

# How and Why to Ask Good Questions During Interviews

By [Tammy Kolda](#)

*This article appeared as a SIAM Blog Post in Dec. 2013.*

Interview season is approaching, so this is a great time to talk about one of my biggest pet peeves with hiring candidates.

## The Scenario

In the U.S., the typical interview for a PhD-level position lasts a full day or more, including a one-hour seminar and one-on-one meetings with researchers and/or faculty as well as managers/administrators. The one-on-one meetings are expected to be two-way conversations; unfortunately, candidates don't always realize this. The following conversation snippet is typical...

Me: We've been delighted to host you for an interview today. We've heard about your work during your seminar and I've just asked you all my questions. What questions do you have for me?

Candidate: [A few moments of silence.] Well, I've already talked to a bunch of people and I just can't think of anything else to ask.

Sigh. This is such a disappointing response, and all the more so because it's such an easy question. The frequency that it occurs continues to astound me.

## Perspective

One thing that may be hard to fathom as a job candidate is that you're being interviewed to work with people, not for people. You will no longer be in a subservient role but rather a peer and colleague. So, the interview conversation is important because it gives a sense of how you'll "fit in" to the department and how interested you are in the work itself. An interview candidate without questions comes across as someone who's not interested in the job, won't engage in the department, and is generally unprepared. In contrast, good conversations can lead to long-lasting relationships, regardless of the outcome of the interview itself.

## Preparation

Preparation helps. If you actually want the job, it's a good idea to do some homework in advance. Research the institution, the department, and the people on your interview schedule in advance of the interview itself. Be proactive in requesting your interview schedule. Take notes on what you learn from your investigations and don't be afraid to pull those notes out during the interview. My colleagues and I are always really impressed by people who have taken even just 5 minutes to check our web pages.

## Great Questions to Ask

Not all of these questions are appropriate for all scenarios (especially group interviews), but these may give you an idea of the types of questions that can keep the conversation going.

- Can you give me an overview of your research? If you can customize this question based on your homework, that's even better. For instance, I've had people ask questions like, "I know you are an expert in tensor analysis, but it's not something that I've had much exposure to. Can you tell me a little bit about it?" You can and should ask a few follow-up questions.
- What is your job title? What was it when you first joined? How has your work evolved since you joined? What are possible career paths at this institution? This is a great way to learn about career paths at the place you're considering. It can especially elicit interesting answers from managers and administrators, since they may often come from different backgrounds.
- What are the major objectives of the department? This can be customized depending on who you're interviewing with. For instance, in industry or the newer institute in some universities, it's a fair question to ask about the function of the work group. It can also be tailored to be more about research objectives, hiring objectives, academic-based objectives (like developing new courses or programs), etc.
- What attracted you to this institution? What are your favorite things about working here? What are your major complaints about working here? These are questions that can be recycled over and over again, yielding different answers every time. Moreover, these are actually pretty useful questions to ask to get a sense of the way the place works.
- What types of activities will be most valued and rewarded? What would be expected of me in the position that I'm interviewing for? Few positions are pure research in the sense that you just show up and think interesting thoughts. There are projects to complete, codes to finish, proposals to write, not to mention meetings, meetings, and more meetings. It's also useful to get a sense of how time is accounted for. In industry and government labs, employees are expected to be focused on specific activities and meet deadlines.
- What is your typical work day like? This is an interesting question and hard to answer, but definitely a good conversation starter. It also can give a sense of how funding and project assignments work, especially important outside of academia. In academia, you can find out the balance between teaching, research, and administrative activities.

Of course, you also can and should ask questions about benefits, salary structure, timing for the decision, research and travel funding, the local housing market, the school situation, etc. But these questions are quickly used up after one or two meetings.