

The Art of Asking Questions

When seeking career answers, start by asking the right questions.



BY DOROTHY M. PRITCHETT

Dorothy M. Pritchett is the founder of Andrew Grace Associates, a national recruitment firm specializing in legal searches. Pritchett has served as director of paralegal placement for Co-Counsel and for Briggs Legal Staffing in Atlanta. Prior to that, she worked 11 years as a paralegal in the areas of litigation, real estate, general corporate, trusts and estates and bankruptcy at law firms in Virginia. She's a member of the Georgia Association of Paralegals and a graduate of the University of Maryland.

We spend much of our legal careers in search of answers: We ponder how accurately we understand work assignments, whether our performance is exceptional or how we can receive more substantive work assignments. However, it's the rare person who dares to ask the question aloud to the person who can provide the answer. Excuses can be numerous:

- 1 I don't want to appear stupid.
- 1 My boss will think I don't know what I'm doing.
- 1 I'm just not ready to deal with this situation.
- 1 I'm afraid.

And fear can be terribly paralyzing. To ask or not to ask? That's the question. In most cases, asking the appropriate questions will open doors and lead to greater overall job satisfaction and better career opportunities. Mastering certain query techniques helps, as does understanding the role of questions in our profession.

Looking Beyond the Question

Mark Questions play a critical role in the field of law. The most brilliant solution often starts with a provocative question. Questions create challenges for opposing parties in lawsuits and can

leave doubts in jurors' minds. Due diligence is nothing more than a detailed inquisition. In fact, asking the right question in a difficult case often creates an avenue that leads to a beneficial resolution. Questions reveal a thoughtful and intellectual mind. The ability to pose an insightful query is an asset to a conscientious inquisitor.

As a professional recruiter, I'm often told by attorneys that legal assistants often don't ask enough questions. Paralegals are very sensitive about their role in providing legal services. We want to make certain that our actions will never be interpreted as the unauthorized practice of law. Since attorney supervision may not always be conducted with a nurturing attitude, we're sometimes reluctant to ask questions. We fear that inquiries about specific matters may be perceived as disputing someone's authority. Thoughtful questions, however, may not only improve your relationship with a supervising attorney, but can also boost your professional self-esteem. The following tips can help you get started:

- 1 As you pose a question, add information to demonstrate that you possess relevant knowledge. If you're uncertain about exactly how to approach a task, you could say, "Lexis-Nexis has an excellent

database that could prove helpful. When I encountered this barrier in the Richmond County case, I found the information I needed there. Should we take the same action this time?" Using this technique, you reveal past experience with a similar challenge and a solution-oriented approach. The result? You look smart.

Provide a reason for the question. "Since you've indicated that the client is on a tight budget, should I check into the procedure for filing these out-of-state documents instead of using a service?" Including a reason indicates you've listened to previous instructions and thought through your options. Don't preface questions with the remark, "This may sound stupid, but ..." People who do this give the impression that their knowledge about the issue is less than adequate. By using such language, they move the focus toward themselves and away from the topic of discussion. You present a much stronger image by simply stating the question.

Consider posing questions as statements. Instead of asking whether an attorney wants you to speak to the client directly, you can say, "I'll call Bob this afternoon to discuss the contract." This indicates initiative - you've decided on a course of action. If your assumption is wrong, it offers the other party an opportunity to correct it. Be careful, though. If this technique is frequently met with corrections, you maybe making too many presumptions.

Rephrase information for confirmation and to solicit additional input. This can be particularly helpful with someone who is vague. For example, you could clarify a deadline by saying, "It sounds like you need these inventories completed by Friday even though the filing deadline is next Tuesday." Use past mistakes to frame future questions. Let's say the attorney you work with frequently writes off some of your hours before billing clients. The next time you receive an assignment, ask how detailed the project should be and how many billable hours you should devote to the task. But avoid

reminders about previous problems. Don't say, "Last time, you told me I billed too many hours on this matter, so how many hours should I bill this time?" Don't inhibit your success by enabling others to dwell on the past.

- 1 If you have numerous questions, request a specific meeting to discuss them or consider presenting them via e-mail or in writing. Your attention to detail and respect for another person's time will be appreciated.

Finally, ask a better question. Start with "how" rather than "what" or

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"why" to appear less threatening. Instead of asking, "What are your expectations?" ask, "How can I most effectively meet your expectations?"

Want to Get More Out of Your Current Job?

Many people seeking improved job satisfaction leap to the conclusion that they need more feedback about their performance. That's always helpful, but often difficult to obtain.

Here's a different approach: Focus on asking questions each time you receive an assignment. The answers provide a blueprint for improving performance and surpassing others' expectations. Consider the following:

- 1 What is the deadline? (Submit work as early as possible to achieve added recognition.)
- 1 How much time do you anticipate it will take to complete this particular assignment?
- 1 How do you plan to present this work to the client? (To exceed expectations, you could prepare a PowerPoint presentation.)
- 1 Where does this job fall in terms of my work priorities?
- 1 How should I keep you informed about the status of the assignment? (Some attorneys or supervisors may not care; others may want to

keep clients apprised of progress. Also, inquire whether meetings, memos or e-mails are best. Communication styles and preferences vary.)

- ▶ If you were doing this, how would you approach the assignment? (This is where you may want to add information to the question to demonstrate you have significant knowledge about the topic and that you're simply seeking advice regarding strategy.)
- ▶ How can I exceed your expectations? (This demonstrates your commitment to excellence and is sure to capture some attention. Be prepared to deliver.)

While asking the right questions can help you achieve superior job performance, they're also important for calculating your own career satisfaction. Questions can help you get more out of your job.

To better understand your working environment, keep the following list handy and pose these questions to yourself every six months to a year: How am I contributing to the final product or success of this company? How do other members of my firm appreciate my contribution? How am I growing professionally? Is my level of responsibility reflected in my compensation? How successful is my employer in attracting and retaining talent? Do I respect the leadership of this company? Do we have the appropriate infrastructure and culture to support our continued success? Do our peers at competing companies or firms respect us?

Is This Particular Opportunity Right for Me?

When conducting a job search, it's up to you to conduct your own "due diligence." Investigate employment options to determine if an opportunity is right for you. Use the Internet, industry publications, professional consultants and network contacts, as well as current and former employees to seek answers. And during the interview, pose challenging questions. Among those to consider:

- 1 How is creativity encouraged?
- 1 How do you reward outstanding performance?
- 1 How would you describe the challenges of this position?
- 1 How significant are bottom line profits in the culture of this firm

compared to maintaining a quality of life for the firm's employees?

How has the company maintained a competitive edge with regard to technology?

How rapidly do you anticipate the law firm growing during the coming year?

How will paralegals contribute to

that growth?

How does the firm encourage continuing education?

Please describe the assignments I'll be given when I'm hired.

Don't forget to ask yourself whether the company's culture is compatible with your values and if it offers the kind of environment where you will be most productive. Consider whether your prospective employer received your thoughtful questions with respect or suspicion.

Ask and You Shall Receive

Questions have played a crucial role in my own career. After working as a paralegal in law firms for more than 10 years, my marriage of 29 years ended.

My income became essential to my survival. Presented with an opportunity to interview for a job in Atlanta and change careers to become a professional recruiter, I used questions to help make difficult decisions.

What qualifications do I possess for this job? How can I overcome objections the interviewer may have about hiring someone with no previous recruiting experience? How can I place candidates in an unfamiliar legal community? How committed am I to ensuring my success? How does this opportunity match with the other goals I want to accomplish in my life? What options exist if I do not succeed?

In short, I was offered the position, and have enjoyed a successful career as a recruiter. When I was forced to reevaluate my career, I wanted answers, but at first, I was overwhelmed by my fear of the unknown. I learned that by asking the right questions, I could explore my fears, focus on solutions and accept risks with a positive attitude.

It's a dynamic shift in thinking that could have a major impact on your career as well. Success can be achieved by knowing the answers, but to get there, you've got to ask the right questions. And success, if you want it, is yours for the asking.