

Must-ask questions during an instructional design interview

You have done it!

You made it through the interview process and now you hear those words that so many job seekers don't want to hear.

"Do you have any questions for us?"

Don't panic. You got this. The absolute worse thing you can do is say you have no questions. It doesn't matter how qualified you are, it can sink your dream of landing the job. Besides you've been selling yourself so hard, it's their turn to answer some questions for you to help provide you a clearer picture of what it is like to work there. Job interviews should be mutually beneficial. Even if they want you, it's important for you to want them too. So what are some questions you should ask? In this chapter we will explore eleven questions you should ask when given the opportunity in an instructional design interview.

Where does this role sit in the organization?

By asking this question, it tells a hiring manager you are curious about how the organization operationalizes the function of instructional design, and gives you more information about the role. Here are some of the possible answers you may receive:

- Information Technology: Depending on what you like to do, this could be a good or bad thing. The good is that the instructional design department may have access to more robust resources (e.g. funding for Learning Management Systems or other technology needed to do your job effectively). The downside is IT often has to deal with prickly internal and external customers, is often seen as "just tech support", and can be perceived as a big expense to an organization. I used to sit in the ID function in an IT department, and I had to turn my projects into "tickets," which made me feel like I was just there to be tech support. An appropriate follow-up question here would be to ask how they operationalize the function of ID in this role. You may find out they have a "customer service" oriented perspective, which sends up the red flag of a course factory.
- Human Resources: Much like IT, HR can also be a good or bad thing, depending on preference. The good is that you are often tied into fringe L&D assignments such as employee engagement surveys, career pathing, etc. The bad is that you might feel like a "compliance course factory:" depending on the organization, there may be no wiggle room for creativity and autonomy when creating the courses that employees have to complete. Additionally, ID folks who sit in HR often must compile audit review documentation and other forms of reporting to uphold various laws and standards that the organization has to enforce. An appropriate follow-up question to this may be how frequently their compliance courses get updated and if they are typically custom built or off-the shelf (meaning purchased by a vendor). The answer to these questions will tell you quickly if you are expected to "spray and pray" when it comes to training or if you are able to improve the compliance experience by creating a better learning experience.

- Operations: Operations can also be a fit depending on your preference. If ID is in operations, they typically have better access to trainees and subject matter experts (SMEs) since they usually come from the same bucket of the organization. Also, these ID departments can get the near-instant gratification of seeing the impact of the learning experiences they create; the feedback loop is often more rich as the department is seen as more accessible and open to feedback. ID departments in operations often create learning experiences for frontline workers of the organization. A downside is that it often takes a lot of education to explain the role of L&D when in operations. An appropriate follow-up question for an ID department in operations would be if there are subject matter experts (SMEs) who assist/report into the ID department. Often, especially in organizations with business complexities, operations ID departments will have champions on the front line who provide essential feedback to the department and help market the learning experiences of the ID department.
- Own department: Be wary if ID is in a separate department. This could make the function more vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of the organization and it can be more difficult to do your job depending on how the organization is structured. Folks I know who work for orgs in which ID is its own department often deal with less autonomy, tighter deadlines, and more layers of red tape to complete a project. Additionally, projects may be managed outside of the ID function, adding an extra level of stress. To me, this one can either be your own nirvana or private hell. It's been my experience when I talk to others who have worked in this structure that the leadership really can make or break this one. An appropriate follow-up question may be to ask about how long it has been its own department. You will likely get a history of how the function of ID for the business has evolved, giving you more information to make an appropriate decision for you and your future.
- College: If your position is part of a college in the university system, you will be supporting courses in that college. It's important to know that not all colleges are resourced the same. Depending on the university, there may be a large disparity in resources. Additionally, depending on the university, you may have different motivations for faculty to use your services. An appropriate follow-up question is if the ID position has a reporting line into a faculty center or overall distance education group. In a previous role I had, while I was embedded in a college the overall governing and larger distance education group had a lot of power in the decision making and administration of learning technologies. Sometimes I thought it was too much power but that's another story for another day.

Ultimately, this will likely be different at each organization you interview for, but at least by asking this question, it shows you have awareness of where learning and development can sit in other organizations and you can also determine if you feel like that position is a fit for you.

What is the composition of the ID department?

Again, this question shows that you are looking for a fit for you, but are also curious about how the ID department handles the workload.

For the composition question, you are looking specifically at which roles are in their ID department. Some of the answers you may receive include (but are not limited to): curriculum developer, educational technologist, LMS admin, knowledge management specialist, eLearning developer, instructional designer, learning experience designer, and project manager.

Some departments have each team member manage their own projects, and sometimes it can be the role of the senior ID (or team manager). If it's a team where everyone has the same role, you may be expected to adopt the style of the team -- there could be less room for creativity & originality.

Through this answer, you should also be able to determine if the team is composed of generalists (who know a bit about everything and likely own their own project from start to finish), or designers with more T-shaped knowledge (they have a deep expertise in one/two areas and can do other functions in a limited capacity).

What are some of the projects lined up for this department in the next fiscal year?

Depending on the organization, fiscal years can be aligned with calendar years or have another cadence. This should be a question they should answer with little hesitation and the key things you want to listen for here are a healthy dose of current projects and future projects. The current projects will give you something to work on during your onboarding and the future projects will likely be heavier lifts requiring you to possibly own the entire project. Some potential red flags would include if asking the hiring manager they don't really have a good sense of the project composition. This could mean they are an "absent manager" in the sense they don't know what their team does. Additionally, for higher-ed or non-profit positions that are grant funded or waiting on a revenue stream to cover, that should also be concerning. I worked for a soft money research center and it adds a layer of stress on the staff to know that funding is in the balance on an annual basis. A great follow-up question would be to ask given the projects discussed, where would you see this role being a key contributor? Again, it gives you more information to see if their outlook for your project work and what you want to do are a fit.

What is the biggest business challenge currently that this role solves for your organization?

This question asks the hiring manager and panel to tell you how valuable the ID department is to the business. Also listen closely because this will likely be your first mountain to climb and may be the project that determines if you make it past the probationary period (if applicable).

How much autonomy and creative freedom does this role have?

Depending on the jobs you have had in instructional design, you know it can vary. This question is pretty cut and dry.

What key performance indicators (KPIs), evaluation criteria, and design standards are we held to in this department?

Buckle up, Buttercup. This may shock you but for many ID departments, they likely won't have an answer here. In some places, a good learning experience is a clean Powerpoint deck uploaded as eLearning in the LMS. For others, it must achieve Kirkpatrick's Level 4 evaluation (haha this like never happens by the way). Some may say the number of faculty members served in a calendar year. Others even expect their ID department to help save the organization money

The fact that you are asking tells a hiring manager you care about the impact of your work. You aren't just another person in the course factory assembly line who wants to get on with the next project. You want to know how you are going to be evaluated and can make a difference in the organization with your work. Listen closely on this one, I know several people who have asked this, been disappointed, and rejected the job offer.

How are projects in the department managed?

By asking this question you are trying to get the scoop on if you will be managing your own ID projects or if there is an ID project manager. A nice follow-up question, if it isn't shared, is asking if there is a particular method or technology used to manage the projects.

How is professional development for this role supported?

You want to know my absolute favorite part of being in charge of an ID team? I get to support their professional development. Weekly they have time on their calendars blocked to take time to read, listen, write whatever they want about any topic that makes them a better professional. I allocate time on the job for this because it is so important. Now with that being said, I do also believe you can't necessarily rely on an organization to provide for you totally in your career. You are in charge of your own career. This is a lesson I wish I would have learned sooner in life because I can't tell you how many roles I had where I felt like if I worked harder and harder I'd be recognized and rewarded. It's true, life isn't fair. Common answers to this may include a budget for a conference, webinar, books, etc. If you have a topic you want to learn more about like project management and they ask you to clarify share that you are interested in learning

more about project management to become a better ID and wanted to know if that's something the company would support. You never know unless you ask.

What is the career path for this role?

You want to know if you can go somewhere right? I guess it depends on where you are in your career, but this is a question that often gets overlooked. The price you pay for not asking this one is the risk of being in a dead end job. You want to hear that this department will support junior IDs, IDs, Senior IDs, Managers, etc. If they say the department is small or maybe there isn't a lot of formal mobility, an appropriate follow-up question would be to ask if there would be stretch assignments or project leadership opportunities. While I craved a leadership title in my day job, I was able to put that I was acting director on my resume for two months while my supervisor was out on leave because I shared with him I was eager to move up. Be sure to read the vibes of the people across the table. Sadly some folks are threatened by ambition and if you see hints of that, it likely isn't worth your time.

If you were to hire me and six months down the road you were to say I was a successful hire, what would that mean?

This is a pretty bold question but one that tells the hiring manager you are wanting to know what makes you rise to the top. Listen closely as they will likely describe some hurdles and deliverables they expect you to overcome in the first three to six months. If that sounds like a good time, then this means you may be a fit. If it sounds like nightmare fuel, it may be time to rethink it.

Why is this position open?

I can't underestimate the importance of this question. Sometimes it is answered in the interview process but if it isn't, please ask. Use the information from this question to determine if you are going to be cleaning up someone else's mess or if the team is growing.



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