



11/21/07

Helm

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

### The Top 25 Questions

Here are some of the best questions to ask during a job interview to determine whether you will be a good fit, according to the sources cited in this article:

1. Why did you join the company?
2. What surprises have you seen since coming here?
3. How many people have you brought in from outside lately?
4. What have you done to make sure these new hires are well integrated?
5. What questions do you use to assess talent before a candidate is hired?
6. If I'm hired, in a year from now, how will you know if I've been successful?
7. Why is the position open? If the last person in the job didn't work out, why?
8. What is your view of HR?
9. What is HR's role in the organization?
10. How employee-centric is the company?
11. What tools are managers given to perform their jobs?
12. Why do employees stay? Why do they leave?
13. What is your turnover rate? How does that compare to five years ago?
14. Are there exit interviews?
15. What core competencies do employees have—i.e., teamwork, creativity, innovation—and how do you make them

actionable? Are they part of regular evaluations?

16. What are the biggest short-term and long-term challenges in this job?
17. Give me an example of a difficult employee relations situation. How was it handled, and what was the outcome?
18. How would you define the culture here?
19. Tell me about the flow of communications. What information does HR deliver to employees? How is it done? Are there all-employee meetings? Does HR have direct communications with senior leadership? In this position, would I have direct access to senior leaders?
20. Does HR have regular staff meetings? How often?
21. Are there motivational programs or incentives such as bonuses or stock options for top performers?
22. What is a typical day like for HR in general, for this job in particular and for employees?
23. What most often contributes to an employee's success here?
24. How common are office parties and social events? Are these mostly external sales functions or internal HR functions for employees (i.e., does HR staff attend)?
25. (For lower-level positions) Where am I weak in my development, and will I have a chance to hone those skills?

Once you've decided on the factors most important to you, you will need to prepare for the interview. While preparation is important for any job candidate, HR professionals have a higher burden than many: Not only must you know your own needs and desires, you also should get a sense for a potential employer's workers, as well as the industry they are working in.

For example, you should seek general employee information. Are there many junior-level people or many approaching retirement? How educated are they, and are they in need of more training? Do many commute long distances? Are they asking for flexible schedules or telecommuting? The answers to these questions might determine the issues you would be working on, if hired.

Besides understanding the workforce, you also should try to get a feel for the company image, or at least what the leadership hopes is its image.

To gather such information, start by reviewing the company's web site, which can provide clues about the organization's style and culture. "Some companies show pictures of employees having fun," McKay says. "That gives you a clue about how they want to project themselves and probably is not inconsistent with who they are as a company."

Also, look for objective news articles for information that won't show up in company

materials or on web sites, experts say.

If you are using a recruiter, don't be shy about asking for that person's insights into the true inner workings of the organization. Greg Hessel, who helps place candidates in his role as global head of the Human Resources Center at Korn/Ferry International in Dallas, says it is part of his job to speak honestly with candidates about what client companies are like.

Asked whether he would be forthcoming about a company's flaws, Hessel replies, "Without question," because a bad match hurts everyone—the company, the job candidate and the placement firm. "We're trying to create a marriage, and we want to make sure that person is successful," he says.

He also encourages candidates to reach out to anyone in their network who might have knowledge of the company.

Finally, you'll need to prepare questions to determine if the company's objectives match your own. "You have to interview them as much as they are interviewing you," Roccia says. "You want to understand the culture. You also want to understand how employee-centric the company is. What tools do they give their managers to perform their jobs?"

(For a list of questions to ask of your potential new employer, see [“The Top 25 Questions”](#))

### **Gleaning Fit Info in the Interview**

Two years ago, Roccia was looking for an executive-level HR position where she could be involved in company strategy. After researching Authoria and speaking to everyone she knew who was familiar with the company, she applied for the position and was called in for interviews. The first two people she met with were the chief financial officer and the CEO.

“That gave me a good impression that HR was very important,” Roccia says. “I asked them, ‘What is your view of HR? What is HR’s role in the organization?’ That’s general, but it gave them the opportunity to be specific.”

Roccia was careful to listen for a “red flag” response, such as “We consult with HR on an as-needed basis.” Instead, the executives’ answers were exactly what she was looking for: that HR is critical to the strategic direction of Authoria.

Liz Bligan, vice president of HR at Primavera, a project management software developer in Philadelphia, also was looking to head an HR office as part of the strategic executive team when she interviewed for her current position. “You have to ask, ‘What is HR’s primary role here?’ If you really want to be a strategic partner and all they’re talking about is how HR ‘keeps us legal and writes good policies and does good business administration,’ that’s a bad sign. If you’re a mid-level specialist, that may be OK,” Bligan says. “But if I’m an executive, I want to hear that the VP of HR reports to the CEO or possibly the [chief operating officer].”

Besides finding out who the head of HR reports to, McKay suggests finding out if that position is assigned to an executive committee. “If the CEO makes all the decisions herself, reporting to the CEO is OK. But if the CEO has an executive committee and you’re not sitting there, you’re not going to have senior-level input.”

There also are nonverbal clues about how you might fit in.

“Start by using the obvious,” says Kathy Basnight, an HR specialist with Maximus Inc., a government consulting company based in Reston, Va. Be perceptive: Is the office bright and clean or dingy? What is the noise and activity level? How do employees interact with each other? How do managers interact with them? Are employees eating at their desks, or are they going out to lunch together? Do managers eat with employees?

Janice Bryant Howroyd, founder and CEO of ACT-1 Personnel Services in Torrance, Calif., says you may want to think twice about a job opportunity if during your visits to the company you notice any of the following:

- Potential co-workers seem stoic and unexcited, as opposed to positive and passionate about what they are doing.
- The potential employer asks few questions and answers your questions vaguely.
- Company stability is questionable, which could mean you may not have a job for long and it’s likely you’ll find it difficult to build a career there.
- When interviewing with various people, you hear very different responses from each person, which could mean there is no cohesive vision and/or the leadership is lacking.

No matter the flow of your interview, count on being asked to list your job weaknesses, Basnight says. Prepare by understanding your weaknesses and be ready to put the best spin on them, she says—but be honest. If you manage to get hired for a job you are not capable of performing, you are setting yourself up for failure, she says.

## **Will You Fit with Your Supervisor?**

Being a good match with your direct supervisor is one of the most important things to determine, says Mark Cenedella, president and CEO of TheLadders.com, a job hunters' web site. Most people spend one-third of their day and nearly half their waking hours at work, mostly near their supervisor, he points out.

You can ask questions to try to determine management style, such as "What was your most difficult personnel problem, and how did you handle it?" But you also should turn up your perception and not ignore your intuition, Roccia says.

"From an HR perspective, I think you know as soon as you sit down," Roccia says. "That person should put you at ease right away."

Bligan knew she would be a good fit with her Primavera boss when, during the interview, they discovered that she had attended the sister institution to the CEO's high school, an all-boys' school in Philadelphia. That information sparked a dialogue in which the two shared common interests and memories that lightened the interview and led to broader discussions. It also let them know that they liked each other enough to work well together, she said.

"When you're a top person reporting to a CEO, you want a good personality fit," Bligan says. Although Bligan's chat went well, she cautions people to use their intuition to tell whether the interviewer is open to a lighter, two-way discussion. If so, then proceed with "safe" topics such as the schools you attended, things you have in common in your industry or possibly special interests like sports. Be careful to avoid personal or inappropriate topics like family, religion or politics, she says.

Being a good personality match doesn't mean you have to have the same hobbies or sense of humor as your boss. What you do have to have is mutual respect and an agreement about the goals of the organization and how to get there, McKay says. "In my 25 years in HR, I've worked for a number of people who were very, very challenging," she adds. "But if our goals were aligned, I made it work."

What is less likely to result in a good fit is if you get the sense that you know more than your supervisor. Carl Jefferson, national president of the Atlanta-based National Association of African Americans in Human Resources, recalls an interviewer who did not seem to have a good grasp of the company's vision or how it made its money. If you perceive that you bring more to the table than your primary interviewer, or if you sense possible clashes between your core values and those of your potential new supervisor, then the job may not be a good fit for you, he says.

## **Seek Your Comfort Level**

Finding a good job fit may feel onerous, but HR professionals should be emboldened by knowing they have an advantage over others. Roccia says members of the profession often have heightened intuition and interpersonal skills, which can serve them well in interview situations. "You can assess everything right off the bat," she says.

With some intuitiveness and the skills to know what to look for, most HR professionals should have a sense in the first few minutes if they will be a good fit in an organization, says Roccia, who has worked for Authoria for 18 months. "When I walked into Authoria, I just knew it was a happening place," she says. "There was a special energy." Her advice to others: "Let your gut guide you. Look for your comfort level."