

Interview techniques: Tough questions, slick answers

Knowing the 'correct' type of answer is the key to sailing your way through the stormy waters of your interview.

A well-trained interviewer will throw all sorts of challenging questions at you in an attempt to assess your true suitability for the job. They often deliberately create stressful situations to see how you react. In fact, the tougher the questions, the better you're doing.

To help you get to grips with the range of possible questions you might get asked, we've listed them under four sections:

Selling yourself: how to mention your strengths and good attributes when answering a question.

Informative answers: for questions that are looking directly for information on your experience and skills.

Dealing with objections: answering direct objections the interviewer may have with your profile.

Turning negatives into positives: how to turn an interviewer's attempts to weed out your weaknesses into an opportunity to show your strengths.

Stress busters: answers that can diffuse potentially stressful questions.

SELLING YOURSELF

What kind of experience do you have to benefit this particular job?

The answer to this question lies in understanding the role when it is first described to you and taking the trouble to ask lots of questions about tasks involved. In effect they are really asking how much training and instruction they will have to provide for you.

Can you work well under pressure?

This is a closed question and can be a sign of an untrained interviewer. Use the opportunity to give a comprehensive but brief answer focusing on several clear-cut examples showing your ability to cope under pressure.

What is your greatest strength?

If you've done your homework before the interview, you would have several strengths to choose from. The obvious choice would be the strength which best suits the demands of the job. This common question is a good opportunity to assert your profile.

What interests you most about this job?

Answering this question properly requires that you fully understand the job description, and if you ask plenty of questions you should be able to respond with some specific explanations that show your enthusiasm. Some good responses include: challenging, exciting, scope for learning and developing, departmental growth, teamwork etc. This question can also be turned around so that you can glean more information from the interviewer regarding the role and the company's expectations.

What are you looking for in your next job?

You want a role where your skills and experience can be put to best use in contributing to the company. Avoid an over emphasis on what you hope the company can do for you.

Why should I hire you?

Be careful not to answer with a broad description. Keep it brief and to the point. Each point should be a direct link between your skills and experience and the demands of the role. A precise answer shows that you accurately understand the role and what you can bring to it.

Do you have any questions?

This is when you can breathe a sigh of relief, as it usually means that the interview is coming to an end. If there's something you haven't yet had a chance to impress upon the interviewer, this is your chance.

INFORMATIVE ANSWERS

Do you consider yourself a natural leader?

In reality not all of us possess the confidence required to lead. You can substitute 'natural' with 'competent' or 'conscientious', focusing more on leading by example with good organisational and interpersonal skills.

Tell me about yourself.

This can be a frustratingly open question. It's a good opportunity to reveal the strengths that you would have identified in your personal profile. Aim to keep it professionally orientated, specific to the characteristics that the interviewer may want to hear.

What are your biggest accomplishments?

Answers to this should be job-related. Modesty should again be applied, hinting that your best work is yet to come. A big accomplishment doesn't need to be overly impressive, but rather show your competency. Don't be hesitant or vague when answering this question. Show that you have a clear idea of your achievements to date.

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

The obvious answer would be "part of the management team within your company". We all know this may not necessarily be true, but the interviewer needs to know that your intentions are to move up the career ladder within the organisation. Be careful not to sound overly ambitious; the interviewer may be your future boss.

DEALING WITH OBJECTIONS

What did you like or dislike about your last job?

Ideally you would answer that there was nothing you disliked. Hiring someone who easily fits into the existing complement of staff is very important, so steer clear of criticising former colleagues, managers etc.

How long have you been looking for another position?

Whether you are employed or not, this question can be potentially fatal. If you are currently unemployed and have been looking for some time, try to minimise the 'time gap' by mentioning any other activities in which you have been involved. If your work is of a specialist nature and you've been fussy, or determined to continue in that field, point this out provided it isn't at odds with the demands of the new role.

Why were you made redundant?

If you were made redundant then this is a legitimate excuse that most recruiters will understand, seeing as they have most probably been involved with laying off people themselves. Try to give acceptable reasons (such as downsizing, restructuring etc), be brief and move on to the next question.

Why were you fired?

If you were clearly fired and cannot realistically pass it off as a retrenchment, then it's advisable to be open and honest (honesty is a virtue that always scores points) while minimising the reason for your dismissal. Try to portray the incident as 'one of those unlucky things that happens to the best of us' and modestly explain how you've learnt from the experience and the steps you've since taken. Put the interviewer at ease in the hope that they won't place too much importance on a reference check.

How long would you stay at this company?

Answering this could be tricky if your CV reveals a tendency for you to move around. You could emphasise your desire to settle down with the right company, and that you feel this is it. Alternatively, throw the question back at them: "Would this company be able to offer me a long term future?"

How do you handle criticism of your work?

Try to portray an attitude that all criticism has a benefit and provides a chance for improvement. Try and elaborate on this question by giving an example of a poor idea that was criticised, rather than substandard work that you had produced.

What are some of the things on which you and your supervisors disagree?

If 'none' sounds too short, mention only insignificant 'creative' differences or, better still, turn the question around and elaborate on the 'wonderfully productive' relationship you shared with your boss, if it is realistic to do so.

Do you make your opinions known when you disagree with your supervisor?

If you have previously dealt with a situation like this where the process and outcome was satisfactory to both parties, then mention examples. Aim to show that you're a mature individual with the confidence and intelligence to approach your supervisor in private to discuss your objections in a constructive, calm manner.

How will you be able to cope with a change in environment?

This sort of question is usually posed if you've spent a long time in one particular job. It sounds like a negative but can be turned into a positive, especially if you're looking for a change or a chance to grow.

Why aren't you earning more at your this stage of your career?

Another implied negative which can be turned into a positive by emphasising your desire to gain solid experience instead of continually changing jobs for the sake of money. This question gives you scope to ask; "How much do you think I should be earning?" This could possibly lead to an offer.

Why have you changed jobs so frequently?

Emphasise that the variety of jobs has been good experience and that you're now more mature and settled. Questions like this can be turned around to portray a positive, but be careful not to dwell too much on the subject or over-justify yourself.

TURNING NEGATIVES INTO POSITIVES**What can you do for us that someone else cannot do?**

Don't let this tough question intimidate you. If you have properly understood the details of the job then try to answer with a unique combination of your skills/experience which others are unlikely to have.

Describe a difficult problem you've had to deal with.

Outline an example of your success in troubleshooting and organisation. It's always good to go into an interview armed with one of these. Clearly explain how you approached the problem, the result and how a difficult outcome was averted. Try to give an example which is relevant to the new role.

What is your greatest weakness?

If you lack a certain skill or experience in a particular field, express your desire to fill that gap or mention that you're studying to rectify this. On a personal level you may be impatient or lack analytical ability, but mention any progress you've made in dealing with this, briefly giving an example showing how much you have improved.

What type of decisions did you make in your last/current job?

Prepare the answer for this straightforward question before the interview. Whether or not you made lots of decisions, make sure your answer reflects that they carried responsibility, were important within the role and required sound judgement.

How do you handle tension?

The smart answer here is to explain how you avoid tension in the first place. Avoid a vague and simplistic answer like "Yes, I can handle tension". You might also want to mention what you do outside of work to reduce stress (e.g. going to the gym, exercising etc).

How do you take direction?

You need to show that you are the type of employee who can be easily briefed and can finish the task at hand without any unnecessary disagreements or issues with your colleagues. Don't give simplistic or vague answers. Try to give examples from your previous or current job showing your ability to follow instructions without being difficult.

What are your pet hates on the job?

Don't shoot yourself in the foot here. Keep this answer short and sweet, using words like "challenge" rather than "I hate?". Try to show that your 'objections' in the workplace are conscientious ones such as lateness, not answering phones etc.

Do you prefer working with others or alone?

Answering this depends on the nature of the job you are going for, but team players are usually favoured so it's best to show that you function well in both situations depending on the nature of the task.

Describe an atmosphere that is conducive to work.

Without a clear idea of the company's office environment, you run the risk of saying the wrong thing. Keep this answer short, base it on your previous role, mention conscientious factors, such as "a professional team", "not too noisy", etc.

What kind of people do you like to work with, or have difficulty working with?

Don't get into personal details here, just give a short, sweet and obvious answer that you prefer working with people who are motivated and have integrity and pride in their work. No one likes working with slackers so you're not likely to offend or influence the interviewer negatively with this comment.

STRESS BUSTERS**What kind of decisions are most difficult for you?**

A good answer is to mention that you have difficulty making a decision where there is insufficient knowledge or information at hand, and that you try to avoid such instances by taking the trouble to remain informed. Try to imagine what sort of decisions would frequently be made in the new role, and steer clear of mentioning any of these as 'difficult'.

Why were you out of work for so long?

It is now quite acceptable for people to take time out to travel or for personal reasons. The interviewer needs to be reassured that you haven't been sitting around doing nothing. Whatever your excuse, make sure you have adequately prepared your answer beforehand and that it doesn't suggest that your commitment to the new job would be less than 100 per cent.

Why do you want to leave your current job?

Obviously we all want to improve our work situation, but this can be a trick question. Avoid stating personal reasons and instead consider using one or more of the following reasons: Challenge, Location, Advancement, Money, Pride, Security.

What interests you least about this job?

A tricky question which can be answered by hinting that you couldn't answer this fully until you've experienced the job in detail. Alternatively, choose an area of the job which is understandably mundane (by anyone's standards), but not vitally important, such as clearing out your email inbox.

I'm not sure you're suitable for the job.

Don't let this trick question throw you. Remain calm and re-emphasise several points that lend support to your suitability. Questions like these crop up towards the end of an interview and can make or break your case. It is a good idea to keep a trump card in reserve for this occasion.

Wouldn't you feel better off in another firm?

This can be a good sign that the interviewer has a high regard for you. What they're really asking is whether you'll get bored and move on. You need to reassure them by throwing back the flattery, emphasising the appealing aspects of their company.

Discriminatory questions

Despite age and other discriminations being illegal, refusing to answer these questions isn't going to land you the job. The interviewer's motive may not be discriminatory, but who they ultimately hire is their prerogative.