

Common Interview Questions & Response Suggestions

You will never be able to anticipate all of the potential questions that an employer will ask during the interview. However, you can prepare your answers for some of the most commonly asked questions, which are listed below.

Tell me about yourself: This is one of the most common questions in an interview, and it is also one that most interviewees find difficult to answer. The interviewer can get an overall sense of who you are in a very short time, and it is a great chance to make a positive first impression in the interview. In addition, the “elevator speech” can not only be used in interviews, but at career fairs, networking events, or even social gatherings.

Why this question is difficult: First, it is ambiguous and does not give the interviewee a clear idea of what to discuss. Second, there is uncertainty regarding the length of the response. One of the biggest mistakes is talking for too long rather than being concise.

How to organize your response: Answer the following questions in order to prepare.

1. **Who are you and where are you now?** – This is a brief starting point to present your qualifications.

Possible areas to include:

- a. Your degree and the college or University where you graduated or will graduate
- b. Location where you attended school and graduation date
- c. Degree emphasis (if unclear), certifications, and licensures

2. **Where have you been?** – Focus on specific career-related experiences that led you to where you are now. You want to show a natural progression of how you came to your current interest in their position. Use concrete examples with details that are relevant to the skills necessary for the prospective position.

Possible topics include:

- a. Career-related experience
- b. Additional work or volunteer experience with transferrable skills
- c. Study abroad experiences
- d. Leadership activities or skills that are relevant

3. **Where are you going?** – Now that you have briefly described your past, it is time to explain your interest in the position. This is where your research about the organization and position helps because you can describe why you are interested in the prospective job.

Final Tips:

- Always be career-related in your response
- Keep it concise
- Provide concrete examples from your past to show why you are interested in the position
- Avoid sounding rehearsed: You want to practice and prepare enough so that it doesn't sound like you are reading from a cue card.

What are your strengths? Your weaknesses?

When asked about your strengths, this is your opportunity to summarize your specific skills and personality characteristics as they relate to the job. Then, provide an example of a time when you demonstrated the use of these skills and characteristics.

Regarding your weaknesses, we suggest that you attack this question in one of two ways. First, don't try to avoid naming a weakness. Everyone has weaknesses and if you avoid stating one, then they may assume that you have such detrimental weaknesses that you are afraid to mention them. You should describe something that you consider a weakness or something that the employer may already be aware of based on having read your resume. Most importantly, you should show how you have been trying to improve upon or how you will counteract this weakness. For example, you could say, "I would consider public speaking to be a weakness of mine because I never had the opportunity to develop that skill. However, I have been volunteering at conferences and presenting workshops in order to improve my skills as a speaker." You could also say that you will plan to take a course or cross train with a colleague. Of course, don't use a weakness that is a character flaw or unmanageable weakness, such as saying, "I am not very flexible when working with others." That is not a good approach and will be considered a detrimental weakness.

The second approach is to highlight a strength that can be derived from a weakness. However, be tactful because this can sound like a tacky, clichéd response. For example, you could describe how you sometimes become too focused on details, and you need to step back sometimes to recognize the bigger picture. This would be aimed just make sure to word it properly and be genuine in your belief that it can be a weakness, otherwise, it will seem feigned.

Do you work well under pressure?

Today's work world is both fast paced and high pressured. Be confident in your ability to work well under pressure, and cite examples of how you have performed in similar, work or school-related situations in the past.

Why are you looking to change jobs?

With this question, the employer is usually trying to determine what direction you see your career headed in. You may want to relate that although you enjoy your current job, your opportunity for growth is limited, and you are seeking a greater challenge. Never tell a potential employer that you want to leave your current job for negative reasons, such as you don't like your boss, the company or organization isn't managed well, low pay, work load is unreasonable, etc. Answers such as these only suggest to the interviewer that you may be a difficult employee.

What is your salary requirement?

The employer should always be the one to bring up the issue of salary during an interview. Remember that salary requirements can be used as a reason to eliminate you from the interview process. Make sure that you research the industry and organization to get a general sense of salary expectations, and provide a range if necessary.

What are your future educational plans?

An employer may be trying to determine your interest and willingness to supplement your education with additional instructional training if it is necessary to effectively do the job. On the other hand, the employer may be trying to determine if you plan to use this job as a training ground while you continue your education and then plan to move out of the organization shortly thereafter. Listen carefully to any cues that may be given that may

help you to discern which of these areas the employer is concerned with and focus any additional education on how it could benefit the organization.

How would you have changed or managed your previous company differently?

Essentially, the potential employer is asking you to criticize your superiors and/or the company or organization itself. This is generally not a good idea. You may make one or two comments about more insignificant areas that could be improved to demonstrate that you took an interest and have the ability to think critically. However, you should realize that anything you say could be used as a reason why you might not be a good match for this company. You could even relate it to conversations you had with your supervisors about potential improvement that you never had the time to implement.

What relevant experience do you have?

Highlight your skills and work history as they relate to the position. If you have directly related experience through an internship or previous employment, describe it. If you do not have direct experience, you should show how the skills that you have gained through your education and past employment will be an asset to you in this position.

What would you want to accomplish during the first year that suggests I should hire you?

Here an employer really wants to know how you would "attack" this position if it were offered to you. Based on the knowledge you have about the position, you should be able to make some basic determinations about what your first year activities might entail under these circumstances. Be as specific as possible. The answer is part of what the employer is evaluating, but he/she is also evaluating your ability to assess a given situation and develop creative solutions.

How do you deal with someone who disagrees with you?

Employers ask this or some version of this question often. It helps them to determine how you manage conflict in the workplace. We are all likely to experience some level of conflict with those whom we work from time to time, and your answer to this question can be a clear indicator to the employer as to how well you will work with a diverse work force under sometimes stressful conditions. They care more about a positive resolution and the process you took than the actual issue. You may want to provide an example of a time that you managed conflict well to assist the potential employer with understanding your style.

What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments?

This is your opportunity to show what a great employee you would make. Go ahead; tell them about what you accomplished while employed at your current and/or previous companies, in school, or through leadership activities. Be specific!

What is it that you like about working in the _____ field?

Studies show that people who have a true liking and/or passion for the work that they do are much more productive and successful than those who are indifferent. This is an opportunity to tell the employer specifically what aspects of the job will motivate you to put forth your greatest effort. If you are not enthusiastic about the field of employment, the employer is sure to notice.

What would your former boss or employer say about you?

This is a time in the interview where you can slip in information about the type of employee you are. It is natural that we want a potential employer to know what we consider to be our best qualities. These qualities may include things like "hardworking", "honest", "creative", "dependable", and "detail-oriented," which can be vague. To add meaning to your answer, you should provide examples of instances when you demonstrated these qualities in the workplace.

How long do you expect to work for us?

Here an employer is simply trying to assess whether or not you are a good investment. While companies don't usually offer lifetime career growth, they are concerned with employee turnover and the costs associated with training new staff. The process of hiring and training employees at any level is quite expensive. Therefore, most companies like to determine, if possible, whether you are using them as a training ground and/or whether you intend to provide some longevity in return.

What are your expectations from our company during the first year?

It is important to focus more on what you want to do for the company than what you want the company to do for you. If you place too many restrictions on the company in reference to opportunity, salary, and promotions, it may cause the company to take caution that your expectations might be higher than what they can provide. It is not unreasonable, however, to expect some level of training and support from a company along with honesty in reference to the other potential benefits listed above.

What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?

An employer never wants to feel as if they were chosen by default. Employers go to great lengths to create a working environment that is desirable along with a compensation and benefits package that is suitable for its employees. Be sure to indicate what it is that you are looking for in a company or organization by selecting things that you know or suspect are present for the company at which you are interviewing. But, again be careful not to place too much emphasis on what you want the company to do for you or you may risk the job opportunity.

What do you do with your spare time?

Sometimes an employer will use this question to determine whether potential employees enjoy participating in team versus individual activities. Other employers may use it determine how you find balance in your life and deal with stress. It is okay to share to whatever level you are comfortable, still maintain a professional style to your answer and highlight the skills and qualities that you may be developing in these outside experiences.

What type of management style do you prefer to work under?

Some employees desire a lot of direction from management while others prefer to work more autonomously. Your answer to this question will likely determine how successful the relationship will be between you and the person to whom you would report. Some people work well in either circumstance and if that is the case, state your flexibility on this issue. However, if your preference swings strongly to one type of style or the other you will want to answer honestly, as the likelihood of you being happy in a position contrary to your style is small.

Sample Behavioral Questions

These types of questions typically probe to learn about your past behavior in specific situations. The idea is to better understand how you act with specific examples. Make sure you focus on your thought process and what you learned from the situations rather than simply describing each example.

- **Give a specific example of something you did that helped build enthusiasm in others.**
- **Tell me about a difficult situation when it was desirable for you to keep a positive attitude.**
- **Give me an example of a time when you had to make an important decision. How did you make the decision and how does it affect you today?**
- **Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult person.**
- **Describe a time when you were working in a team or group setting and one member wouldn't hold up his/her share of the work.**
- **Tell me about a time when you failed and what you learned from it.**
- **Tell me about a time when you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.**
- **Give me an example of an important goal, which you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.**
- **Tell me about a time when you did something at work that was necessary but you knew it was not what your supervisor would approve of. What was the result and if you had to do it over again, would you handle it the same way?**
- **Describe a situation where you dealt with an irate customer or client.**

This is just a small sample to give you an idea. However, employers may give you specific scenarios relevant to their industries in order to see how you will respond. Be prepared for any type of situation that may arise in your prospective field.