

Common Interview Questions

Each interview is unique, but there are some basic questions that interviewers always seem to ask. It makes sense for you to be prepared for them – not with a memorized stock answer, but with a plan or strategy for responding in a way that emphasizes what you have to offer the organization.

The most important element in all your answers is honesty. A skilled interviewer will be able to detect insincerity, exaggeration and faked enthusiasm. If you don't want to reveal your innermost dreams, you should develop strategies for answering these questions truthfully without completely baring your soul.

Where do you expect to be in five years from now?

The interviewer wants to know whether or not you have a sense of direction, goals, and a career plan. He also wants to know whether you're a good long-term prospect for his organization – if they hire you, they'll be making a serious investment in your training and development, and they'll want you to stay long enough for them to see a return on it.

You should be careful how much you share here. If you see yourself staying with this organization for a long time, working your way up through increasing levels of skill and responsibility, then by all means say so. However, if your long-term goal is to gain some experience with this organization and then move to a competitor, or start your own company, be careful what you say. You can be both honest and diplomatic – for example, “My goal is to gain experience and enhance my skills working in a dynamic and professional environment.”

Tell me about a time when you had to think outside the box.

The interviewer is probing for creativity and initiative. He wants to know whether you are able to come up with innovative ideas when there is no “canned” solution to a problem or situation. He also wants to know whether you are able to translate an innovative idea into action and make it work.

You probably have a number of examples you could use, if you think about it. Pick one that had a tangible outcome, such as a new process that improved response time, or an innovative approach that you developed for overcoming a customer objection and winning a sale.

What's your biggest weakness?

The interviewer wants to know how self-aware you are. He's also testing your composure; he wants to see whether you get defensive at his use of the word “weakness”, or whether you are able to respond positively.

You need to show the interviewer that you are as aware of your own shortcomings as you are of your strengths and abilities. You're probably more used to hearing the term "area for development" than you are the word "weakness", but in this context they mean the same thing. Identify an area where you know you need to improve – perhaps something that was identified on your last performance review – and then go on to describe what you are doing about it. If possible, weave in some information about what you are good at; for example, "I spent a couple of years developing presentations for other people to deliver, and I can put together a killer presentation, but when I had to deliver one of them myself I realized my presentation skills needed some polishing. I joined Toastmasters a few months ago, and I can already see an improvement."

Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a major obstacle at work.

The interviewer is looking for some insight into your problem-solving abilities. He wants to know what you do when you are faced with a major problem, and how you deal with it – that you are able to respond to a critical situation without panicking. This is a behavioural question that you need to respond to with a real situation, not a hypothetical answer.

You can prepare for this question by thinking about some occasions when you have dealt with a significant problem, and thereby avoided serious consequences. For instance, you might have had a key member of a project team quit in mid-project, or dealt with a supplier who failed to deliver essential equipment on time. You should describe the situation leading up to the problem, how and why the problem occurred, and what you did to avoid or mitigate the consequences.

What's your work style?

The interviewer may or may not have an agenda here. On one level, he may simply want to know how aware you are of the way you operate. However, he may also be looking for specific qualities that are required by the job, such as a high degree of organization or initiative.

You may not have given this much thought before, which is why you need to prepare for this question. Think about the type of work you like and do best, and the type of environment you enjoy working in. Are you good at handling lots of pressure and deadlines, or do you prefer working within a structured framework? Do you enjoy working with a team, or do you work better alone? If you have taken a recognized personality assessment, such as Myers-Briggs or DiSC, you can also share some of that information relating to your work style. If this is a management position you could also touch on elements of your leadership style, such as communication, planning, accountability, and commitment to personal and professional development.

Why do you want this job?

The interviewer wants to know that you have selected this organization with some thought, not just at random, and whether your reasons are in alignment with the organization's needs and values.

You have an excellent opportunity here to demonstrate how well you have researched the organization. Your goal is to convince the interviewer that you are the best possible fit for this position, so try to relate your skills and abilities to the organization's needs, and identify why you think this job is a good career move for you.

Why do you think you would be successful in this job?

The interviewer may have more than one reason for asking you this. He may not be convinced that you are adequately qualified for the position; or he may simply want to hear how you relate your skills and experience to the requirements of the position.

You will be able to answer this question easily if you have done your homework. Start by identifying some of the most important requirements of this job, and explain how you meet or exceed each of them. Try to be as specific as you can, and give examples of how you have met similar requirements in the past. For example, if one of the requirements is "excellent communication skills", your response might be, "My last job also required extremely good communication skills. I was responsible for preparing bi-weekly project updates to senior management and key stakeholders, and I was frequently commended for my ability to convey information clearly and concisely."

What would you do in your first three months on the job?

The interviewer may have different reasons for asking you this question, too. His reasons, and the answer he wants to hear, will depend largely on what type of organization this is.

You need to tailor your answer accordingly. In a large, conservative organization, you might be expected to spend a significant amount of time getting to know your team, familiarizing yourself with organizational policies and structure, and getting up to speed with current projects. At the other end of the spectrum, in a small, dynamic organization, three months might be an eternity – long enough to let the competition get ahead – and you might be expected to hit the floor running. This could also be the case if you are applying for an internal position and are already familiar with the work environment. Some research into the organizational climate is required to enable you to give an appropriate answer to this question.

What's the most positive thing your last boss would say about you?

The interviewer is asking this question at a couple of different levels. Superficially, what are your strengths? What do you think makes you valuable to an employer? On a more subtle level, are you aware of how other people see you? Is your perception of your abilities in alignment with the perceptions of those around you?

You can draw on past performance appraisals for the answer to this question. It's a great opportunity to pull out some of those complimentary comments: "In my last performance review, my manager told me that my customer service skills were the best in the department, because I always asked a few extra questions to ensure that I understood exactly what the customer wanted."