

# Interview Questions

Here are 20 questions to expect in an interview, plus tips on how to handle them. Interviewers seem to love these questions, since they reveal a lot about the job seeker's good and bad points, goals, work and personality styles.

## **1. How would you describe yourself? (Or, Tell me about yourself)**

Here's a golden opportunity to give a two-minute overview of your major work accomplishments, and why they show you are a good fit for the job. It's not an invitation for a chronological recitation of your life a la Dickens' "I am born" mode.

## **2. What is your greatest weakness?**

Careful, no time to spill the beans about your chronic lateness or lack of organization. Pick a weakness that is really a virtue -- e.g., you're a perfectionist. Or, note some skills are better than others -- e.g., your communications skills are better than your numbers skills.

## **3. Do you have any questions?**

Always. Show your knowledge of, and interest in, the employer with at least one or two questions -- but wait until the job offer to inquire about salary or benefits.

## **4. Why should I hire you?**

Tally up, point by point, how your qualifications and performance match those of the job.

## **5. Describe your ideal job.**

It sounds very much like the one you're applying for, and you're a good fit because of X, Y and Z.

## **6. What salary do you want?**

Don't name a figure first. Ask the salary range for the job, or the range your qualifications can command. If pressed, counter with a range based upon your research, starting at the lowest amount you would accept.

## **7. What salary do you make now?**

Cite the salary range that matches your qualifications. Avoid the trap of admitting a below-market salary.

## **8. Why were you fired?**

You didn't volunteer this, of course. If your job was downsized or if your employer has high turnover, say so. But if you were fired for cause, cast the facts as positively as you can, noting the problem has been overcome. Don't badmouth your ex-employer, and don't be defensive.

## **9. Since you are a career-changer, how do we know you can do the job?**

Show how your past skills and accomplishments are applicable -- for example, marketing, writing, public speaking are skills that are highly transferable across industries.

## **10. Why are you leaving your current job?**

Respond in terms of your need to seek new challenges like those associated with the company where you are applying. Don't badmouth your current employer, boss or industry, or you'll risk being pegged as a problem from the get-go.

## **11. What didn't you like about your former job?**

Again, be as positive as possible. A possible answer is to explain that you felt that you weren't being challenged enough. But again, remember, no badmouthing allowed!

**12. You've been stuck in the same job for years -- why?**

Perhaps advancement opportunities were very restricted at your company -- which is why you're eager to discuss the skills you independently acquired or improved in classes or trade groups.

**13. Do you like working with others or alone?**

Most employers today operate in a team environment, so interpersonal skills are important. But know in advance the culture and the company's values. Best bet: you are a team player but are self-motivated enough to work alone, if necessary.

**14. How do you respond to criticism?**

You view it as a learning opportunity, and it has taught you to improve.

**15. What do you know about our company?**

Hopefully, a lot. Don't even be in an interview unless you have done your homework on the employer, its competition, and can ask informed questions.

**16. Why have you job-hopped so much?**

This isn't the negative it used to be. Show what you learned and how you progressed in career growth and responsibility.

**17. I'm not sure you have the right qualifications (or are suitable) for this job.**

Rise to the challenge, and display grace under pressure. Calmly ask if he or she has questions about any aspect of your background, then address these concerns. Show the qualifications that enable you to do the job, or explain how you are working to improve in a certain area.

**18. What are your career goals?**

Interviewers don't want to hear how you want to be president of the company, or take their jobs. You aim to progress as far as your skills and talents take you in an industry or job function, growing in challenges and responsibility.

**19. Who (or what) has been a major influence?**

No right or wrong answer here. Give solid, clear reasons for your choice, whether it's a relative, friend, mentor or adversity you overcame; the interviewer wants to judge your communication and reasoning skills.

**20. Why do you want to work here?**

Give good, clear reasons why you like the company and why you'd be a great fit. If you can't make a strong case on why you should be hired, chances are the interviewer can't, either.

Sharon McDonnell is the author of *You're Hired! Secrets to a Successful Job Search* (Macmillan, 1999).

You've landed an interview -- an opportunity to persuade the interviewer that your qualifications and skills make you the ideal fit for the job. It's a two-way process however, because it's also a chance for you to ask meaningful questions, figure out what the employer really wants, and decide if the job is right for you. In essence, it's a test for both parties, and thinking in this light will help reduce the fears that make many job-seekers regard interviews as some of the most stress-filled minutes of their lives.

To help you prepare, remember the five P's of a successful interview -- preparation, practice, positive thinking, punctuality and politeness.

**1. Preparation:**

One thing interviewers always grouse about with astonishment is how ill informed many job-hunters are about the employer and job for which they are applying. So surprise them: read up on the company, its competitors, industry and current trends using annual reports, brochures, industry directories and news articles. Cram as if for an exam. Thanks to the Internet, such research is easier than ever before. Talk to knowledgeable people about the company. Know what the grapevine knows about the employer -- existing and future products or services, prospects and company culture.

Be able to discuss your qualifications and how they match specific job requirements, offering ready examples to prove you are "very creative," "have lots of initiative," "respond well to pressure" and so on.

Solid preparation will make you handle interview questions with aplomb, ask insightful ones of your own and project an air of calm confidence. Never go to an interview without it.

Bring several resumes to the interview -- you may meet with several people -- business cards, names/telephone numbers of references (or letters), paper to take notes, and any proof of your accomplishments (such as portfolios, writing samples or award certificates).

## **2. Practice:**

Bone up on answering likely interview questions, such as our list of 20. Don't forget to practice answers to problem areas you'd prefer to avoid -- like why you were fired twice, have a three-year gap between full-time jobs, or didn't graduate from college -- so you won't fumble or be abrupt or defensive when asked. Rehearsing with a friend or relative, in front of a mirror or with an audiotape or videotape can offer the gift of seeing yourself as others will. It almost goes without saying that you should try to sound spontaneous and not like a robot during the real thing.

Think of each interview as a learning experience. Some people accept every interview offered, on the theory it can only help tune their skills.

## **3. Positive Thinking:**

Because your mind is so powerful, make it your friend, not your enemy. Think about and visualize a positive outcome: how the interview will go smoothly, how you will get an offer, how you'll breeze out of there. Remember the cardinal rule about worrying: it never helps, and often hurts. You've prepared and practiced well, so expect the best. Don't forget to get enough sleep the night before!

## **4. Politeness:**

Since an interview is an opportunity to persuade and arrive at a meeting of the minds, it's obvious you want the interviewer to like you, right? You know what they say about being able to get more with honey than vinegar? Well, it's true. Don't be a raving sycophant, but do be polite. Enough said.

## **5. Punctuality:**

Your qualifications may be superb, your preparation stellar, and your politeness unparalleled, but if you arrive 45 minutes late, your interviewer will be, ticked off or even unavailable. You may also be so flustered it may interfere with your questions and answers. A smart thing to do is to verify the exact address, telephone number and directions to get there, the day before the actual interview. You should also leave enough time for any transportation delays. If you're late, try to call ahead, apologize, and don't allow it to ruin your whole interview.

Sharon McDonnell is the author of "You're Hired! Secrets to a Successful Job Search" (Macmillan, 1999)

Here are eight ways to "sell yourself" during your job interview.

1. Be confident! Clearly state your strong points.
2. Practice interviewing. Do a mock interview with a friend or relative. Get their honest feedback and ask how they perceive you.
3. Know when to stop talking.
4. Talk about your qualities/abilities. Do not make your answers too personal.
5. Be honest about your achievements and talents. Mention them when appropriate, but don't drone on and on about them. Mention them as a way of showing how you have been an achiever and accomplished goals that you embarked upon.
6. Listen carefully. During an interview listen carefully for the key skills, which are required in the role you are discussing and the issues facing the organization, and respond to those with statements such as "it is obvious that you have aggressive sales goals. In my present role, my region was the last in the company, but as sales manager I led our team to become number one at the end of two years." Another example is, "I can see that this is a fast paced organization - in my present company we have narrow margins and constant deadlines, and I flourish in this type of environment."
7. Know how to articulate each accomplishment. Prior to your interview, you should review each position and know the biggest accomplishment you would like to discuss and prepare how you would like to describe it. When thinking about your accomplishments, think about the specific skills and competencies the company is looking for in the position and incorporate this in your presentation.
8. Present your contribution in conjunction with the team. An employee does not work in a vacuum, and most accomplishments happen in teams, be prepared to discuss the overall success of the project and what your specific contribution was. This approach is good is you don't want to come off as grandstanding, but want to present your contribution in conjunction with the team.

Informational Interviews are a great way to get a glimpse inside of a company. They can be hard to schedule, so once you get this opportunity, you don't want to blow it! Here's are some tips on how to handle this type of interview.

Being a good listener is the best way to seem interested and not pushy. You should have your questions prepared ahead of time, but if the person takes you a bit off course, go with it. Many people are flattered by your interest in them, and love to talk about themselves. Yet most people are also busy, so try to keep the interview to 30 or 40 minutes, maybe even less. You will not want to be remembered as the person who talked forever.

Hang onto your resume until near the end (unless they request it earlier in the interview) and then ask a few specific questions on how you could improve your resume for this industry. This not only gets you some insight, but also assures you that the person actually reads parts of your resume.

Before you leave, (this is the hardest part), do two important things: 1) ask if there are any other people in the industry that he or she could recommend that you speak with, and 2) be very clear that you want to be remembered if there are openings in the near future.

When you get home, (or in the next day) write a thank you note.

Good luck. Although a lot of interviewers have dropped asking the "Five Year Plan" question, it can still crop up now and then. Why not be prepared?

When you answer any question in an interview, you need to accentuate your positives. Do not worry about being grandiose; it is better to err on the grandiose side than the wimpy side. Try to be honest in your five-year plan. If the interviewer does not understand your goals, or looks surprised, remain consistent in what you say, don't back down.

### **Some examples:**

"I see myself using the skills I have now, and the managerial skills I plan to acquire, working as a manager in the sales department."

"I would like to be in a position in which my marketing strategies are implemented. In my last position I have learned a great deal about marketing strategy, and this job would help me with this professional goal".

"I would like to move into the business development team. Business development interests me, and as I understand it, after a few years, many people do move from this position to that team."

"I want to do one of two things, either continue on programming or switch over to story development. I believe this next job will not only increase my skills and expertise in programming, but give me more insight for future goals."

"Because this industry is moving so fast it is difficult to say exactly what type of job I will have in five years. Yet I do know that my position will have to be creative. In my last job my creative responsibilities increased, and I was able to write and edit more and more. In this position I hope to continue to improve my writing and editing skills."

### **What **not** to say:**

"I don't know, whatever comes along".

"As long as I make \$75,000, who cares".

"I hope to learn everything I can here, than take your company's secrets and become a consultant".

"You know, just move on up the ladder."

### **Setting your-self apart from the masses:**

If handled properly, being different can set you apart from your competition, and will become the reason you are chosen for a job over your competition.

If handled incorrectly, being too different, can be the very reason you do not get the job!

There is a fine line when discussing what is appropriate when trying to set yourself apart from your competition. Hopefully the following examples will give you some valuable tips on standing out in a positive way.

**APPROPRIATE:** Put your resume on a good stock or linen paper - light beige, grey or off-white

**INAPPROPRIATE:** Put your resume on bright yellow, red, blue or purple paper

**APPROPRIATE:** During an interview compliment a picture of the interviewer's family

**INAPPROPRIATE:** Mention your children (unless they ask)

APPROPRIATE: Wear something "in style" as long as it is conservative

INAPPROPRIATE: Wear something "trendy" or provocative

APPROPRIATE: Research the Corporation/Firm you are interviewing with and mention what you learned (make sure the information is positive.)

INAPPROPRIATE: Go in unprepared and try to "wing-it" (ignorance won't "fly")

APPROPRIATE: Bring to your interview a recent article that relates to the Company and /or that field.

INAPPROPRIATE: Bring nothing! (You won't make much of an impression)

APPROPRIATE: Bring in a list of well thought out questions to your interview. Make the questions intelligent and use them as an additional way to "sell yourself."

INAPPROPRIATE: Ask questions about YOU (vacation requests, holidays off, when is your first raise, etc.)

APPROPRIATE: Bring in a "Brag Book" of your RELATED accomplishments!

INAPPROPRIATE: Bring in nothing - or your Cub Scouts trophy from 3rd grade.

APPROPRIATE: Send your interviewer a hand written thank you note - highlighting some of the reasons why you would be a great fit for their opening (give examples)

INAPPROPRIATE: Send nothing! OR send an e-mail everyday for 1 week, send a thank you note and then leave 3 thank you voice mail messages. (DO NOT BE A STALKER!)