a slasher movie. So the ‘tell me about yourself’ answer needs to directly fit the concerns of your prospective employer.”

Previews are also short but show clips of the movie that people would want to see more of later. They provide enough information about the movie so that you could ask intelligent questions about what the movie is about. Hiring managers don't want to look unprepared by reading your resume in front of you, so Szlucha

advises “to provide them some topics to ask you more questions about.”

Highlight your most important accomplishments

Greg Maka, managing director at 24/7 Marketing, advises job seekers to “tell a memorable story about your attributes.” For example, if you tell an interviewer that people describe you as tenacious, provide a brief story that shows how you have been tenacious in achieving your goals. “Stories are powerful and are what people remember most,” he said.

One great example is that of Fran Capo, a comedienne who bills herself as “the world's fastest-talking female.” She offers the following advice: “Whenever I go on auditions or interviews. I have a ‘set’ opening I use. ... I tell the interviewer what I do in one sentence and then say, ‘And I also happen to be the Guinness Book of World Records’ fastest-talking female.’ Then I elaborate.” According to Capo, the main thing in anything you do is to be memorable, in a good way. Your goal when you answer the ‘tell me about yourself’ question is to find a way stand out from everyone else.

be able to demonstrate to that potential boss that they have really thought about the job and have some good, probing questions. But they also need to ask questions that will help them determine whether or not this is going to work out.”

Beck went further, emphasizing that the interview is the prospective employer’s opportunity to convince you that the company will be a good fit for your needs. The interview is also a chance for the job seeker to turn the tables and get more information out of the employer.

“Remember that an interview is a two-way street,” Beck said. “You have to convince the person who is interviewing you that they need to hire you. But remember: You’re not there to beg. They need to convince you just as much as you need to convince them.”

Accordingly, one of the most important questions to ask during an interview relates to expectations, Bryant said.

“In my experience, expectations are not communicated very clearly,” he said. “Most people — at every level — come in, and there seem to be an awful lot of assumptions being made, both on the new employee side and on the employer side. You hear people say that it takes six months to get integrated into a company and to really be productive. Well, it doesn’t need

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to help alleviate her worries, such as through new projects, improving processes, etc.,” said Quast in an e-mail to TheLadders. “Companies look for employees who add value, so try to find creative and inspiring ways to show how much value you can add.”

Quast suggests asking co-workers what they are working on and how you can help. “This will give you a good picture of the projects being worked on by individuals, as well as projects that are larger in scope and being worked on by many within or even outside the department,” she said.

What not to wear

Of course, in addition to goals and objectives, you also want to know what to wear on Fridays. Many of the experts interviewed by TheLadders said it’s important early on to engage your co-workers in a discussion about the corporate culture.

Linda Matias, author of “201 Knock-out Answers to Tough Interview Questions: The Ultimate Guide to Handling the New Competency-Based Interview Style,” suggests digging to find out what type of personality succeeds with the company.

“Every organization has its own culture,” she said. “Team members with certain personalities may get no-

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And, be brief

Maureen Anderson, host of “The Career Clinic” radio show, stresses the importance of keeping your answer short: “The employer wants to know a *little* bit about you to begin with — not your life story. Just offer up two or three things that are interesting — and useful. You should take about a minute to answer this question.”

To make sure it is succinct and covers what you want it to cover, she suggests that you “write your answer out before the interview, practice it,

time it and rehearse it until it sounds natural. Then practice it some more. The goal is to tell the employer enough to pique their interest, not so much that they wonder if they’d ever be able to shut you up during a coffee break at the office.”

Rather than dread this question, a well-prepared candidate should welcome this inquiry. Properly answered, this question puts the candidate in the driver’s seat. It gives candidates an opportunity to sell themselves. It allows them to set the tone and direction for the rest of the interview, setting them up to an-

swer the questions they most want to answer. ■

A veteran human-resources executive, Lee E. Miller is a career coach and the author of “UP: Influence Power and the U Perspective — The Art of Getting What You Want”



and “Get More Money on Your Next Job ... In Any Economy.” He may be contacted at Lee@YourCareerDoctors.com.

Walk Out of a Job Interview in a Blaze of Glory

How to answer the “So, do you have any questions for me?” interview question and make an impression your interviewer won’t soon forget.

By Scott Ginsberg

Picture this: The job interview is (almost) over.

You’ve answered all their questions.

You’ve jumped through all their hoops.

You’ve taken all their tests, assessments and personality profiles.

Meanwhile, your brain hurts from overthinking. Your butt is numb from oversitting. And by now, you’ve managed to sweat right through that crisp, new white shirt you bought just for today.

“Just *hire* me already!” You think.

Not so fast. There’s still one thing left to do: **Walk out of that interview in a blaze of glory.**

Today I’m going to teach you a job-hunting strategy that will instantly make you more approachable; hireable; employable; promotable; buyable; bookable; unforgettable; and, most importantly, call-back-able.

And all of it hinges on your ability to respond effectively to one of the most common (yet one of the most underleveraged) interview questions:

“So, do *you* have any questions for *me*?”

Prospective employers almost always ask this one – especially at the end of the interview. And most job-hunting books, interviewing resources and career coaches will advise you to respond with intelligent, creative questions such as:

- Why is this position vacant?
- Do you promote from within?
- Do you have a formal training program?
- What are the future goals of the company?
- How will I know that I have met your goals?
- Why did you choose to work for this company?
- How would you describe your company’s culture?
- How will my performance be evaluated, and how often?
- What is the average work week of the person who will fill this job?
- Will I be hearing from you or should I contact you?

Those are great questions. They’re smart, focused and goal-oriented.

There’s only one problem: Everybody else asks them, too.

And that instantly eliminates the probability of standing out.

Here’s the reality

The less boring and normal you are – and the more rules to which you are the exception – the more hireable you will become.

So, try this: Next time your interviewer asks, “So, do *you* have any questions for *me*?” I triple-dog-dare you to answer with one of the following responses:

1. Do you see any gaps in my qualifications that I need to fill?
2. Are there any reasons I’m not fully qualified for this position?
3. Is there anything I’ve said today that might hurt my chances of being hired here?
4. Now that you’ve had a chance to meet and interview me, what reservations would you have in putting me in this position?
5. What have accidentally I said or done during today’s interview that’s inconsistent with your perfect candidate for this job?

Here’s why this strategy works:

You *put* the interviewer on the spot. After all, you’re not the only one being interviewed here. So, turning the tables in this manner helps you maintain power because – contrary to popular conditioning – the listener controls.

You *prove* counterintuitive thinking. I don’t care if you’re applying to work the night cleanup shift at Reggie’s Roadkill Cafe – employers love people who think this way. Not just someone who “is” unexpected – but someone who actually thinks unexpectedly.

You *demonstrate* openness to feedback. My great friend, Joe Rotskoff, HR manager at Crescent Plumbing Supply in St. Louis, was the person who first educated me on this interview approach. “The secret is twofold,” Rotskoff said. “First, you display openness to how others experience you. Second, you show a dedication to improving self-awareness. And that’s exactly the type of employee companies seek to hire in this tough economy.”

You *exhibit* dedication to personal improvement. Which makes you an employee who adds value to the net worth of her human capital – and, therefore, the net worth of the company’s assets – every day. Wow.

You *close* the sale. Job interviews are sales calls. Period. You’re selling the company on you, your skills and your long-term potential as a valued asset to the team. So, when you ask closer questions like these, you’re essentially “asking for the sale.” And you’re doing so in a professional, tactful, confident manner. How could they *not* say yes to you?

Now, here’s the worst thing that could happen

Let’s say you ask one of these questions. And let’s say the prospective employer (unfortunately) responds with an answer that indicates you’ve done something wrong. Or missed the mark. Or come up short in regards to the position.

Fantastic! You’ve just received specific feedback that you can leverage to add value to yourself and become more hireable in the future.

So, if this is the case for you, here’s my suggestion:

Physically write down his response to your questions, right then and there. This demonstrates active listening and further reinforces your openness to feedback.

Then, when you write your thank-you note to the interviewer later that evening, be sure to:

1. Thank him again for the helpful feedback on your performance
2. Explain what your commitment plan is for remedying that inadequacy in the future. Hey, he might even change his mind after that!

Job interviews are sales calls. Period. You’re selling the company on you, your skills and your long-term potential as a valued asset to the team.

But here’s the best thing that could happen

Picture this: The interviewer’s jaw hits the floor, his pen falls to the ground, and he stares at you like you just told him that his company was going to be featured on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Then, once he mops up the puddle of drool on your job application, he racks his brain trying to come up with an answer to your powerful question.

But he can’t find one.

Because there *isn’t* one.

Because you, my unemployed friend, are pretty amazing.

And you deserve this job a hundred times more than every other candidate who walked in the door before you.

That’s what happens when you stick yourself out there.

That’s what happens when you’re approachable.

You walk out of that job interview in a blaze of glory.

And then, come Monday morning, you walk back into that same building. But this time, you’re not there for an interview – you’re there to see how spectacular the view is from your new office.

Good luck.

Let me ask ya this ...

How will you turn approachability into hire-ability?

Let me suggest this ...

For the list called, “7 Ways to Get Potential Employers to Return Your Calls Every Time,” [send me an e-mail](#), and you’ll receive the complimentary list! ■

Scott Ginsberg, a.k.a “The Nametag Guy,” is the author of eight books, professional speaker,



an award-winning blogger and the creator of NametagTV.com. He’s the only person in the world who wears a nametag 24-7 and teaches people how to turn approachability into profit-ability.

For more info about books, speaking engagements, customized online training programs or to rent Scott’s brain for a one-on-one coaching session, call 314-256-1800, or e-mail scott@hellomynameisscott.com.

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to. If you don't ask anything else, find out what the expectations are.”

Bad question

Worse than silence are bad questions that a prospective employer can not answer; demonstrate your ignorance; or worse, so offend the interviewer that they eliminate a job seeker from consideration.

There are some questions that have always been taboo during an interview — rushing into questions about salary, for example. But have any questions become no-no's since the economic downturn? No, experts said. The rules are pretty much the same as always.

“The rules are the same — it's just that (the questions) count more than ever before,” said Call to Career's Palmer. “That's not to say that it was OK to ask about salary (during an interview) before and now it's not. It simply means that everything is much more serious because of the competitiveness of the job market. So, things that an employer might have overlooked before are really, really going to be a big deal now because you have so many qualified candidates looking for the same position.”

“Stay away from questions that aren't going to help you any,” said Crossroads Consulting's Beck. “Getting into somebody's personal life is really of no interest. Asking whether someone is pro- or anti-Obama is not a good question to ask. I would stay away from questions about salary. I would stay away from questions about benefits. You want to ask questions that are relevant to the job and to the opportunity that you are being presented with.”

Bryant said it's important for prospective employees to use their intuition to help determine which questions will resonate positively with interviewers.

“You need to feel out the personality of the person you're interviewing with,” said Bryant. “Are you going to ask, ‘Are there any discipline issues with my (potential) direct reports?’ before you even get the job? That might be seen as meddling. But, ‘Where did my predecessor leave off?’ That's perfectly acceptable to ask in an interview.” ■

► JOB

ted more often and receive promotions. Armed with this information, you can assess whether or not you will naturally excel in the company or if you have to flex your personality style.”

Angie Maizlish, president of First Impressions and a certified professional resume writer and certified employment interview professional, said success in a new position requires a plan of action. This, she said, requires a list of good questions and a notebook and pen (or a BlackBerry or iPhone) to record the answers.

Some of the questions Maizlish suggests are:

- What do you want me to accomplish the first week? Second? Third?
- Where do you see me one month from now?
- What tools do I need to be familiar with to be successful?
- Do you have a mentor program?
- To whom do I address questions? What is the best way to communicate those questions?
- What method of communication do you prefer? Do you have an open-door policy, or is there a set time during which I can direct any questions?
- What are the top three goals for me this quarter?
- Can I eat at my desk?
- Where is the bathroom?

Finding the right answers to all of these questions (especially the last) will go a long way toward ensuring a smooth start in your new job. ■

Career Advice from TheLadders

- [Help Them Say Yes in Your Next Interview](#)
- [Tough Interview Questions](#)
- [A New Deciding Factor in Interview](#)
- [Interviewing Authentically](#)