



Five Questions to Ask a Prospective Employer

By Tim Pappas

It isn't the first time, and it won't be the last. I'm staring at a resume of a candidate with a 20-year career within a Fortune 500 company, with a strong progression up the corporate ladder that stalls when the company does its fourth "re-organization." I know what comes next--a series of positions over the next six years with three different companies. When this candidate comes in to interview for a position with our client, he /she states a well-reasoned justification for each move. "My boss and I had a difficult relationship." "A friend recruited me." "It was a big mistake that I regret."

All of the reasons for his moves may be true, but as corporate America appears to embrace a "continuous leaning" strategy, candidates need to be prepared for being in the job market and making a good selection of a potential new employer. Anyone in transition will tell you that taking the "right job" is often better than taking the any job offered. Selecting the wrong employer can have significant impact on personal stress, future advancement, and attitude. The market typically remains good for those that are patient and willing to wait for the right opportunity.

How is the right opportunity spotted? Often the questions a candidate asks in the interview will determine his/her fit in the organization going forward. The problem of identifying the ideal employer is twofold. First, what questions should you ask, and second, what should the answer be from the prospective employer?

Among many questions, here are five questions mid-to-senior level employees need to ask at a minimum:

1. How are decisions made at this organization?
2. What is the most risky decision the company has made in the last 24 months?
3. Where did the best two ideas come from in the last five years?
4. How does this organization handle conflict at a senior level?
5. How does one succeed or fail at this company?

See what others don't.



An acquaintance called to talk about a company reputation and to ask about a position for which he was being considered. “Should I join this company?” was the question. My response was “I can’t answer that question for you—I do not know you well enough nor have I worked for the company in the past.” I suggested these five questions with the well-worn advice to “start with the end in mind.” In other words, before an interview with a prospective employer, make sure you have identified the response to each of the five questions that represents what your “perfect company” would have to say to get you very interested in the position. You may not have an exact answer, but you should be able to come up with what the character of the answer should be to garner interest both personally and professionally. Take question #1, for instance. You might be the type of individual that works best making decisions independently. If asking the executives at a prospective company yields the answer that the decisions are centralized with one or two on the senior management team, the company might not be right for you.

It is easy to argue the merits of each individual question and not all the five questions will have equal weight—in fact some may not matter to you at all. The simple fact is that many people approach an interview not understanding what they are looking for, and as a result are inclined to accept a position because it is offered, not because it is the right position. Or, they delay making a decision because they need to compare the position to some other offer from a different company. When they realize the position was right for them all along, the position may no longer be available.

Another common mistake candidates make is that they believe they “can work with anyone.” Not true. Sooner or later even the most flexible person will reach a breaking point when the work culture becomes intolerable. Note that it is often the overall culture that dictates the “feel” of an organization, not an individual “chemistry” with your prospective boss. Make your decision to join a company based on the overall culture of the organization, not solely on the personality fit with a specific person. What if that person leaves—where are you then?

The answers are critical, but the manner in which the questions are answered may be just as important. For instance, if you are in a group interview and you ask the question, “How are decisions made here?” and three executives look at the floor or the ceiling while the President answers the question--their reactions may be more telling than the answer itself.

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As you ask these questions and you find the answers do not match your expected responses, it might not be a good idea to join that company. If the answers agree, you may not need to look further. Experience tells us that joining the company with the right fit is better than joining any company; even at the risk of being unemployed longer than you are comfortable.

What of the acquaintance who used these questions? He told me, with some embarrassment, although the answers did not match, he took the job anyway. He said, "This is the worst decision I have made in my life." He left the company within six months.

Answers are the key.

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