

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Willia Plank
April 30, 2010

Five Must-Ask Interview Questions

As the economy picks up, companies are starting to hire more. But managers often only get funds for a new key hires, so they have to select new employees wisely. That makes conducting a smart interview critical. Reporter Willia Plank check in with Ben Dattner, founding principal of organizational consulting and research firm Dattner Consulting, to get his interview advice.

Here are his five must-ask interview questions:

1. *In what ways will this role help you stretch your professional capabilities?*

This is a reversal of the common question, “What are some of your greatest weaknesses?” Normally candidates dress up their weaknesses, or talk about “positive weaknesses” such as a tendency to work too hard. Phrased Dr. Dattner’s way, this question may better prompt the candidate to describe skills she wants to improve and goals she’d like to achieve. Watch out for candidates who say the prospective job would simply incrementally add to what they already know.

2. *What have been your greatest areas of improvement in your career?*

This is another question that gets to weaknesses, but in a new way. It also allows interviewees to tell their career histories and ambitions. A red flag answer: “I’ve always been a natural. I don’t need to make any improvements.”

3. *What’s the toughest feedback you’ve ever received and how did you learn from it?*

This shows a candidate’s ability to learn from mistakes. A good answer would involve the candidate recalling specific feedback and detailing how she learned from it and changed. Sometimes candidates may say they can’t remember tough feedback. That can be a red flag. It may indicate the interviewee hasn’t worked in a high-risk or creative environment, that she has never solicited advice, or that her co-workers view her as too fragile for feedback.

4. *What are people likely to misunderstand about you?*

This question reveals social intelligence, or the ability to understand others. A candidate might say he asks a lot of questions, and that some people have misinterpreted this inquisitiveness as aggression or criticism. If the candidate says he once found himself in this situation and changed his managerial style, that would indicate he can sense other people’s perceptions and adapt.

5. *If you were giving your new staff a “user’s manual” to you, to accelerate their “getting to know you” process, what would you include in it?*

This lets the candidate reveal her work style. A straight answer should indicate the interviewee is self-aware. For example, a candidate might reveal that she prefers to hold conversations in person rather than over the phone; that she likes to be kept in the loop or that she dislikes surprises. Those answers can help a hiring manager determine whether the candidate’s style fits with the office culture. A bad answer, Dr. Dattner says, would be: “Just do your job and there won’t be any problem”, or “They’ll figure it out soon enough.”