

What questions should you ask in an interview?

by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

The interview's almost over. You've spread your whole life before your interviewers and done your best to impress them. Now they want to know what questions YOU have of THEM. What are the good questions to ask?

1. *About the job itself.* You must learn whether this job is for you. Make sure you know before you go:

- What will my job responsibilities be?
- Tell me about my boss and my work group?
- How do you view the challenges I'll be given?
- How do people typically advance in this job?
- Will I receive an orientation or learn on the job?

Even such mundane things as work hours and what building you'll be in. You don't want to show up at 9:00 a.m. if the ole factory whistle goes off at 8:00.

2. *About the company.* Is this the company you want to work for? You will seldom get it right when you Google and do research on an organization. What the inside knows is different than the PR or the press says about it. Nonetheless, your interviewer will be impressed that you went to the trouble to learn about the new facility being built, the rising sales in China, the stockholder dispute. It demonstrates that this is how you'll tackle your job; you'll be thorough. Ask questions like:

- Tell me how you view the future of the company?
- What impact will your China strategy have on this job?
- What growth opportunities will the new facility present for the company?

You can ask questions about a stockholder dispute if it will affect the company as it relates to you, but don't pretend to be an insider. You have no idea of an issue's complexities. Ask the question in a positive way, not like a producer from "60 Minutes."

3. *About your interviewer.* How does your interviewer feel about working here? Whether the person questioning you is your potential boss, co-worker, employee, or HR representative, the interviewer is fair game, if time permits:

- How have you advanced in your career?
- What keeps you challenged?
- What are your opportunities, as you see them?
- What do you like about working here?

They are relevant, business-oriented and not too personal; these should be your guiding words.

4. *About the interview process.* How soon before you're likely to get a decision from them? You have a life which can feel like it's on hold till you find employment. Ask:

When do you expect to make a decision?
When am I likely to hear back from you?
Who will be contacting me?
How will an offer be made?

5. *About salary and benefits.* The etiquette is that these are the last questions you ask. Customs in companies differ. The hiring manager may be willing to talk about salary, but may, for example, refer you to HR for the benefits questions. But you need to find out:

What's the salary for this position?
Can you describe the benefits (health care, vacations) to me?
When do I become eligible for benefits?

By this time in the interview, they should stop playing the salary game ("Well, the range is. . ." or, "What salary are you seeking?") and actually tell you what the job pays. They may not, however, tell you how negotiable the offer will be. They haven't made one yet! If you're not the offer-ee, you don't have a need to know!

What questions shouldn't you ask?

There are questions that will get you thrown under the interview bus. Don't ask:

Will you go out with me? (Trust me, it happens)
What are my chances of getting the job?
How do you think I did in the interview?
How could I improve my interviewing skills?

They're here to make an assessment of your capabilities. Don't cross the line into personal; don't ask them questions they can't or won't answer. They're not here to help you get better at looking for a job. They're here to make the right decision for the company. These questions do not endear you to the interviewer.

What if you've made future plans (and paid for them) — like a cruise, a wedding and honeymoon — but you won't have earned vacation time. When do you bring that up?

Don't wait till you report for your new job to first raise this issue. Do it in the interview, so they're making a decision about you with full information. Ninety percent of the time the company will understand and make allowances. They may ask you to take the time without pay; they may be generous and give you the time with pay. Situations like this don't thrill them, but they can be dealt with, and much better than as a post-hire surprise. Don't be a wuss. Bring it up in the interview.