

COMPANY CULTURE: 11 Great questions to help you figure out if you will enjoy working there

Aside from networking with people who work inside the target employer (and people who have left), the next-best thing to do is ask smart questions of every person you talk to during the hiring process. Ask questions that are insightful and professional ... without offending them or coming across like a needy or inflexible employee. Here are some great questions to ask (yes, some of them are duplicates of the list above. I offer them here again to demonstrate that they are great questions for uncovering company culture).

Here are 11 great questions to ask about culture:

Evaluate expectations / job duties

1. What are the most important things for me to do in the first 90 days to be successful? Listen carefully and take notes. If it feels good, that's great. If the hair stands up on the back of your neck, you need to pay attention to it! As follow-up questions to further clarify job expectations. You want to find out the real scope of the job, the resources available and the importance of the job.
2. What are the biggest challenges you think I'll face in the first 90 days? This is important. If they are open, they will tell you a lot about the culture and your potential barriers to success. If they are not open, that's room for concern and follow-up questions. Look for clues about the people, processes and infrastructure. This question is a great way to surface political issues.
3. How will my performance be measured? If they are not clear about this, or are non-committal, that is a concern. Strong managers can tell you their expectations without batting an eyelash. This is especially disturbing if you are considering a sales position. If you hear anything like "We'll work that out once you are on board," run. PLEASE do not ever take a sales job where your commission plan is not in writing. That is a recipe for disaster (and heartache). Even if you are a leader and will be creating something from scratch, you must have some clear idea about how your performance will be measured.
4. One year from now, what would you like to see in me and this role? This question provides a longer-term view of the job, the expectations and what it will take for you to be successful. It also gives you a view of the leadership, the vision and mission ... all of which may or may not fit in with your values and desires.

Evaluate the culture

5. Describe your ideal candidate for this position. This question will tell you much more about what they really want in their next hire – and how they will evaluate you to other candidates. The answer to this is often quite different from the job description you have seen. Not only will it tell you what to expect, it will also help you translate your past experience and skills into a language that matters to them – to help you stand out from the herd.
6. Tell me a little bit about your favorite – or most successful - employee. If they are open and engaging with this question, it will tell you LOADS about the culture, and what the position really entails ... much better than a job posting. For example, if you hear things like “She is great. She never has to ask for direction. She just jumps in and gets things done,” then you know the job has a high degree of autonomy. That’s great for me – but it might not be great for you. Do you like a manager who is more hands-on and provides lot of direction? Then this should be a flag for you.
7. Why is this position open? (What happened to the last person in this role?) The point of this question is to discover if there is some inherent problem with the job, their hiring process, or if it’s the result of a positive change. If it’s a new position, that usually means growth –which is great. However, the rate of growth can mean very different things. Explosive growth indicates a high degree of change, fast pace, and usually a lot less direction and formal processes in place. Does that energize you? Or, are you someone who needs structure, predictability? If so, you need to consider this will likely be a tough culture for you). If it’s open because the last person quit or got fired, ask why. Listen carefully to what they say. It will give you valuable clues about what it takes to be successful and happy in the role.
8. Why do you work for this company? What do you like most about working here? If the person struggles to answer this, that should be a concern – especially if you’re talking to your next potential boss! An unhappy boss = an unhappy employee. However, you do need to remember that the perfect job for you is NOT the perfect job for everyone else. It means you need to have your radar up, and ask that question of everyone you meet in the process. Work hard to network with others who have worked there in the past, and see what they say about the work environment.

Evaluate their market / competition / climate

9. I see that your company (mention an industry or company challenge they’re facing). Can you tell me a little bit about how that is affecting your performance - and what you're doing to address it? I’d like to help you turn that around ...

This question demonstrates that you have done your homework on them, but it will also tell you where their biggest threats are in the market – and how that might affect your role with the company. It will also give you a great platform for showing how you can help them address these challenges (assuming you’ve faced something similar before).

Evaluate your chance of getting the job

10. Do you see any reason why I may not be a fit for this position? This is another great way to figure out what they really want in their next hire - and for you to see how you stack up against the competition. Listen carefully – and ask clarifying questions. If they raise a concern that you think is not a concern, by all means let them know that!

11. What are the next steps in your process? How will you make your decision? Not only is this a great way to express your interest in the position, it helps you understand what to expect. If they are unclear about next steps, that’s a good sign that their hiring process stinks and you might get dragged through a long and painful process. Be nice and responsive to them, but focus your energies elsewhere. You cannot afford to wait around for wishy-washy companies.

“Believe you can and you’re halfway there.” - Theodore Roosevelt

NOTE: Save questions about flexibility & hours for later in the game

Asking questions about work hours and flexibility should be saved for later in the process (unless your first interview is with the decision maker. In that case, you can go through those types of questions after you hear the words “I’d love to bring you in” or “When can you start” or something similar.

The first interview is like a first date: you do not want to start making demands on the relationship before they decide if they want to be with you. So, those questions you have about hours, flexible work schedule, vacation time and how they give raises are all important questions ... once they are in love with you and you seriously want the job. Focus instead on the right JOB fit, and answering all their questions. Once you make it through the first round, things get much more exciting – and it does become appropriate to ask these kinds of questions.

The only exception is this: if you have some real-life constraints (childcare or eldercare issues, a disability, etc.), and cannot take a job unless it meets certain criteria. Even then, you should usually wait until the second interview (or at least until they call you back for a second interview) to start asking these questions.

You need to "close the deal" with good final questions.

Remember how important it is to share your enthusiasm for the job? Asking a great closing question is an important piece of this puzzle. Plus, at the end of an interview you will undoubtedly want to know if they're excited about you. The following questions are great for two things: demonstrating that you want the job and uncovering any potential concerns they have ... so you can address them on the spot. Too often, employers walk away with concerns that are completely unfounded, when a simple question by the candidate could have uncovered it so the candidate could have eliminated it.

5 great ways to "close the deal" (questions to ask at interview end)

Pick one of these questions to ask at the end of the interview. Put it at the bottom of your list of questions so you remember to ask.

- Based upon our meeting today, how do you see me fitting your needs?
- How do I compare to other candidates?
- Do you see any gaps in my experience that concern you?
- What are the next steps in your process?
- Where do we go from here?

Remember to say thank you! "Thank you very much for your time today. Based upon what we've talked about, I am very interested in learning more."

Warning: Some interviewers will be uncomfortable with a direct question about what they think about you, but that is okay! Very often, it's company policy not to give feedback. I promise – it's worth asking! If you are enthusiastic and smile, they will walk away remembering that you are excited about working with them.

“I need a job right now! I can’t be picky!”

If you're unemployed and you need a job right now, then I LOVE that you don't want to be picky. You might need to take a job that does not excite you while you look for one that does. I took a few like that when I first started out. Soon, however, I was able to pick and choose because I had built up my portfolio, my reputation and my client list. I also had more money in the bank. Don't get too bummed out taking a boring project in the beginning. The beautiful thing is this: it is temporary! You will soon be on to bigger and better things! Make the most of each assignment. Take your “A game” every day and make a goal of getting a solid reference from every client. Once they see how good you are, they might even ask you to take on a more exciting project at their company, and/or refer you out to friends at other companies.

Meet Jane

Jane is a project manager who got laid off and was having trouble finding a job she really wanted. So, she took a step down into a job as a project coordinator. She was not excited about being a project coordinator, but she wanted to get to work as soon as possible. 2 months later, they saw how good she was and promoted her to a project manager and hired someone else to do the project coordination work. Sometimes, doing what you need to do to feed the family can be just the step you needed.

“You know, sometimes all you need is twenty seconds of insane courage. Just literally twenty seconds of just embarrassing bravery. And I promise you, something great will come of it.”

– Benjamin Mee (Matt Damon) in the movie “We bought a zoo”

10 Ways to make a great first impression

1. Arrive early (10-15 minutes).
2. Treat the receptionist with a smile and professional courtesies.
3. Smile! Like you mean in.
4. Stand tall and confident (even if you’re not feeling confident).
5. Lean in for a firm handshake (a little ... not too much!).
6. Make good eye contact.
7. Maintain good eye contact throughout your conversations.
8. Stay positive. Avoid negative body language or words. Never complain about traffic, weather or anything else.
9. Be open with your body language and words.
10. Be curious.

The top 5 reasons for rejection (JobVite)

The good news is, you can DRAMATICALLY boost your odds of getting the offer just by being a good human being. By the time you get an interview, chances are really good you’ve got the right technical skills and experience. They’re looking for the “fit.” Remember: Likeability is more important than having all the right skills! Case in point, here are the top 5 reasons for rejection:

- 86% Rude to receptionist or support staff
- 71% Checking phone during interview
- 58% Showing up late
- 52% Bad hygiene
- 39% Interrupting the interviewer

Identify the gaps

This is one of those GAME-CHANGER EXERCISES! If you do this exercise, you will know with confidence that you ARE qualified for that job want. You'll know what to put on your resume and LinkedIn profile. You will know how to prep for every interview. And you will stand head and shoulders above your competition! So just do it!

WHEN TO USE THIS EXERCISE: Do this exercise for the first time now ... and then every time you go after a new role ... before you tweak your resume. You will save so much time AND be a real stand out for the role.



Identify the gaps

Top 10 Required Skills + Experience Required for your dream job	Do you have it? YES or NO	If yes, name Current Skills & Experience that match.	If no, name a comparable skill OR 1 way you can overcome this gap.	When did you use this skill? (Get your story ready for your next interview!)