

Answering Tricky Interviewing Questions

GETTING STARTED

Job interviews are the single most important part of the selection process—for both you and your future employer. Once your resume (or personal referral by someone whose opinion the hiring manager trusts) has established that you meet the basic skills and background requirements, it is the interview that establishes you as a candidate who will fit well into an organization’s culture and future plans.

While most interview questions are generally straightforward, unambiguous inquiries, some interviewers will throw in surprises specifically intended to explore your thinking and expectations at a deeper level. Or they may be meant to throw you off guard to see how you react in high stress or confusing circumstances. Or they may not be intentionally tricky at all. They may merely be invented by the interviewer, or borrowed from lists of questions available on the Internet, with no idea what their value is, or how to assess your response as it relates to the requirements of the job.

How you answer tricky questions could determine whether you will receive an offer from the organization. But it’s also important to remember that what those questions are, and how your answers are received, can tell you volumes about whether this is a company you want to work for. Here are some of the questions you might want to consider as you’re preparing yourself for a job interview:

1. What aspects of your career do you feel especially good about, and how can you make sure those are discussed in the interview?
2. What aspects of your career so far do you feel especially worried about discussing?
3. Can you formulate answers to questions about those aspects in advance?
4. How can you use the interview to learn about the potential employer?

KEY TERMS

Interview: The interview is an opportunity for an employer to get to know the candidate behind the resume. It is also the chance for candidates to get a sense of a company’s culture, values, and plans for the future.

Interviewer: The interviewer is the person seated directly across from the candidate and charged with leading the conversation. Sometimes this person is a professional especially trained to assess candidates for fit. More often, however, he or she is doing this work in conjunction with a larger job description. In this case, the interviewer could be burdened with a difficult attitude about the meeting—for example, being resentful at having to be pulled away

from his or her regular duties, or shy, or confused about what kinds of results to expect from the interview.

Tricky questions: These questions make a candidate uncomfortable for any number of reasons—they're too personal; they're not obviously related to the open position; they require fast thinking under hypothetical circumstances, or they prompt the candidate to reveal crucial information (such as salary expectations) before he or she is ready to do so.

FAQS

What if I don't understand how the question relates to the job I'm applying for?

Some questions—especially questions in which you are given a scenario and asked to think your way through to a solution—are designed to help the interviewer understand your ability to make tough decisions, or be a leader in high pressure situations. True, it's reasonable to expect that you won't ever find yourself stranded in a lifeboat, charged with deciding which fellow survivor to throw overboard to conserve rations. But the way you reason out your decision may tell the interviewer much about you—for example, how you would choose which product to take out of inventory to conserve valuable warehouse space. Try to answer these kinds of questions based on business strategy.

Some questions ask me to divulge my greatest weakness. How can I answer these questions without disqualifying myself for the job?

Such questions are usually designed to discover the extent of your self-knowledge. We all have weaknesses, and it's unreasonable to expect you to be perfect in every way. Keep your answer short and dignified. Identify only one area of weakness that you're aware of, but also describe what you are doing to strengthen that area. Don't try to be too clever by turning a negative into a positive, saying things like, "My biggest weakness is that I'm a determined worker and won't give up until the job is done well and completely." You aren't fooling anyone.

Sometimes I get the impression that the interviewer doesn't know why I'm being asked a certain question, and that my answer would be beyond his or her understanding. How do I salvage that situation?

A company that hires unqualified interviewers to select qualified candidates may not be one you would like to work for . . . so you may not want to salvage such a situation. But if you're determined to give yourself the best chance to work at this organization, help the interviewer out by exploring the reasons behind the question and what exactly is being looked for in the way of response.

Even though you may not answer the question itself, you will still benefit from the conversation. You will position yourself in the interviewer's mind as someone who is not rattled by ambiguity, but instead works calmly and cooperatively with team members to arrive at the best possible outcome.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Understand the purpose of the interview

The best job interviews are respectful encounters that allow mutual discovery. It may feel as if the employer has all the power—after all, it's the employer who will decide whether to offer you the job. Ultimately, however, it is you who holds the power, because it will be you who decides whether to accept the job. So interviews are just as important for you in the selection process as they are for the interviewer.

Keep that power balance in mind, and it will help you stay calm, dignified, and clear thinking when tricky questions are asked.

Assume that the interviewer is probably as uncomfortable with the process as you are

Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes, and assume that he or she is slightly uncomfortable with the process as well. Few people relish meeting someone new and peppering them with probing questions. You may be the 25th candidate for a job, so the interviewer may feel tired of the same old questions and the same pat, rehearsed answers. Remember also that the interviewer was once sitting in your seat, applying for his or her job within the company and worrying about the same surprise questions that you are. The resulting empathy will help break down the barriers of tension and perceived judgmentalism.

Prepare yourself in advance by identifying the topic areas that might be the trickiest for you. Then think carefully about how you might answer them. Broadly speaking, there are eight areas of questioning that could pose a challenge for you:

- Your experience and management skills
- Your opinion about industry or professional trends
- The reasons why you are leaving your current job
- Financial or other value of your past achievements
- Your work habits
- Your salary expectations
- Your expectations for the future
- Your personality and relationship skills or problems.
- Imagine which of these areas might be discussed and formulate in advance the general thoughts and responses you want to express. But don't rehearse answers to anticipated questions word for word.

Never lie

Many interviewers do this work for a living, so they are more experienced at hearing the answers that candidates think they want to hear than you are at delivering them. Be candid and clear, and use lengthy answers only when you see that demonstrating your strategic thought process in detail will add valuable information.

When in doubt, try to understand the business reason behind the question. Ask questions of your own

“What do you mean?” or “Could you rephrase that question?” are perfectly acceptable queries in any civilized conversation. Job interviews are no different.

Be prepared to answer questions about salary

During the interview process you want to keep the focus on your worth, not your cost. Early in the process, politely decline to go into details about past salary and future expectations. Many companies have a policy of offering salaries only at a certain percentage above a candidate’s previous salary. If your previous salary, for whatever reason, was below market average or below your worth, you shouldn’t have to be forced to accept a lower salary in the future.

If a question comes up about your salary expectations, make sure you have done your homework. You should have decided ahead of time on a salary range that is acceptable to you. Make sure the top of the range is well above the figure you would be thrilled to accept, and the bottom of the range slightly above your predetermined “walkaway” figure.

Study question lists

Many lists of questions are available online. Interviewers use them, and you can, too. Although you may not be asked those specific questions during the interview, the knowledge that you have done everything you can by preparing in advance will help you feel relaxed, confident, and capable—which is basically what the employer is looking for in the first place!

COMMON MISTAKES

You criticize your former employer or co-workers

If you are asked why you are seeking new employment, focus on your positive ambitions, not any resentments or grudges you may harbor. Talk in terms of what has worked in your career, not what has failed.

You get angry or defensive

A job interview is part gamesmanship, part blind date, part tea party. Use your social skills to smooth over edgy moments or bristly reactions to possibly offensive questions. And don’t take anything personally.

You give away your power

You are at the interview to assess the desirability of the job, just as much as to sell your own desirability to the company. Remembering that will help you keep your dignity and protect you from feeling compelled to answer inappropriate, irrelevant, or intrusive questions.

You use scripted answers to anticipated questions

These are inauthentic, and the interviewer has heard them all before. Original responses, even if they are slightly clumsy, will be more valuable to both you and the interviewer. They are a more accurate guide as to whether there is indeed a match between you and your potential new employer.

MORE HELP

Deluca, Matthew J. 1996. "Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Interview Questions". New York: McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing

Alison Straw and Mo Shapiro. 1998. "Tackling Tough Interview Questions". London: Hodder & Stoughton for the Institute of Management

Fry, Ronald W. 2000. "101 Great Answers to the Toughest Interview Questions". Franklin Lakes, New Jersey: Career Press

Yate, Martin John. 2001. "Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions". London: Kogan Page