



National Association of College and
University Business Officers

BUSINESS OFFICER MAGAZINE

July 2007

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

A Dress Rehearsal for Your Next Job Search

By Sig Ginsburg

To ace an interview with a selection committee or search firm, nothing beats preparation. Here are questions you'll want to be ready to ask and answer.

As a former business officer at several institutions and as a current executive recruiter for higher education, I've posed and answered hundreds of interview questions. I've found that what a candidate asks is as telling as the answers he or she gives when questioned. So, when interviewing for a new job, as you rehearse your answers to the questions you expect to be asked, be sure to develop your own list of queries. You'll learn more about the potential job while showing the interviewers that you're interested and curious—and have done your homework.

One sometimes neglected area is the reference check. It is important for you to understand what questions might be asked of your references and what information you might provide them in advance. Keep in mind that a thorough background and reference review is more likely to be conducted now and is easier and quicker to perform than it was 5 or 10 years ago.

Whether you're probing or responding—or preparing your references to provide information on your behalf—you'll have a better chance of landing your dream job if you let the following sets of questions be your guide.

Twenty Questions Coming Your Way

- 1) Why did you decide to become a candidate for this position?
- 2) What do you see as this position's major challenges and opportunities—and its major difficulties and risks?
- 3) From what you know at this point about the position and institution, what appeals to you most? What do you like least?
- 4) When you leave this position what would you like to be remembered for? And when you retire and end your career, what would you like people to say about you?
- 5) What do you see as your job after this one; what is your ultimate career goal?
- 6) What do you regard as your five major achievements in your life? ...in your career?
- 7) What do you like best about your current position—what do you like least?
- 8) What decisions or actions have disappointed you in your career? If you had a chance to change them, what would you do instead?
- 9) Describe the most difficult supervisory problem you have had to deal with in your present job and how you handled it.
- 10) How do you deal with the personal stress and/or the stressful situations that you experience on the job? How do you deal with subordinates, peers, and superiors who appear to be stressed?

- 11) At our institution, we are currently facing or will face the following problem. Explain how you'd develop a process for dealing with this challenge and what you would anticipate as the outcome.
- 12) How have your present and past positions prepared you to take on the responsibilities of this position?
- 13) If we asked people who know you well to describe you, what five words would most frequently come up? What three reasons would they give as to why we should hire you?
- 14) If your supervisor sent you to represent your institution at a very important meeting with people you have never met, what would he or she caution you about in terms of your style and approach to ensure that you would be an effective participant in the meeting?
- 15) Give us an example of a major crisis or chaotic situation you faced and what you did to manage it.
- 16) For what have you been most frequently praised—and most frequently criticized?
- 17) Suggest two or three things that you believe would make you stand out in a crowd of excellent candidates.
- 18) If you could wave a magic wand so that this position turned out to be your dream job, what specific things would you want the wand to ensure?
- 19) What do you like to do when not working?
- 20) What would you want us to remember most about this interview?

A Dozen Queries to Pose

- 1) What are the major challenges, opportunities, risks, and minefields of the position?
- 2) Why is the job vacant, and what is the history of the position and of those who have held it?
- 3) How do the president, board of trustees, top administrators, faculty, and students regard the position?
- 4) What is the climate and culture of the institution? Describe the typical working relationships between and among units, individuals, and various constituencies and stakeholders.
- 5) What have been the institution's strategic plan priorities and to what degree have they been achieved?
- 6) What have been recent results of financial performance, fundraising, student admissions and retention, and faculty recruitment and retention efforts?
- 7) What type of managerial and personal style is likely to be effective in meeting the responsibilities of the position?
- 8) What is it like to work here and live in this community?
- 9) Why should a candidate be seriously interested in the position and the institution?
- 10) What current or potential negatives or concerns should I know about the position and the institution?
- 11) How, after a year, would you assess whether you had made an excellent decision in selecting a candidate; what would you expect to have been accomplished? And what would that expectation be after three years?
- 12) What interests you most about me; what do you think I might be able to accomplish and contribute? What about me might cause you concern?

Seventeen Tips to Prepare References

- 1) Tell me how and when you came to know the candidate and in what ways you have worked with him or her.
- 2) What were your respective responsibilities when you worked together?
- 3) Give me your impression of the candidate's management style, professional skills, and personality traits.
- 4) How would you rate the candidate's effectiveness with various constituent and stakeholder groups, including direct reports, board trustees, and funders?
- 5) Describe a difficult situation the candidate has handled and the resulting outcomes.
- 6) How would you describe the candidate's capacity for analytical thinking and problem solving?
- 7) Describe his or her capacity for creativity, initiative, and action.
- 8) Tell me about a situation that the candidate managed in a way that was not particularly effective. What was his or her reaction in trying to turn things around?
- 9) What are the person's techniques for managing across the various functions that fall within his or her purview? What characteristics stand out as areas of strength? Which appear to be areas of weakness?
- 10) How effective is the candidate in managing technology? How has he or she demonstrated the ability to be innovative with technology in addressing institutional needs?
- 11) Why would the person want to leave his or her present position? Is he or she under any pressures that we need to understand and consider?
- 12) What advice would you give the candidate's next boss to get the maximum contribution from the person and to minimize the impact resulting from skill areas in which the person needs to improve?
- 13) Do you know of any inappropriate professional conduct on the part of the candidate? Is there anything else of significance that we should know?
- 14) How does the person deal with stressful situations, actions, and decisions? How does he or she deal with difficult situations involving subordinates, colleagues, or his or her supervisor?
- 15) If you were to use five words to describe the candidate, what would they be?
- 16) How would you describe the kind of supervisor and organizational climate and culture that would most likely enable the candidate to be at his or her best?
- 17) How would you rank the candidate's overall performance and productivity compared to other subordinates or colleagues?

SIG GINSBURG is executive vice president and director of the nonprofit practice, DHR International, an executive search firm headquartered in Chicago. sginsburg@dhrinternational.com

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