

Questions for Employers: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:

Some of the most important questions in every job interview are the questions that you ask the interviewer. Traditionally, those questions have focused on subjects like, “How are new employees oriented and/or trained?”, “What would my ‘first day’ on the job be like?”, and “What sorts of career ladders are possible?”. Questions like those have always been worth asking, primarily because they give you a chance to show how interested you are in the organization and how committed you are to pursuing a successful career there.

But another area of questioning that has become more and more important in the last few years is, “How is your organization dealing with [a current issue]?” A specific example of this would be asking a JP Morgan recruiter how their organization is handling the recent investigation of employees and customers who profited from PPP loans (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jpmorgan-chase-ppp-paycheck-protection-program-investigation-memo/>) or, during an interview with a Big Pharma company recruiter, asking what their company is doing about America’s current Opioid Crisis (<https://www.drugwatch.com/featured/opioid-crisis-big-pharma/>)

As a future employee, asking questions like these can not only be a window into an organization’s ability to manage a crisis, it can also expose the integrity of its business practices, and, most importantly, its values. For instance, if a Big Pharma interviewer quickly answered your question about the Opioid Crisis with, “That was something we really weren’t involved in”, you might conclude that their company may be avoiding responsibility for their actions in some way or seeing it as a non-issue. But if the Big Pharma interviewer answered your question with “Yes, we see it as a critical issue for us going forward, and even though we weren’t directly involved, we’ve put a number of protocols and practices in place to deal with it, including following through on our responsibility to our customers by [...]”

It should be clear by now that your questions in an interview, particularly the ones aimed at how the organization handles a critical situation, are the best way to determine how you might “fit”—not just because your “skills” can be an asset, but because your “values” match their core principles and ways of doing business. And asking about something that’s “in the news” is a good way to discover what the organization really cares about.

And there are many things “in the news” today that concern us all—Global Warming, the Coronavirus, Voting Rights and the Upcoming Election, and the Black Lives Matter movement that has exposed the deep pockets of pervasive racism that continue to divide us. All these issues are affecting (and infecting!) us all as individuals, but they are also having a major impact on the institutions or organizations that you are seeking to join. And, over and above them all, the BLM has brought into clear focus the critical issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in organizations and how they can affect your eligibility for a job, your chances of being hired, your career progression and your ultimate career success. So, questions about how an organization is dealing with DE&I should be a core part of your every interview, because ignoring the issue can not only lead to a “misfit” between you and a hiring organization, but also fail to address

opportunities for corporate growth and organizational change that, if not dealt with, will continue to harm us all (<https://inequality.org/research/black-workers-break-through-corporate-silence/>).

But finding out more about DE&I issues in an organization doesn't mean just asking questions about how employees are hired, how they are promoted or how they are treated. Every organization, large or small, public or private, profit or non-profit, faces the same DE&I issues in two basic ways—what are they doing to increase DE&I inside their organization—for their staff, managers, corporate leaders and Board, and what are they doing to increase DE&I outside the organization—for their clients, their industry, and their community.

First, some General Questions:

- Is DE&I a core value here? What can you point to that supports that?
- What DE&I programs and practices are in place here? What progress are you making?
- What resources (time, effort, money) are you putting toward increasing DE&I going forward?
- What are the obstacles to increasing DE&I here?

Questions about DE&I inside the Organization:

- What does your data show about hiring, promotions, retention and turnover of minority employees?
- Have you used that data to increase DE&I? How?
- Will there be transparent and routine releases of internal data to track your progress?
- How many minorities are hired for entry-level jobs? Supervisory or middle management level? Executive or Board level? Has that changed over time? How?
- Is your salary structure equitable for all employees, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity etc.?
- What are some of the experience(s) minority employees have had here at work? How were they dealt with?
- At this point, what efforts are being made by senior leadership to understand what minority employees experience at work?
- What is being done to educate and develop supervisors and managers who have high turnover rates of minority subordinates or who have been reported to HR for DE&I issues?
- What have you learned from exit interviews and other communication to human resources (HR) about the experiences of employees who identify as [...]?
- Are there communication channels in place to discover what is and is not working for minority employees? How well are those channels working?

Questions about DE&I outside the Organization:

- How diverse is your client population? How does that affect your organization and what are you doing about it?
- What would your clients/customers say about your efforts to promote DE&I?
- How do your DE&I efforts compare to what your competitors are doing?
- What are you doing to increase DE&I efforts in your industry/field/profession?
- Are there incentives in place to encourage employees to present your in-house DE&I programs in professional forums and conferences?

- What are the best practices that other industries are following and how can they be adapted to your needs?
- What outreach are you currently engaged in (to colleges, universities and professional schools) to promote DE&I and incorporate it in your hiring practices?
- Do you offer scholarships to minorities? What are the qualifications?
- What is your organization's "community"? Are there DE&I issues there and if so, what is the organization doing about them?
- Is there someone in your organization who is responsible for "Community Relations"? What do they do?

Two final points.

First, many of these questions are phrased in a "complete" way—that is, they look like they could stand alone, rather than being part of a continuing dialogue that may have led up to them. But they can be much more powerful if you attach them to some "anchoring" information that can put them in context. For instance, one of the General Questions could be more pertinent if you started it off by quoting the hiring organization's "Mission Statement", then asked how it supported DE&I. Or, there could be a news story in the popular press that commends or criticizes the organization's DE&I programs. Mentioning that could be the lead-in to a question about DE&I inside the organization. Whatever the added source of information, making your questions more situationally specific and time-focused will add considerable weight to whatever answers you get.

Second, these DE&I questions are meant to be "informational", not "confrontational". Even though some of the answers you get might be dismaying or even dismissive, the point is to ask the question in a collaborative way, as if you were an employee wondering about what the organization is--or is not—doing to move DE&I forward. So, you should think of your DE&I interview questions as "diagnostic"—to find out how fair, open and honest the organization is about DE&I and, even more important, to discover how "valued" you would be if you worked there, no matter who or what you are. And learning more about that is a courtesy we need to extend to one another everywhere, especially now.