

# IT'S YOUR TURN TO ASK THE QUESTIONS

by Cynthia Hoffman, AgCareers.com

**O**ftentimes preparing for an interview includes studying a list of the most frequently asked questions. But what about researching the organization and developing a personal list of questions? Employers use the interview to determine if an applicant is right for their organization. At the same time, an applicant should use the interview to determine if the organization is right for them.

## PROPER PREPARATION

Adequate interview preparation will help an applicant in this process. If they take the time to really research the company, they can ask in-depth questions during the interview.

"The interview process gives us the opportunity to get to know the candidate and explore their skills, strengths, goals, and desires," said **Frank Campbell**, Ontario Region Marketing Director for **GROWMARK, Inc.** "It also gives the candidate a chance to explore our organization, and see if they feel comfortable with us."

For the 2008 intern hiring season, Campbell said GROWMARK interviewed 40 applicants and hired 7 interns. He said the interview plays a vital role in further consideration of an applicant, and applicants should come prepared.

According to *Quintessential Careers*, a recent survey showed 47% of executives polled said that having little or no knowledge of the company is the most common mistake a job seeker makes during an interview.

Campbell said it's important for students to spend time researching the company beyond just the Web site.

"One of the first places to go to prepare for an interview is the corporate Web site, but there are lots of other steps you can take as well," Campbell said. "Attend career fairs where you can chat and ask questions informally. Read the company's brochures and other literature pieces.



Applicants should use prepared questions to help impress the interviewer but even more so to better understand if the organization is the right fit for them.

It's also a good idea to visit a local branch or store."

In an article titled "*How to Successfully Prepare for Interviews*" author **Deborah Brown-Volkman** writes, "Know the company's view of itself, as well as what people who don't work for that company think about it. You are looking for indications of where a company is going and what problems the company and the industry are having."

It's important for students to do some personal research on the company, said **Elaine Thrale**, Coordinator of Directed Field Studies at **Olds College** in Alberta.

Students should talk to others who work for, or who have business with, the prospective employer," she said.

"In some cases we advise students to ask for an information interview prior to an interview. Many employers are happy to oblige and are impressed that the student is being proactive."

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Thrale also advises developing a list of questions to ask the employer. If

the applicant does the research correctly, then generating questions should be easy.

Even if they have gathered a lot of information during their research, they should still ask questions to determine if the job opportunity will be a good fit for them.

"Students should ask for some idea of expectations of performance, particularly if they are applying for a job in sales and/or marketing," Thrale said. "They should ask for information about upcoming projects or previous accomplishments of the company. Any questions that demonstrate the student's interest in the company are a good idea."

Campbell agrees that students should ask questions during the interview to determine how suitable the job position is.

The interview is your opportunity to ask those burning questions about the organization," he said. "Does the organization fit with your outlook on a social and cultural level? Through questioning, you should be able to establish how com-

comfortable you would be to work for this company.”

Campbell said the interview process usually consists of a series of two or three interviews. He said the first interview tends to be the shortest because an employer wants to learn as much as they can about an applicant to determine if they could be a fit.

“Typically there is not a lot of time to ask questions and hear more about their company or department during the first interview so an applicant should have questions prepared in case they get the chance to ask them,” Campbell said. “The second or third interviews are the time where the employer has recognized certain skill sets in an applicant and discussions and questions will be welcomed.”

If an applicant does not ask any questions, it raises several concerns with the interviewer, Campbell said. He said the interviewer may think that they were not prepared, they aren’t interested in the position or the organization, or they lack communication skills.

## HELPFUL HINTS

While the questions should help an

applicant learn more about the position, there are some questions that should be avoided. Campbell said the applicant should not ask questions about salary, benefits, or hours especially on the first interview.

But what if the benefit package is an important determining factor in one’s consideration of a position, and the employer doesn’t address the subject? It’s wise for the applicant to wait until the employer brings it up, but it’s appropriate to ask general questions like what are the benefits of working for your organization.

If more questions develop during the interview then the applicant should write them down so they can be discussed later on. It’s a good idea to ask the employer if it’s OK to take notes during the interview. Chances are they will be impressed with the applicant’s preparation.

If an applicant thinks of another question after the interview is over, Campbell said it’s OK to follow up.

“Follow-up questions show continued interest in the position,” he said. It’s a good way to differentiate yourself from the others interview-

ing for the same position.” Campbell also said a handwritten thank you letter after the interview is more impressive than a thank you e-mail.

Thrale said it’s always good to send a thank you letter, but reminds students it’s OK to decline a job offer if the interview helped them discover the position or organization was not a good fit for them.

“If a student is uncomfortable with what they heard in the interview, it is OK to decline a job offer,” she said. “The interview is just as important for them to get information about the company as it is for the company to determine their suitability for the job.”

Campbell agrees with Thrale and said if used correctly; the interview will benefit both the employer and the applicant in the long run.

“It is very important that both parties feel comfortable before reaching an employment agreement. If this is accomplished, a win-win relationship is established, and the chance for both parties to succeed is greatly enhanced.”

## GAIN INSIGHT THROUGH QUESTIONS

There are three areas that candidates can focus on and use to help guide them with questions to ask the employer. These three areas are questions about the company, the people, and the job. Below are sample questions for each.

### Questions about the company

- What are the basic values that make up the company’s culture?
- How long have you been with the organization?
- Is the company growing? If so, where is the growth coming from?
- Ask questions that relate to the research that you have done.

### Questions about the people

- Can you tell me how you have progressed with your career within this organization?
- How would you describe your own management style?
- What obstacles do you see that may prevent you from meeting your objectives?

Questions about the job or position — these questions can be divided into five categories

### Responsibility

- What is the most pressing directive for the position?
- What would a day on the job be like?

### Job History and Status

- Why is this position vacant? What led to the vacancy?

### Decision-Making Authority

- Will I be responsible for prioritizing my own work or will it be prioritized for me?
- Will I work individually or in teams?

### Resource and Subordinates

- What resources are available for this position to achieve primary goals?
- What is the approval process that someone in this position would be required to follow?

### Evaluation and Performance

- If I am hired and am successful, what will I have accomplished at the end of three months? One year?
- Who will evaluate my performance? When? How?

Thomas W. Morris III, Excerpts from *Roll Call*, “Are there questions the interviewee should ask the interviewer?”