

Career Advice

How to answer interview questions

There are some common interview questions and you should prepare your answers before-hand. The key thing to remember when responding to interview questions is to keep your answers brief and to the point. If you are faced with a difficult question, make sure you stay calm, don't get defensive, and take a moment to think about your response before you answer.

Remember, the answers below are only suggestions. Try to personalise your response as much as possible.

Question: Tell me about yourself.

Answer: Identify some of your main attributes and memorise them. Describe your qualifications, career history and range of skills, emphasising those skills relevant to the job on offer.

Question: What have your achievements been to date?

Answer: Select an achievement that is work-related and fairly recent. Identify the skills you used in the achievement and quantify the benefit it had to the company. For example, 'my greatest achievement has been to design and implement a new sales ledger system, bringing it in ahead of time and improving our debtors' position significantly, saving the company £50,000 a month in interest'.

Question: Are you happy with your career-to-date?

Answer: This question is really about your self-esteem, confidence and career aspirations. The answer must be 'yes', followed by a brief explanation as to what it is about your career so far that's made you happy. If you have hit a career plateau, or you feel you are moving too slowly, then you must qualify your answer.

Question: What is the most difficult situation you have had to face and how did you tackle it?

Answer: The purpose of this question is to find out what your definition of difficult is and whether you can show a logical approach to problem solving. In order to show yourself in a positive light, select a difficult work situation which was not caused by you and which can be quickly explained in a few sentences. Explain how you defined the problem, what the options were, why you selected the one you did and what the outcome was. Always end on a positive note.

Question: What do you like about your present job?

Answer: This is a straightforward question. All you have to do is make sure that your 'likes' correspond to the skills required for the job on offer. Be enthusiastic; describe your job as interesting and diverse but do not overdo it - after all, you are looking to leave.

Question: What are your strengths?

Answer: This is one question that you know you are going to get so there is no excuse for being unprepared. Concentrate on discussing your main strengths. List three or four proficiencies e.g. your ability to learn quickly, determination to succeed, positive attitude, your ability to relate to people and achieve a common goal. You may be asked to give examples of the above so be prepared.

Question: What is your greatest weakness?

Answer: Do not say you have none - this will lead to further problems. You have two options - use a professed weakness such as a lack of experience (not ability) on your part in an area that is not vital for the job. The second option is to describe a personal or professional weakness that could also be considered to be a strength and the steps you have taken to combat it. An example would be: "I know my team think I'm too demanding at times - I tend to drive them pretty hard but I'm getting much better at using the carrot and not the stick".

Question: Why do you want to leave your current employer?

Answer: State how you are looking for a new challenge, more responsibility, experience and a change of environment. Do not be negative in your reasons for leaving. It is rarely appropriate to cite salary as your primary motivator.

Question: Why have you applied for this particular job?

Answer: The employer is looking for evidence that the job suits you, fits in with your general aptitudes, coincides with your long-term goals and involves doing things you enjoy. Make sure you have a good understanding of the role and the organisation, and describe the attributes of the organisation that interest you most.

Other common interview questions to consider:

- How does your job fit in to your department and company?
- What do you enjoy about this industry?
- Give an example of when you have worked under pressure.
- What kinds of people do you like working with?
- Give me an example of when your work was criticised.
- Give me an example of when you have felt anger at work. How did you cope and did you still perform a good job?
- What kind of people do you find it difficult to work with?
- Give me an example of when you have had to face a conflict of interest at work.
- Tell me about the last time you disagreed with your boss.
- Give me an example of when you haven't got on with others.
- Do you prefer to work alone or in a group? Why?
- This organisation is very different to your current employer - how do you think you are going to fit in?
- What are you looking for in a company?
- How do you measure your own performance?
- What kind of pressures have you encountered at work?
- Are you a self-starter? Give me examples to demonstrate this?
- What changes in the workplace have caused you difficulty and why?
- How do you feel about working long hours and/or weekends?
- Give me an example of when you have been out of your depth.
- What have you failed to achieve to date?
- What can you bring to this organisation?

We hope these questions will give you enough material to prepare before an interview.