

4.8 ANSWER QUESTIONS

What to Know

Most interviewers ask similar questions during job interviews. These questions relate to how your skills, knowledge, training, and work experience fit the job opening in the company. Unfortunately, many job hunters do not expect the questions, and do not practice their answers before an interview. As a result, applicants may not present their strongest assets. It is difficult to give good answers to questions on the spur of the moment. If unprepared, the simplest question can throw you off balance.

You can improve your chances for success if you practice answering questions. Read the following questions, write down your own personal answers, and practice your answers out loud. Then, when an interviewer asks one of the questions, you'll be ready.

As you read the questions and begin to develop your own answers, use the following ideas:

1. Keep your answers brief, but be certain you answer the questions thoroughly.
2. Use evidence, examples, data and anecdotes to illustrate your points.
3. Think about your answer before you start to speak. It is okay to pause and collect your thoughts, and then give your answer. Try to relate your response to the position for which you are applying.
4. Remember, most questions have more than one purpose. As you develop your answers, think about the match between your skills and the company's needs.
5. Every chance you get, explain how you would go about doing a job rather than just saying you can do it. Do not volunteer information you are not asked for—you might talk yourself out of a job.

Be nice to people...nice gets nice, and all things being equal, courtesy can be very persuasive.

TOUGH QUESTIONS AND TOUGH ANSWERS

The following list of questions and answers may help you prepare for your interview.

1. Tell me about yourself.

Be thorough, but brief. Talk for no more than two minutes. Be logical. Be positive. Discuss your education and professional achievements and goals. Then briefly describe your qualifications for the job and the contributions you could make to the organization. Refer to the 30-second commercial in section 4.4.

2. Why did you leave the military?

This can be a difficult question. “I achieved my goals in the military and I’m now looking for a new challenge.” You could then explain what your goals were, how you met them, and where you see yourself going now.

3. Why are you leaving your current position?

This is a critical question. Do not bad-mouth previous employers. Don’t sound too opportunistic. It is good to state after long personal consideration you wanted an opportunity to expand your background/knowledge. You feel your chance to make a contribution at this time is very low due to company restructuring. Still attempt to score points.

4. What do you consider your most significant accomplishment?

This can get you the job. Prepare extensively. Tell a brief story, which includes details and your professional involvement. The problem, action, resolution organization works well here. Describe a situation that presented a problem, detail what actions you took to resolve it, and discuss what the resolution was. This should be an accomplishment that was truly worth achieving. Some aspects that you could discuss include: hard work, deadlines, overcoming obstacles, important company issues and relations with coworkers.

5. Why do you believe you are qualified for this position? Why should I hire you?

Pick two or three main factors about the job and about you that are most relevant. Discuss for two minutes, with specific details. Select a technical skill, a specific management skill (organizing, staffing, planning) and a personal success story.

6. Have you ever accomplished something you did not think you could?

Show you are goal-orientated, have a strong work ethic, personal commitment and integrity. Provide a good example where you overcame numerous difficulties to succeed. Prove you are not a quitter and you’ll get going when the going gets tough.

7. What do you like/dislike about your current position?

Interviewer may be trying to determine your compatibility with the open position. Stating you dislike overtime or dislike specific details, or that you dislike “management” can cost you the position. There is nothing wrong with liking challenges, pressure situations, opportunity to grow, or disliking bureaucracy.

8. How do you handle pressure? Do you like or dislike these situations?

High achievers tend to perform well in high pressure situations. Conversely, this question also could imply that the position is pressure-packed. If you perform well under stress, provide a good example with details, giving an overview of the stress situation. Try to relay the situation as a challenge rather than focusing on your ability to handle pressure. The interviewer will see you turn a negative into a positive situation.

9. Good employees can take the initiative and get the job done. Can you describe yourself in terms of this statement?

A proactive, results-oriented person does not need constant supervision. To convince the interviewer you know how to take initiative you must describe a situation in which you were self-motivated. Try to discuss at least one example in depth. Demonstrate a strong work ethic and creativity.

10. What is the worst or most embarrassing aspect about your career? How would you have done things differently now with 20/20 hindsight?

This is a question to find out if you are introspective and if you learn from your mistakes. The right answer indicates an open, flexible personality. Do not be afraid to talk about negative results or problem issues, particularly if you have learned from them. Dynamic, high-performance individuals learn from mistakes. End your story on a positive note.

11. How have you grown or changed over the past few years?

To discuss this effectively is indicative of a well balanced, intelligent individual. Maturation, increased technical skills, or increased self-confidence are important aspects of human development. Overcoming personal obstacles, or recognizing manageable weaknesses can make you an approachable and desirable employee.

12. What do you consider your most significant strengths?

Know four or five key strengths. Be able to discuss each with a specific example. Select those attributes that are most compatible with the job opening. Most people mention management ability or good interpersonal skills in response to this question. If you can not describe the specific characteristics of management, such as planning, organizing, budgeting, staffing, etc., do not say you have strong management skills. If you mention interpersonal skills you should be able to clearly explain what you mean.

13. What do you consider your most significant weakness?

Show by specific example how a weakness can be turned into a strength. Balance any negative with a positive statement. Example: "I tend to be a workaholic, but have learned to better manage my time."

14. Deadlines, frustration, difficult people and silly rules can make a job difficult. How do you handle these types of things?

If you can't deal with petty frustrations you'll be seen as a problem. You certainly can state your displeasure at the petty side of these issues, but how you overcome them is more important. Diplomacy, perseverance and common sense can often prevail even in difficult circumstances. This is part of corporate America and you must be able to deal with it on a regular basis.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

15. What kind of work are you looking for?

16. What do you know about our company? (This is your opportunity to shine with the amount of research that you've done. If you have contacts in the company this is a good time to do some name dropping.)

15. What can you do for us that someone else cannot?
16. What things about your previous jobs have you disliked?
17. What goals have you set recently?
18. Where do you expect to be in five years?
19. What do you think of your supervisor?
20. What does your supervisor think of you?
21. What do your subordinates think of you?
22. How did previous employers treat you?
23. What is your management style (democratic, team player, etc.)?
24. Would you describe a few situations in which your work was criticized?
25. What are your two biggest accomplishments in:
 - a. your present or last job;
 - b. your career so far?
26. How long would it take you to make a contribution to our company?
27. What do you expect as a starting salary?
28. Tell me about yourself:
 - a. Are you creative? Give an example.
 - b. Are you analytical? Give an example.
 - c. Are you a good manager? Give an example.
 - d. Are you a leader? Give an example.
29. I have interviewed several people with more experience. Why should I hire you instead of them?
30. What jobs have you held? How did you get them and why did you leave?
31. Why did you choose your field of work?
32. How do you spend your spare time?
33. What personal characteristics do you feel are necessary for success in your chosen field?
34. Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?
35. What kind of boss do you prefer?
36. Can you take criticism without getting upset?

ILLEGAL INTERVIEWING QUESTIONS

Inquiry Area	Illegal Question	Legal Question
National Origin/Citizenship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you a U.S. citizen? • Where were you/your parents born? • What is your “native tongue?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you authorized to work in the United States? • What languages do you read/speak/write fluently? (This is okay only if this ability is relevant to the job.)
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How old are you? • When did you graduate? • What’s your date of birth? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you over the age of 18?
Marital/Family Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What’s your marital status? • Whom do you live with? • Do you plan to have a family? When? • How many kids do you have? • What are your child-care arrangements? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you be willing to relocate if necessary? • Would you be able and willing to travel as needed by the job? (This is okay if it is asked of all applicants.) • Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary? (Again, this is okay only if it is asked of all applicants.)
Affiliations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What clubs or social organizations do you belong to? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List any professional or trade groups or other organizations that you consider relevant to your ability to perform this job.
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How tall are you? How much do you weigh? (Questions about height/weight are not acceptable unless minimum standards are essential to job performance.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to lift a 50-pound weight and carry it 100 yards, as that is part of the job?
Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have any disabilities? • Please complete the following medical history. • Have you had any recent or past illnesses or operations? If yes, list them and give dates when these occurred. • What was the date of your last physical exam? • How’s your family’s health? • When did you lose your eyesight? How? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you able to perform the essential functions of this job? (This question is okay if the interviewer has thoroughly described the job.) • Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job-related functions?

Inquiry Area	Illegal Question	Legal Question
Disabilities (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you need an accommodation to perform the job? (This question can only be asked after a job offer has been made.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As part of the hiring process, after a job offer has been made, you will be required to undergo a medical exam. (Exam results must be kept strictly confidential, except medical/safety personnel may be informed if emergency medical treatment is required, and supervisors may be informed about necessary job accommodations, based on exam results.)
Arrest Record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been arrested? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever been convicted of _____? (The crime named should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question.)
Military	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you've been in the military, were you honorably discharged? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve? • What type of training or education did you receive in the military?

Taken from: "Handling Illegal Questions." Kaplan, Rochelle. Planning Job Choices, 1998. National Association of Colleges and Employers, 1998, pp. E61-2.

Worrying about what is right is always more important than worrying about who is right.

Situational Questions

You also need to think about “What if . . .” questions. These can be difficult to answer. For instance:

“What would you do if your supervisor told you to do something illegal?”

Use common sense. These types of questions need answers based on your knowledge, experience and personal values. Consider what the employer wants to hear. A calm approach is best. Don’t rush into an answer. It is better to cushion your answer. For example: *“One thing I might consider doing, would be . . .”* If the interviewer does not like your solution, you can consider a different approach.

Another situational question might ask for an example of how you had to deal with a difficult situation. The interviewer might ask you to describe a time when you had to deal with a difficult supervisor, co-worker, or customer. You should highlight your contributions and keep your answer relevant to the job you are interviewing for.

Another area of difficult questions may concern your family responsibilities, age, health or other personal information. They are not always fair questions and may be illegal, but you need to be prepared to deal with them. Refer to the application section that deals with inappropriate questions. You may choose to deal with these type questions by refusing to answer, in which case you will probably not be hired. Another response could be: *“If you can tell me how that relates to the position, I would be happy to answer the question.”* You must make the decision about how to answer based on how much you want the job.

An interviewer will form opinions about whether you are:

- Mature
- An initiator
- Emotionally stable/even-tempered
- Thorough
- A team worker
- Self-confident
- Tactful
- Assertive
- Adaptable
- Conscientious
- Tough minded
- A hard worker
- Self-disciplined
- Honest and sincere

Guidelines for Salary Questions

1. Do not mention money or benefits until the interviewer brings it up, or until an offer has been made.
2. Give the amount as a range, for example \$20,000 to \$23,000 rather than saying \$21,000. A range gives room to negotiate.
3. You can find out a realistic salary from researching the occupation. Check the Internet for salary information. Another resource for information might be the local state job service.
4. Sometimes an employer will bring up salary early in an interview. If you are not ready to discuss this question simply say:

“Before I can give an answer to the salary question, I would like to know more about the position.”

5. The best time to discuss the salary and benefits package is after you have a job offer, when you are in a much better bargaining position.
6. Remember, there are many benefits to a job besides salary, such as:
 - opportunities for advancement and training
 - benefits, i.e. parking, transportation, tuition reimbursement, childcare onsite, fitness center, health insurance, etc.
 - good working conditions
 - good hours, flexible scheduling, etc.
7. If possible, wait until you find out about the benefits and are offered the job before you answer questions about salary.
8. If an employer asks you about the minimum salary you will accept, don't give a figure you think will either be too high or too low.

If you are too high, they'll think that you won't take the job at a lower salary and might offer it to someone else.

If you are too low, you might get the job at a much lower salary than you could have gotten. This little mistake could cost you thousands of dollars!

9. Here are some ways you can answer the question about minimum salary:

“I'm really interested in long-term growth and advancement. Right now, I'm willing to consider whatever your company pays people with my skills.”

“I don't have a particular amount in mind. I'm interested in a career with your company, not just a job.”