

CAREERGUIDE 2002

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR INTERVIEWER

To get the job you really want, learn to interview the company. Use our comprehensive checklist, compiled from various industry sources, and get the true picture of the company before you join.

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When Janice applied for a job as Promotions Coordinator with a publishing company, she wasn't to know that what her boss, Dan, really, really wanted was a full-time Girl Friday. What Janice really, really wanted was a shot at writing. She would have gone in any door left open.

Like most eager recruits, she was a sitting duck. Janice was so pleased just to get an interview that she forgot to ask some very important questions, like "What's the job about?" That she was unqualified to do promotions work suited Dan to the ground.

The next six months in Janice's career showed her the importance of being clear in your head about the work you want to do, putting that priority across at the interview, and asking the right questions to determine if you and the job are on the same track.

Promotions was a good enough place to start, thought Janice, and at the interview she was quite pleased to be told she would indeed get the chance to write. That was after she'd groveled for the job and admitted she'd even clean inkwells just to work in publishing. She got the job. Six months later, she was a nervous wreck from juggling too many balls, none of which entailed real writing.

Dan took her at her word and for the first week, Janice did nothing but file mountains of press releases and fetch coffee for him and anyone else visiting him that morning/afternoon/evening. There were no immediate promotions planned and therefore no writing on the walls. It wasn't until two months later when Janice was roped in to rewrite press releases for a major advertising supplement that the promotions department even took notice of her.

From that somewhat shaky start, she soon became the promotions department's dumping ground. She began writing advertising copy for the marketing department clients who didn't have agencies, supervising artwork, proofreading articles for the 'legit' writers. All this in addition to her daily duties of filing press releases, fetching coffee, gathering information for Dan's stories and running errands.

On top of not recognizing Janice's true talents, the canny Dan also gave himself bylines for work she had done. Granted she positioned herself as the willing victim, but the boss as mentor and guide also had the duty to channel talent in the right direction, even if it meant losing his personal slave. He was also in charge of the supplements writing department which churned out advertorials and today Janice feels that perhaps this was what she could have been groomed for from the beginning.

The day came when she felt that she was neither any kind of Promotions Coordinator nor being paid enough for that job let alone all the other jobs she was doing. She was popular throughout the department and did get satisfaction from her various duties. However, six months on it was clear she wasn't going to be a writer whilst working for Dan. She quit in sheer disappointment and frustration.

It was a mismatch from the beginning, and one that could have been avoided if only Janice had the presence of mind to take a step back and examine the proposition before she accepted it. Dan, too would have saved himself the money, time and trouble of having to train a fresh hire.

Ask the right questions, get the right job

You should interview a company as much as it interviews you. It really is to the company's advantage, too, to get involved in your job evaluation process by answering your questions because they stand to gain an insight into your character and your priorities. It's like this: you tell them what you want, they tell you what they've got, and somewhere along the line - hopefully - both sides click and you're hired.

To get the right fit between you and your employer, you have to treat your interview almost like a date. List your priorities with regard to life expectations, job satisfaction/ advancement, and workplace. For every item on the list that's important to you, ask about it and tick off what's a go and what's a no-go. Ask the same questions at all your different interviews so that you have a level ground from which you can evaluate each opportunity. Keep notes on every interview.

Some questions present themselves as the interview progresses. Ask them promptly as and when the issues are being discussed. That way, you engage your interviewer with something other than what he's got on his list to ask you.

- Interviewers usually have their say first, but while he's talking, you could note down on a piece of paper those items that you would like to discuss further. Ask for elaborations on points you are not clear about.

- Red-flag questions that are not answered to your satisfaction and make a note of them - perhaps to ask at the next interview or research on your own. These are the tell-tale signs that things may not be as they seem. So, how do we frame those crucial questions?

You can ask them in different ways, of course, but here's a list you could practice with.

Corporate culture

- Could you describe your corporate culture?
- What are the worst aspects of your company's culture?
- What steps are being taken to change this?

Management style and what type of employee will fit in

- How would you describe the department's management style?

- In your experience, what type of person fits in well here?

The boss's immediate and long-term goals

- What are your immediate objectives and goals for this department/the company?
- Could you tell me a little bit about your on-going projects?
- What projects are in the pipeline for the next two years?
- What are the problems you foresee?
- What will be the department's/company's biggest challenges?

Day-to-day responsibilities/duties

- What will my daily duties be?
- What other duties will I be expected to perform?

Skills needed to succeed in the job

- Could you specify the skills you think are important for this position?

Challenges

- What are the challenges of the job?
- How does the department expect these challenges to be met?
- How did the previous title-holder handle them?
- Why did the last person who held this job leave?

Find out where you stand in the power stakes

- Who makes the decisions regarding (state aspect)?
- What are the areas in which I will be the decision-maker?
- If I am not going to be the decision-maker, who will be?
- How much influence will I have in the decision-making process?
- What are the meetings I will be expected to attend?
- Could I also ask to sit in at meetings when I choose to?
- How well does the culture tolerate participation in department/company matters outside one's own scope of work, for example, will other departments welcome my comments and suggestions or would it be seen as an 'interference'?
- In what areas will I work with other departments and at what level? (Obviously, you'd like a chance to work with the upper echelons.)

Your support crew

- Will I get an assistant?
- To what extent will my boss support me, for example, could I ask him to back me up at important client meetings?
- Who can I discuss my problems with?
- How much support can I expect from my colleagues, for example, could I ask them to help out with my projects or do I depend on secretarial staff?

Check out your colleagues for mentor/star qualities

- Who will I be working with?
- Could I meet some of them?
- Could I spend a day understudying them to get a feel of the job?

Company policy on providing staff training, promotions

- Does the company have a training programme for staff?
- Will I be able to attend the courses and if so, how regularly?
- What are my opportunities for career advancement if I take this position?

Crunch questions

Here are some questions you need to ask - just don't expect honest answers. The people who do answer toughies like these to your satisfaction may be the straight-talking visionaries you'd want to work with, though, so no harm trying.

- Are there any budget cuts planned for the next two years that will directly affect this department in terms of staff numbers, training opportunities, salaries or bonuses?
- How does the company treat its customers?
- Who are your best customers and why?
- Who are the worst and why?
- What do you think your customers would say about the company?
- If you were a customer, what aspects of the company would you change in order to give better service?
- When top executives leave, why do they leave and where do they go?
- And this will disarm anyone: If I were your friend, what would you tell me about this job that you haven't already told me?

"Ultimately, the challenge of choosing the right job is a lot like any other business challenge -- the harder you work at it, the better the results. An added benefit of educating yourself about companies you might join is that you learn a lot about yourself in the process." - Michael Warshaw in an article for Fast Company

Companies get radical with hot talent

Like the company but still not really, really sure? How about asking if you can test-drive the job for a couple of weeks before you sign on the dotted line? Two Singapore recruiters I contacted - one from an IPO'd dotcom, the other from a quasi-government organisation, were both open to this option, and have in fact taken people on as freelancers for a 'dating' period before the parties decided to 'go steady'. The people who freelance tend to be those with specialized talent, proven track records, or well-known enough in his industry to wing it wherever he likes.

Job within a job?

Some talent shine so brightly they can get a job anywhere. These people are so valued that they can 'do their own thing' within companies. In a radical effort to lure people with hot skills, some companies have been able to attract and hold on to them by agreeing to give them the space and time to pursue interests closer to their hearts whilst in the company's employ. This way the talent gets salaried free reign while the company has the skills it can tap any time.

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