

HOW TO ANSWER THE FOUR MOST COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

There are some questions that tend to pop up during almost every job interview.

The bad news: These questions can be quite difficult to answer.

The good news: Because they are so common, you can prepare for them well in advance and give a perfect answer without breaking a sweat.

So allow me to present four of the most common - yet most perplexing -- interview questions and how you can best answer them.

1. Tell me a Little about Yourself

Sometimes the most general question can be the hardest. How can you sum up your entire life in just a couple of minutes?

You don't.

This oldest of questions is not an invitation to talk about your difficult childhood, your favorite grandmother or how you won the state swim competition in high school. Instead, it's a request for you to describe what you can offer the company.

In his excellent book 101 Great Answers to the toughest interview questions, author Ron Fry suggests focusing on:

- your key accomplishments at previous jobs
- the strengths demonstrated by those accomplishments.
- How these relate to the job for which you're applying.

The goal is not summarize your resume - the interviewer already has a copy of that. Rather, tell how you came to be interested in this particular company and job, and weave examples of past accomplishments thought to demonstrate why you are the perfect candidate.

2. Why did you leave your last job?

Did you resign? Get laid off? Storm out of the office in a huff, never to return? Chances are, you'll have to explain it in an interview.

The most important point to remember when answering this question: STAY POSITIVE.

The biggest sign of a troublemaker is when someone trashes his or her former boss or company during an interview. It doesn't matter if your boss was a jerk or if you hated your coworkers - an interview is not the place to vent past frustrations.

Rather, the best way to answer this questions is to stay positive and talk about your desire for growth opportunities. This will paint you as a proactive employee who enjoys responsibilities and challenges.

Here are some quick pointers for answering this question, depending on your circumstances:

IF YOU ARE FIRED: Be honest, but quick about explaining it. Don't get into the political details, rather, explain what you learned from the experience and how it makes you an even stronger employee today. It's not a good idea to lie about your termination. When the interviewer calls your references, he or she will most likely find out you were fired anyway. So be honest, and explain what you learned.

IF YOU WERE LAID OFF: This is not nearly as taboo as it was even five years ago, so don't apologize or act defeated. If a company goes bankrupt or had massive layoffs,

simply explain: "Because of the economy, the company decided to eliminate six departments including mine".

IF YOU QUIT: Again, be honest and stay positive. State that the work being offered wasn't challenging enough, that you are seeking higher levels of responsibility or simply that you are ready to make the next step on your career ladder - and that the job for which you are interviewing is the ideal next step.

The secret is to stay positive and discuss your desire for growth. Hiring managers love applicants who actively seek responsibility.

3. What's your biggest weakness?

What are you supposed to do - tell them why they SHOULDN'T hire you?

The "weakness" question is popular with interviews not because they want to torture you, but because they're interested in hearing how you tackle challenges.

The most important thing to remember is that after you name your weakness, you MUST discuss what you have done to overcome it.

Pick a weakness that is real but understandable or relatively harmless. Whatever weakness you pick, be sure that it is work-related ("I have a tendency to overfeed my dog" is NOT an appropriate weakness) and that you present the strategies for how you overcame it.

Here are some examples:

I used to have a tendency to procrastinate. So now I am always sure to set a strict schedule for all of my projects well in advance and I set personal deadlines. This organization has really helped.

Once in a while, I focus too much on the details of the project. So now, when I'm working on a project, I always make sure at the end of the day to sit back and take a few minutes to think about the general scope of my work. It forces me to keep priorities straight and helps me keep the right mindset.

You don't want to pick a weakness that will torpedo your chances. Even your weakness should speak strongly toward your skills. The examples above all address honest weaknesses; here are a few other "safe" weaknesses that are easy to discuss:

I tend to be a perfectionist.

I sometimes work too hard, leading to unnecessary stress.

4. Do you have any questions for me?

Yes, you do.

You always try to ask a thoughtful question or two at the end of an interview. It shows that you've been listening and that you've done your research on the company.

What should you ask?

Does this job usually lead to other positions at the company? What kind of positions?

What do you like best about this company? Why?

DO NOT ask about salary, vacation days, benefits or anything else that would make it look like you're more interested in the compensation package than the company. Also, don't ask too many questions; just a couple will be fine.

And the most important question of all: Don't forget to ask for the job!

I'm very interested in this job. It's exactly the kind of job that I'm looking for. What is the next step in the interview process?

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