

Why Not Why

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You don't need New Years to make a resolution, or a promise to yourself. And if you are interviewing, you may want to make a promise to yourself to avoid the question "Why."

Let's be clear. You don't ask "why" because it makes people feel defensive and interviewing is not about a contest or trying to make the interviewer uncomfortable. While interviewers may ask it, you may want to delete it because the purpose of an interview is to develop rapport and trust so that you can be moved on to the next interview. This is about YOU and YOUR choices.

I was originally trained as a journalist. All good journalists learn the 5 Ws and H. Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. For any story to be worth its salt, a writer had to cover all six bases, from writing obituaries to outbreaks of a disease.

However, as a job candidate, you are not necessarily in need of getting all the facts, every last detail, but you ARE interested in learning as much as you can while keeping the interviewer feeling positive about your candidacy. You also never want to make the interviewer feel uncomfortable.

You can use all the questions to keep the conversation going and you never have to ask "Why" again.

Let's say you want to know "why" the position is open. Yes, it's good to know it but you don't want to make the interviewer feel defensive in any way. You never know. There is always a possibility that the person who interviews you also happens to be that prior employee's best friend. Asking the "why" question may bring up some feelings that might negatively contaminate the mind of the interviewer and you DO NOT want that energy of feelings in the room -ever.

However, you are still curious, and you should be. So, here is how you can get rich and even more comprehensive answers without unintentionally alienating the interviewer.

Take the journalist's list of Who, What, When, Where, and How and experiment with asking these questions to yourself first and see which ones might work best.

For example: Instead of "Why?" ask "Who is the most likely candidate to fill the position and how would that person be different from the person who held it prior?" How does that feel for you?

And you can try, "What is the most important aspect of having the right person fill this position?" This one asks the interview to really think about things, which adds a new slant.

"When do you think this position will be filled", is a direct question that may not have an answer. Ask yourself, "How could I use "when" in my next interview in a way that yields the maximum information?"

“Where do you see the ideal candidate in this position taking the team?” While this question is as far away from “why” as you might get, hopefully you see how in contrast it is to the defensive-making “why.”

Or, “How did this position become open?” This one is more neutral and you may like this better. Or with another slant: “How would you describe the qualities of the job and what changes might occur when the right candidate fills the position?”

As you can now see, asking open-ended questions like this gives you a greater array of possibilities. Who would you ask? What would stop you from using them? When will you begin? Where do you see yourself using this approach? How will you integrate all of this into your next interview?

So, ask away but don't ask “why”!