

GREAT QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

by Denise Bissonnette

One of the benefits of attending a job fair is the opportunity to meet many employers in one place within a single day. Not only does it afford you a wonderful opportunity to share your resume and skills with recruiters, but it also gives you a chance to gain exposure to local employers and become informed about the various positions and opportunities that exist within their companies. One of the most important steps in preparing for a job fair is having a list of good questions for employers and other exhibitors, and being ready to ask them. Here are some common questions with regard to this important practice.

Why should job seekers come prepared to ask questions of employers at a job fair?

Naturally, you are not going to be a perfect fit for every company, and not every company is going to be a perfect fit for you. Employers take great care and consideration in recruiting applicants that fit with their needs and interests, and likewise, as a job seeker, you need to take equal care in choosing employers that fit with your needs and interests. Employment is a two-way street – it is a business arrangement among two parties, you and the organization that hires you. Employers will be ready with questions that help them screen and select candidates who meet their qualifications, and you need to be ready with your questions to help you screen and select employers that meet yours.

Being prepared with good questions will allow you to exude calm and confidence when entering a conversation with recruiters. It demonstrates professionalism and projects confidence. It shows them that you care where you work, who you work for, and how you will be applying your abilities and personal strengths. Asking questions is also a way of expressing enthusiasm and interest in a company – a quality that recruiters always appreciate!

Am I guaranteed to have an opportunity to ask questions of every exhibitor?

Absolutely not. Depending on how many people are approaching the booth, the employer may not have the luxury of time to speak individually with each job seeker. Typically, you will have an opportunity to ask a few questions, but you

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need not take it personally when time does not allow. Simply take any information that is being offered by the employer, and if the company sparks your interest, find other ways of pursuing employment with that company. Eventually, you will have an opportunity to ask your questions, if only in the job interview itself!

At what point do I ask my questions? Do I need to wait until I am invited to do so?

There is no formula for conversing with employers at a job fair, and every conversation will take on its own character. Sometimes it will feel like a mini-interview, and other times it will unfold like an informal conversation. Some recruiters will open with a question like, "Tell me about yourself", "What brought you out to the fair today?" or "What is your interest in our company?", while others will take a look at your resume and ask questions off the cuff with regard to your particular background. Be open and willing to follow the employer's lead.

Many recruiters will ask if you have any questions for them once they have finished with their questions for you, providing you with a perfect opening. If they have not done so, and you feel that the conversation is coming to a close, ask their permission to pose a few questions by simply stating, "Before I go, may I take a moment to ask you just a few questions? Would you mind if I take notes?" Requesting to take notes is a way of communicating that what they have to say is important!

How many questions can I ask any single employer or exhibitor?

Again, there is no formula with regard to how many questions you can ask, but you need to be responsive to the situation. If you are alone with the person and no one is waiting behind you, you can take more time and feel free to ask more questions. However, be aware of the number of people who may be waiting in line, and limit your questions accordingly. Your consideration of their time will not go unnoticed by the recruiters!

If you have more to ask than time allows, consider saying, "I have many more questions about your company and the opportunities you offer, but I want to be sensitive to your time here today. How would you recommend I follow up in the near future in order to learn more? Could I contact you again, or is there someone else you would recommend that I contact? What is the best way for me to be in touch with you/him/her – by phone or email?" Take precise notes on their

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response to this question and then be sure to follow through on their suggestion.

Do I ask the same questions of every employer?

Probably not, only because your questions will change as your needs and interests vary with each company or organization. With some, you will want specific information about the summer positions they are looking to fill or the job shadowing opportunities they may make available for students, while for others you may inquire about the educational standards they look for in long-term career opportunities. Then again, there will be some employers from whom you are seeking general job search advice, or ideas on how to present yourself to others in their industry. You may have some standard questions that you will pose to every employer, but it is also likely that there will be a unique question that you ask each one as well.

Does it matter what questions I ask?

Yes, it matters a lot! Your questions are like a mirror reflecting your values and motivation. The truth is that the questions you ask may be the basis upon which a recruiter decides whether or not to move your resume to the "interested" file. Not all questions are equal in the eyes of employers! There are questions that would likely get you 'screened out', and others that would pique the employer's interest.

Imagine, for example, that you are a recruiter and you have two different job seekers approach your booth, each asking different questions. The first one asks about salary and wages, whether or not she would be asked to work on weekends, and if she could time off in order to perform at an upcoming music festival. The second one asks what qualities the company values most in their trainees, how they take pride in themselves as player in their industry, and what a newly-hired person could do to make an immediate contribution to the particular department which the job seeker is interested in. Which of these two do you think you would be more likely to select between the two?

It is said that you know a lot more about a person by their questions than by their answers. Allow the questions you prepare to reflect the following:

- What is important to you, what your values are, and what your expectations are;
- How much research you did (or plan to do) about the company;

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- How serious you are about landing the right position;
- Your degree of curiosity, openness, and ability to listen;
- Your level of energy, your initiative, and your communication skills; and,
- Your preparedness.

What kind of questions should be avoided?

The Obvious – Don't ask questions that lead to information that you could easily glean from the company literature, or from going to their website. Questions regarding their products or services, their location, or the kinds of positions they recruit for are likely to be answered on signs or posters at their exhibit. Don't waste the recruiter's time having them tell you information that you could readily uncover in other ways.

Too Personal – While it is great to engage with the person who is at the booth, keep your questions professional in nature, and avoid asking anything too personal. It is fine to ask what the person enjoys most about working for the company, or how he/she entered the field, but questions regarding their marital status, their horoscope or what they are doing next Saturday night are definitely off limits!

The Self-Absorbed – Questions that are all about "what's in it for me" are a real turn-off to potential employers. There is a difference between inquiring how your gifts and strengths might be put to best use at a company, and asking how much they pay, how much vacation time they offer, and whether or not they include chiropractics in their benefits package!

The Irrelevant – Keep your questions to the subject at hand rather than trying to make idle conversation with the recruiter. It is important that your questions reflect that you see their time as valuable.

So, what are some good questions to ask employers at a job fair?

There are four categories of questions you can ask recruiters at a job fair. We have given you lots of options within each category, so you can pick and choose the ones that appeal to you, or you can come up with your own. But be sure to have a "questioning plan" – in other words, have your questions written down and handy when you approach a booth. Referring to your written questions shows the employer that you are professional, organized and prepared. Have fun choosing your favorites!

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Questions about the Work Culture and Career Opportunities

- What are the qualities or characteristics of the people who work best in your environment? In other words, how would you describe a star employee?
- How would you describe your company's work culture?
- How does ABC pride itself as an employer?
- I read that your company has excellent retention rates for new hires. What do you think are the factors that contribute to that reputation?
- What kind of opportunities are there for ongoing training through your organization?
- Are there specific career tracks within the organization? If so, could you tell me a little bit about them?
- What kind of entry-level positions (or internships) exist within your organization?
- Are graduate degrees important to advancing within your organization? Which ones?
- Which courses or experiences do you suggest for someone who is working towards becoming a prime candidate for employment with your company?

Others:

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Questions about a Position

- What would a typical day look like for someone in this position?
- What are the most immediate concerns and challenges faced by the person in this job?
- I am sure that it is different for everyone, but how do you think the reality of this position typically differs from people's perception of what it is going to be like?
- What kind of training is offered to those new in this position? Are new employees assigned mentors?
- I have worked a lot behind the scenes in past jobs, and I am anxious to be working with customers face to face in my next position. To what extent do you think I would have that opportunity with your company?
- If offered a position as a _____, how could I totally exceed your company's expectations on the job in the first 2-3 months?
- I realize that if I were offered a position with your company, I would be starting at the bottom and I have a lot to learn before being able to participate on higher levels of the business. I am, however, a fast learner and an ambitious worker. What opportunities do you foresee as potential "next steps" for someone with my background and career aspirations?

Others:

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Questions for the Recruiter

- How did you come to choose this career?
- What made you choose this company and what do you like most about it?
- Is there anything that really surprised you about working for this company?
- What do you find most challenging about working in this field or within this industry?
- What counsel or advice would you give to someone new to this industry?
- Given your own experience, what advice do you wish you had been given when you were at my stage of the job search?
- What is one of the best pieces of career advice you have ever heard?
- Do you have any tips for me with regard to making the most out of this job fair?

Others:

Questions about the Hiring Process and How to Follow-Up

- Does your company hire on a continual basis or just at certain times of the year?
- Are there additional ways of working with your company other than through full-time, permanent positions, for example, contract work, part-time, or temporary positions?
- How long does the hiring process typically take and what steps are involved for the applicant?
- Do you have any suggestions for how I can best move my application or resume forward to the right person in your company?
- If I do not make this round of hiring, what advice do you have in terms of how I might follow up with your company for future openings?
- I am very excited about this opportunity! What do you recommend I do to advance my application to the next step? Is there any additional information I could provide to enhance my chances of being hired for this position?
- Knowing how competitive your company is and how many applications you see in a year, what tips would you give someone to somehow stand out in the application process?
- I am enthusiastic about the idea of working with your company and I would like an opportunity to learn more about the opportunities you offer. How would you recommend I follow up in the near future in order to learn more? Could I contact you again, or is there someone else you would recommend that I contact? What is the best way for me to be in touch – by phone or email?

Others: