

Prepare Your Answers to Common Interview Questions



Fear of tough questions creates most of the anxiety experienced during an interview. Here are some frequently asked questions and suggested strategies for responding:

1. Tell me about yourself

This is your personal infomercial. (Refer to the Personal Infomercial “TipSheet.”) Give a brief outline of your professional and/or educational background as it relates to the position.

2. What are your strengths?

Provide three to four job-related abilities. Be ready to provide specific examples to support.

3. What are your weaknesses?

Never say you have no weaknesses. Limit to one or two at the most. Turn weaknesses into positive statements about your potential job performance, such as “I tend to be a perfectionist,” or “I have a tendency to work long hours” if a project excites you. You can also reference a legitimate weakness that you have worked to overcome through improved self-management or training, ie. time management or computer literacy. Just be sure that it doesn't have a major impact on your ability to do the job.

4. What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself five or ten years from now?"

Discuss your desire to advance but also let the interviewer know that you are interested in making a meaningful contribution to the area that you are hiring in at. If you are being interviewed by the hiring manager you don't want to give the impression that you want to get your foot in the door and then move, leaving them with a hole in their department!

5. What accomplishment are you most proud of?

The secret to this question is being specific and selecting an accomplishment that relates to the position. Think of the qualities the company is looking for and develop an example that demonstrates how you can meet the company's needs.

6. Why did you leave your last job?

If you are unemployed due to company closure or lack of work, simply explain the circumstances. If you are reentering or just entering the work force, briefly explain why...e.g., in school, raising children, self-employed. Even if your last job ended badly, be careful about being negative in answering this question. Be as diplomatic as possible. If you do point out negative aspects of your last job, find some positives to mention as well. Complaining endlessly about your last company will not say much for your attitude. If you were terminated, be honest. Talk briefly about the circumstances, and emphasize that you have learned from it.

7. Why do you want to change jobs?

You do not want to turn this question into a negative bashing of your last job or boss. Avoid negative comments about your current employer or boss. Express that you benefited from your time with your former employer, but you are ready to look toward the challenges of a new career. You can also use your research to put forth several points about the organization you are interviewing with that you feel will be a great match for your particular skills and experiences. Emphasize the fact that this opportunity to work for them is 'just what you have been looking for' and why, and then go into several ways you can add value to the organization.

8. What do you do with your spare time?

Tell them. Hobbies and sports tell interviewers a lot about the sort of person you are. Prepare now before any interview in what way your pastimes will help you in this position. For example, if you are active in sports, your peak fitness could be useful. If you play football for example, emphasize that you understand the needs of being a team player. They probably want to see that you do more with your life than just watch TV every night. Sometimes they are also looking for anything that might clash with work. Perhaps a night school course that will keep you from working late, or interfere with required business travel. Remember also that people like people that are like them, that they have something in common with and you might just strike lucky.

9. How do you handle pressure?

Consider this response: "I enjoy working in a challenging environment. I have found that I have been able to effectively manage pressure on the job by prioritizing my responsibilities so I have a clear idea of what needs to be done when." Also, be prepared with some specific examples of how you have handled stress on the job.

10. Describe your last boss

Discuss the strengths your past supervisors had and how they helped you succeed in your positions. Avoid negative comments. If you are asked specifically what you did not like about your previous boss or what you would change, try to turn it into a positive, e.g., "because of our reduced staff, Chris could not give me a lot of coaching, however, as a result I become more self reliant and proficient in XYZ"

11. Why do you want to work for us?

Stress the positives you have heard about the organization. Show that you have done your homework by giving information you obtained from your research.

12. How would you describe your personality?

Keep your answer short and relevant to the job and the organization's culture. Remember that the interviewer is trying to determine if you would "fit" with the culture/ personality of their organizations.

13. You seem over-qualified for this position

An employer will get "a quicker pay-back from hiring you" because you have more experience than required. Emphasize your unique attitudes, abilities, and interests that led you to apply for the job. Stress your skills, your enthusiasm for the organization, your eagerness for the opportunity to learn, and that you feel that there is always something new to learn wherever you work. Also, play up your experience and say you could help train other people. You might also say that you have targeted this position because you have a special interest in "this kind of work," or in this "particular organization."

14. You seem under-qualified for this position

The employer is worried that your training time will be extended. State that you are eager to learn and learn quickly (be prepared with an example). Emphasize that because you do not have a lot of experience they do not have to retrain you.

15. Why have you been unemployed for so long?

Never say that you've been living on your unemployment/severance pay and taking a break! Emphasize that you are you looking for the right fit and not just any job. Discuss how you have continued to stay current in your field - "Finding the right job takes time. I'm not looking for just any job." Some answers may be the same as #3 if you've been out of the labor force.

Otherwise, explain that you have been diligently looking for work but that jobs using your skills are not readily available in the area. You have made a career change and entry jobs are more difficult to find.

16. Can you explain these gaps in your employment?

You may have gaps in your employment for many reasons. Speak confidently and positively about your experiences during the gap that would make you a good employee. For example, the skills involved in budgeting, organizing, and planning while raising a family might transfer to on-the-job skills. Volunteering might have equipped you to work with diverse groups and adjust to flexible schedules. Definitely mention if you have used the opportunity to return to school or even take a PC class.

17. Your last job was with a large company. We're a small entrepreneurial firm and we're used to rapid change. Can you adapt?

State: "My last company underwent many changes while I was employed there. I enjoyed trying new things and ideas." (Show examples whenever possible.)

18. What salary are you seeking?

This is one of the most important interview questions. When an interviewer asks your salary requirement, try first to gently deflect the question by indicating that your requirements are negotiable and that you are seeking compensation that is fair based upon the role and responsibilities. You can also turn the question around by asking how much the organization has budgeted for the position. If you are pressed for a number, give a range. To decide on a range, think about the salary you want, your salary at your most recent position and the industry-standard salary for the job. (Do some research if you are not sure about the industry-standard range in this region.)

19. How would your boss respond to a question about your strengths and weaknesses?

Interviewers believe that the candidate will give a more realistic answer if they believe that the interviewer may discuss this during a reference check or other contact with the prior boss. Say that you believe he or she would confirm whatever you have claimed as your strengths and areas that need improvement. If your boss had complimented you for a particular quality or accomplishment, this gives you an opportunity to mention it.

20. What is most important to you in your job?

Think about what truly motivates you. Is it helping others, solving problems, having challenges, being recognized for your efforts, etc? Relate your answer to what you know about the organization and the position that you are being considered for. For example, what qualities or values would a person need to do that job well.

21. Why should we hire you for this position?

Your response should sum up the main selling points of what you have to offer. It is not a time to be shy. What do you have to offer this organization - past experience? specialized knowledge? skills? attributes? Again, just be sure that the selling points you emphasize relate directly to the qualities the employer would want in that position.

Note: Potential employers often ask a number of questions about your past employment. To be prepared, carefully review your resume and develop brief 20-second vignettes or "stories" that more fully explain every responsibility and activity required for both your current and past jobs. Also, have examples of successes / challenges that you overcame that will demonstrate your accomplishments - especially those that show skills that would apply to the new job.