

Interviewing is a Two-Way Street

By Brad Schwartz

This month, I'm going to switch things up a bit and ask you the question.

Question: During your first interview with a company, the prospective employer concludes the discussion with the standard "Do you have any questions?" line. Which is your best response?

- A. "Yes. I was wondering when the benefits would become effective? What is the annual vacation allowance? And, does the company match on the 401(k) plan?"
- B. "No, I think you just about covered everything I wanted to know. I'm sure I'll have more questions later."
- C. "Yes. From what you've asked during the interview, it sounds like you have a problem with occupancy. Can you tell me a little more about the current situation, and what the initial challenges would be for the new person?"

And the answer is...

- A. No. During the initial interview, this "What's in it for me?" attitude can be interpreted as self-centered and shows your lack of interest in the job itself.
- B. No. Astonishingly, this is the most common response. But you missed a key opportunity to demonstrate your interest (and independent thought process) and to find out more about the company or position.
- C. Correct. This response shows interest in the problem and how you may be the possible solution. This is also a chance to learn what will be expected of the new hire.

Do Your Homework

So as you notify your references, dry-clean your best interview suit and mentally review your career highlights, don't forget to write a list of your own questions. As recruiters, we encourage each candidate to thoroughly research a company before each interview. Most employers will provide an opportunity for you to ask questions near the end of the interview. Your preparedness (or lack of it) could win (or lose) you the job.

Where Do I Start?

The easiest way to begin researching a company is to read the company website. Look for "Company News" or "Meet Our Team" sections. You may even be able to find bios of your scheduled interviewers. Find out about the company's portfolio (multifamily properties and/or commercial properties) and where the properties are located. Does the company own/manage, or is it a third-party management company? If you are interviewing for a site level position, confidentially "shop" the property to learn about the product itself. And finally, Google the company online for any tidbits you may have missed.

Make A List

Formulate smart questions that reveal the depth of your research and your interest in the job. Prepare both company questions and job-specific questions. However, some of the best questions will develop from the interview discussion and cannot be anticipated in advance.

Although it may seem obvious, only ask those questions to which you want an answer. Many people will ask questions merely to impress the interviewer.

Do not ask questions that are clearly answered on the employer's web site, job description or in any literature provided to you in advance. This would reveal that you did not prepare for the interview, and you are wasting the employer's time by asking these questions. Never ask about salary and benefits issues until these subjects are raised by the employer.

Sample Questions

If you are having trouble developing questions, consider the following samples as food for thought.

For a Property Manager position:

- How big is the property? (Only if you are unable to find this information before the interview.)
- Is the emphasis on marketing, operations, or a combination of the two?
- How many people are on staff at the community? What are the different roles?
- What changes would you like to see over the next year at the property itself?
- Is there room for growth?
- What is the chain of command?
- What are the organization's plans for future growth or change?

For a Regional Property Manager position:

- What is the size of the portfolio? (Only if you are unable to find this information before the interview.)
- Does each community have a Property Manager?
- Are budgets done at the site level?
- Describe a typical staff at a community.
- Is this going to be an operational position, or will I be involved with marketing and operations?
- Is the company planning on growing or staying around the current portfolio size?
- Is there room for growth within the company?
- What is the chain of command?

During the Interview

Use your judgment about the number of questions you ask and when to ask them. Ask pertinent, thoughtful questions. Do not monopolize the interviewer's time, particularly if you know they have appointments scheduled following your interview.

Remember, the best questions will come as a result of your listening to what is asked during the interview. Jot down any questions or take notes throughout the interview if necessary.

Some of your prepared questions may be answered during the course of the interview discussion. If so, you can simply state that you were interested in knowing about "X", but it was addressed during the interview. Ask for additional clarification if appropriate.

Accepting a new job is a big career and, even bigger, life decision. You need to know as much as possible about the organization, just as the organization wants to learn about you.

Keep Sending Me Your Questions

Each month, my column will focus on a recruitment or retention question or concern facing our property management industry, as submitted by THE APTS readers. Tell me which issues affect your company. What is important to you? Keep your questions coming and email me at brad@msbresources.com.

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