It's Your Turn to Ask the Questions
By: Cynthina Hoffman, AgCareers.com

Oftentimes preparing for an interview includes studying a list of 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.

Industry professionals said it's important for students to spend time researching the company beyond just the website.

"We dedicate a lot of time and resources to put individuals on campuses to interview the best of the best," said Bill Smith, business development specialist at Helena. "If we are going to dedicate the time and resources on our end, we expect students to investigate our company, research the specific position, and be able to ask intelligent questions."

Smith said for their Midwest internships alone, each year Helena will screen approximately 500 candidates, interview 100 and hire only 20. The interview is a vital part of the selection process, and candidates should be prepared if they want to make it past the first round, Smith said.

Of course an applicant should explore the company's website to learn about its structure, products and services, mission, and new activities or projects. An applicant should also know the job description in detail. They should go through the list of requirements and develop an example of how they would meet each requirement.

Reviewing any press releases or other literature about the company is also a good way to learn more, said Mary Ellen Barkley, assistant director of career and employment services at Kansas State University.

Smith said he looks for individuals who take their research to the next level. He said extensive research is impressive to the employer, but will also help the candidate gather insight they can not get from a website.

He suggests interviewing past interns or present employees to learn more about the company. This type of research helps one learn about the company culture and can be useful during an interview.

"If a candidate refers to a past intern's project or quotes a present employee, I know they came properly prepared," Smith said.

Types of Questions

If the applicant does the research correctly, developing a list of questions to ask the employer will 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, said Ashley Buck, human resource specialist at Becker Underwood.

"It's good to have your research done because the more you know about the position and the company, the more confident you will be during the interview process," Buck said. "But if you don't ask any questions, the employer will think that you did not come prepared or you aren't truly interested in the position."

Barkley said the list should include questions that fall into three categories.

1.) Questions that help an interviewee learn more about the position, work environment or company culture. Ex.) "What types of training programs are available to new employees in this position?"

2.) Questions that demonstrate an interviewee's knowledge of the company. Ex.)"I read about this type of research your currently conducting. How will that relate to this position?

3.) Questions about the interview/selection process. Ex.)"When will you be making a decision about this position?"

No matter what, Smith said the questions should be original because it lets employers know the applicant is really interested in the position.

"Avoid canned questions because they are easy to identify and it tells the interviewer that the applicant didn't take time to develop their own questions," Smith said. "The applicant should have a customized list of specific questions pertaining to the organization and the position."

He said that the applicant should also have a different list of questions for every interview and every new interviewer. He said this will really helps the applicant gain a better understanding of the organization and determine if it will be a good fit.

Helpful Advice

While the questions should help an applicant learn more about the position, there are some questions that should be avoided. Barkley said the applicant should not ask questions about salary or benefits until the employer brings it up or the applicant receives a job offer.

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? Smith said an applicant can ask general questions to prompt the employer.

"It's a sensitive area and an employer will lead an applicant into the topic of conversation when it is appropriate," he said. "But it's ok to ask questions like what are the benefits of working for your organization, or why should I work for your organization versus another?"

Both Smith and Buck recommend bringing a notepad and pencil into the interview. They said it's helpful for the applicant to take notes during the interview and jot down questions that may arise.

If an applicant thinks of another question after the interview is over, Smith said it is perfectly fine for them to follow up.

"Follow-up questions show that the applicant took a little more time to reflect and research, and that they really care about the organization," he said.

If applicants use the interview as a tool to learn more about the organization, they will have more success in finding the quality position they are looking for. Smith said coming prepared and effectively participating in the interview helps everyone in the long run.

"It's critical for applicants to use the interview process to interview the company," Smith said. "The last thing any organization wants is to hire an individual only to determine 30 or 60 days later, that the employee is not a cultural or professional fit. That type of situation is frustrating for both the employee and the organization."