

Commonly Asked Interview Questions

Exercise 7.2

Here are some of the most commonly asked stress or interview questions and suggested approaches for answering them. Bear in mind that the two main issues on the interviewer's mind are...

- What can you do for me?
 - Do you fit in?

Consequently, if you can use your answers to score points on either of these issues, you'll gain an edge on your competition. The answers also keep you from getting yourself in "hot water" with extreme answers.

1. *Tell me about yourself.*

This is not an invitation to ramble on. Take some time in advance to think about yourself and those aspects of your personality and/or background that you'd like to promote or feature for your interviewer. Write this in about a 90-second to 2-minute format and practice it until delivery is smooth.

2. *What do you look for in a job?*

State what you want in terms of what you can give to your employer. The key word in the following example is "contribution."

"My experience at the XYZ Corporation has shown me that I have a talent for motivating people. That is demonstrated by my team's absenteeism dropping 20 percent, turnover steadying at 10 percent, and production increasing 12 percent. I am looking for an opportunity to continue that kind of contribution in a company and with a supervisor who will help me develop in a professional manner."

3. *Why are you leaving?*

You should have an acceptable reason for leaving every job you have held. If you don't, pick one of these seven acceptable reasons.

- You don't feel there is room to grow professionally in that position (at that company)
- You're driving or commute is too long.
- You are at a dead end in your position and there is no place for you to go.
- You have excellent skills and talents but there are just too many people ahead of

you in line for promotions.

- You feel, based upon your research, that you are underpaid for your skills and contribution.
- You want to be with a better company.
- In your opinion, the company does not have the stability you seek.

For example: “My last company was a family-owned affair. I had gone as far as I was able. It just seemed time for me to join a more prestigious company and accept greater challenges.”

4. ***What can you do for us that someone else cannot do?***

This question will come only after a full explanation of the job has been given. If not, qualify the question with “what voids are you trying to eradicate when you fill this position?” Recap the interviewer’s job description as you highlight your skills.

Finish with a question that asks for feedback or a powerful answer. If you haven’t covered the interviewer’s hot buttons, he or she will cover them now, and you can respond accordingly.

5. ***Why should we hire you?***

Your answer should be short and to the point. It should highlight areas from your background that relate to current needs and problems. Recap the interviewer’s description of the job, meeting it point by point with your skills. Finish your answer by remarking: “I have the qualifications you need [itemize them], I’m a team player, I take direction and I have the desire to make a thorough success.”

6. ***Can you work under pressure, deadlines?***

You might be tempted to give a simple “yes” or “no” answer, but don’t. It reveals nothing and you lose the opportunity to sell your skills and value profiles. Whenever you are asked a closed-ended question, answer the question and add a skill-selling example story.

7. ***What are your most significant accomplishments in your present or last job?***

Keep your answer job-related. You might begin your reply with a statement such as: “Although I feel my most significant achievements are still ahead of me, I am proud of my involvement with...I made my contribution as part of that team and learned a lot in the process. We did it with hard work, concentration and an eye for the bottom line.”

8. ***What is your primary strength?***

Isolate high points from your background and add key values. You might want to demonstrate pride, reliability and the ability to stick with a difficult task yet change course rapidly when required.

9. ***What is your primary weakness?***

This is a direct invitation to put your head in a noose. Decline the invitation.

Design the answer so that your weakness is ultimately a positive characteristic. For example; “I enjoy my work and always give each project my best shot. When I don’t feel that others are pulling their weight, I find it a little frustrating. I am aware of that weakness and I try to overcome it with a positive attitude that I hope will catch on.”

Also consider the technique of putting a problem in the past. Here, you take a weakness from way back when and show how you overcame it. It answers the question but ends on a positive note. An illustration: “When I first got into this field, I always had problems with my paperwork – you know, leaving an adequate paper train. To be honest, I let it slip once or twice. My manager sat me down and explained the potential troubles such behavior could cause. I really took it to heart and I think you will find my paper trails some of the best around today. You only have to tell me something once.” With that kind of answer you also get the added bonus of showing that you accept and act on criticism.

10. ***How long would it take you to make a contribution to our firm?***

You are best advised to answer this with a question: “That is an excellent question. To help me answer, what are your greatest areas of need right now?” When your time comes to answer, start with “Let’s say I started on Monday the seventeenth. It will take me a few weeks to settle down and learn the ropes. Do you have a special project in mind in which you will want me to get involved?” That response could lead directly to a job offer but, if not, you already have the interviewer thinking of you as an employee.

11. ***What do you think of your boss?***

People who complain about their employers are recognized as the same people who cause the most disruption in a department.

12. ***What features of your previous jobs have you disliked?***

Criticizing a prior employer is a warning flag that you could be a problem employee. No one intentionally hires trouble. Keep your answer short and positive.

13. ***Would you describe a few situations in which your work was criticized?***

This is a doubly dangerous question. You are being asked to say how you handle criticism and to detail your faults. If you are asked this question, describe a poor idea that was criticized, not poor work.

14. ***How would you evaluate your present firm?***

Always answer positively and keep your real feelings to yourself, whatever they might be. Your answer should be, “Very good” or “Excellent.” Then smile and wait for the next question.

15. ***What would you like to be doing five years from now?***

The safest answer contains a desire to be regarded as a true professional and team player. As far as promotion, that depends on finding a manager with whom you can grow.

16. ***How do you organize and plan for major projects?***

Effective planning requires both forward thinking (“Who and what am I going to need to get this job done?”) and backward thinking (“If this job must be completed by the twentieth, what steps must be made, and what time to achieve it?”)

17. ***Describe a difficult problem you’ve had to deal with.***

This is a favorite tough question. It is not so much the difficult problem that’s important – it’s the approach you take to solving problems in general. It is designed to probe your professional profile, especially your analytical skills.

18. ***What would your references say?***

You have nothing to lose by being positive. If the company checks your references, it must by law have your permission. That permission is usually included in the application form you sign. Despite these points, never offer references or written recommendations unless they are requested.

19. ***Can we check your references?***

This question is frequently asked as a stress question to catch the too-smooth candidate offguard. It is also one that occasionally is asked in the general course of events. The higher up the corporate ladder you go, the more likely it is that your references will be checked.

Your answer may include: “Yes, of course you can check my references. However, at present, I would like to keep matters confidential until we have established a serious mutual interest [i.e., an offer]. At that time, I will be pleased to furnish you with whatever references you need from prior employers. I would expect you to wait to check my current employer’s references until you have extended me an offer in writing, I have accepted, we have agreed on a start date and I have had the opportunity to resign in a professional manner.” You are under no obligation to give references of a current employer until you have a written offer in hand. You are also well within your rights to request reference checks of current employers wait until you have started your new job.

20. ***What type of decisions did you make on your last job?***

The interviewer may be searching to define your responsibilities or he/she may want to know that you don’t overstep yourself. It is also an opportunity to show your achievement profile.

21. ***How do you handle tension?***

This question is different from “Can you handle pressure?” It asks how you handle it. You could reply, “Tension is caused when you let things pile up. I find that, if you break those overwhelming tasks into little pieces, they aren’t so overwhelming any more. So, I suppose I don’t so much handle tension as handle the causes of it.”

22. ***How long have you been looking for another position?***

If you are employed, your answer isn’t that important. If, on the other hand you are

unemployed, how you answer becomes more important. So, if you must talk of months or more, be careful to add something like “Well I’ve been looking for about a year now. I’ve had a number of offers in that time, but I have determined that the job I take and the people with whom I work need to be people with values with which I can identify.”

23. ***Have you ever been fired?***

Say “no” if you can. If not, act on the advice given to the next question.

24. ***If so, why were you fired?***

If you were laid off as part of general work force reduction, be straightforward and move on to the next topic as quickly as possible.

Having been fired creates instant doubt in the mind of the interviewer and greatly increases the chances of your references being checked. Consequently, if you have been fired, the first thing to do is bite the bullet and call the person who fired you, find out why it happened and learn what he or she would say about you today.

Your aim is to clear the air. So, whatever you do, don’t be antagonistic. Reintroduce yourself, explain that you are looking (or, if you have been unemployed for a while, say you are “still looking”) for a new job. Say that you appreciate that the manager had to do what was done and that you learned from the experience. Then ask, “If you were asked as part of a pre- or post-employment reference check, how would you describe my leaving the company?”

Would say that I was fired or that I simply resigned? You see, every time I tell someone about my termination, Whoosh, there goes another chance of getting another paycheck!” Whatever you do, don’t advertise the fact you were fired. If you are asked, be honest, but make sure you have packaged the reason in the best light possible.

If you can find out the employee turnover figures, voluntary or otherwise, you might add; “Fifteen other people have left so far this year.” A combination answer of this nature minimizes the stigma. You have even managed to demonstrate that you take responsibility for your actions, which shows your analytical and listening skills. If one of your past managers will speak well of you, there is nothing to lose and everything to gain by finishing with; “Jill Johnson, at the company, would be a good person to check for a reference on what I have told you.”

25. ***Have you ever been asked to resign?***

When someone is asked to resign, it is a gesture on the part of the employer: “You can quit, or we will terminate you, so which do you want it to be?” Because you were given the option though, that employer cannot later say, “I had to ask him to resign.”

26. ***Were you ever dismissed from your job for a reason that seemed unjustified?***

The sympathetic phrasing is geared to getting you to reveal all the sordid details. The cold hard facts are that hardly anyone is fired without cause and you’re kidding yourself if you think otherwise. With that in mind, you can quite honestly say “No” and move on

to the next topic.

27. ***In your last job, what were some of the things you spent most of your time on, and why?***

Employees come in two categories: goal-oriented (those who want to get the job done) and task-oriented (those who believe in “busy” work). You must demonstrate good time-management and a goal-oriented attitude, which is what this question probes.

28. ***Do you have any questions?***

A good question. Almost always, this is a sign that the interview is drawing to a close and that you have one more chance to make an impression. Create questions from any of the following:

- Find out why the job is open, who had it last, and what happened to him or her. Did he or she get promoted or fired. How many people have held this position in the last couple of years? What happened to them subsequently?
- Why did the interviewer join the company? How long has he or she been there? What is it about the company that keeps him or her there?
- To whom would you report? Will you get the opportunity to meet that person?
- Where is the job located? What are the travel requirements, if any?
- What type of training is required and how long is it? What type of training is available?
- What would your first assignment be?
- What are the realistic chances for growth in the job? Where are the opportunities for greatest growth within the company?
- What are the skills and attributes most needed to get ahead in the company?
- Who will be the company’s major competitor over the next few years? How does the interviewer feel the company stacks up against them?
- What has been the growth pattern of the company over the last five years? Is it profitable? How profitable? Is the company privately or publicly held?
- If there is a written job description, may you see it?
- How regularly do performance evaluations occur? What model do they follow?

29. ***Rate yourself on a scale from one to ten.***

Bear in mind that this is meant to plumb the depths of your self-esteem. If you answer ten, you run the risk of portraying yourself as insufferable. On the other hand, if you say less than seven, you might as well get up and leave. You are probably best claiming to be an eight or nine.

30. ***What is the most difficult situation you have faced?***

The question looks for information on two fronts: How do you define difficult? And what was your handling of the situation? You must have a story ready for this one in which the situation both was tough and allowed you to show yourself in a good light.

31. ***What have you done that shows initiative?***

The question probes whether you are a doer. Be sure, however, that your example of

initiative does not show a disregard for company policies and procedures.

32. ***What are some of the things about which you and your supervisor disagreed?***

It is safest to state that you did not disagree.

33. ***In what areas do you feel your supervisor could have done a better job?***

You could reply, "I have always had the highest respect for my supervisor. I have always been so busy learning from Mr. Jones that I don't think he could have done a better job. He has really brought me to the point where I am ready for greater challenges. That's why I'm here."

34. ***What are some of the things your supervisor did that you disliked?***

If you and the interviewer are both nonsmokers and your boss isn't, use it. Apart from that answer, "You know, I've never thought of our relationship in terms of like or dislike. I've always thought our role was to get along together and get the job done."

35. ***How did your boss get the best out of you?***

This is a manageability question, geared to probing whether you are going to be a pain in the neck or not. Whatever you say, it is important for your ongoing happiness that you make it clear you don't appreciate being treated like a dishrag. You can give a short, general answer:

"My last boss got superior effort and performance by treating me like a human being and giving me the same personal respect with which she liked to be treated herself."

36. ***What personal characteristics are necessary for success in your field?***

You might say, "To be successful in my field? Drive, motivation, energy, confidence, determination, good communication, and analytical skills. Combined, of course, with the ability to work with others."

37. ***Do you prefer working with others or alone?***

This question is usually used to determine whether you are a team player. Before answering, however, be sure you know whether the job requires you to work alone. Then answer appropriately. Perhaps, you could reply, "I'm quite happy working alone when necessary. I don't need much constant reassurance. But I prefer to work in a group—so much more gets achieved when people pull together."

38. ***Explain your role as a group/team member.***

You are being asked to describe yourself as either a team player or a loner. Most departments depend on harmonious teamwork for their success, so describe yourself as a team player.

39. ***Do you make your opinions known when you disagree with the views of your supervisor?***

If you can, state that you come from an environment where input is encouraged when it helps the team's ability to get the job done efficiently. "If opinions are sought in a

meeting, I will give mine, although I am careful to be aware of others' feelings. I will never criticize a coworker or a superior in open forum. Besides, it is quite possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

However, my past manager made it clear that she valued my opinion by asking for it. So, after a while, if there was something I felt strongly about, I would make an appointment to sit down and discuss it one-on-one."

40. ***How would you handle an unfair or difficult supervisor?***

If you need to elaborate, try, "I would make an appointment to see the supervisor and diplomatically explain that I felt uncomfortable in our relationship. I felt he or she was not treating me as a professional colleague, and, therefore, that I might not be performing up to standard in some way. I would ask for his or her input as to what I must do to create a professional relationship. I would enter into the discussion in the frame of mind that we were equally responsible for whatever communication problems existed and that this wasn't just the manager's problem."

41. ***Do you consider yourself a natural leader or a born follower?***

If you are a recent graduate, you're expected to have high aspirations so go for it. If you are already on the corporate ladder with some practical experience in the school of hard knocks, you might want to be a little cagier. Assuming you are up for (and want) a leadership position, you might try something like this, "I would be reluctant to regard anyone as a natural leader. Hiring, motivation and disciplining other adults, while at the same time molding them into a cohesive team, involves a number of skills that no honest person can say they possessed from birth. Leadership is a lifetime learning process. Anyone who reckons they have it all under control and have nothing more to learn isn't doing the employer any favors."

42. ***When do you expect a promotion?***

Tread warily, show that you believe in yourself and have both feet firmly planted on the ground. "That depends on a few criteria. Of course, I cannot expect promotions without the performance that marks me as deserving of promotion. I also need to join a company that has the growth necessary to provide the opportunity. I hope that my manager believes in promoting from within and will help me grow so that I will have the skills necessary to be considered for promotion when the opportunity comes along."

43. ***You have been given a project that requires you to interact with different levels within the company. How do you do this? With what levels are you most comfortable?***

This is a two-part question that probes communication and self-confidence skills. The first part asks how you interact with superiors and motivate those working with and for you on the project. The second part of the question is saying, "Tell me whom you regard as your peer group?"

To cover both bases, you will want to include the essence of this: "There are basically two types of people I would interact with on a project of this nature. First, there are

those I report to, who bear the ultimate responsibility for its success. With them, I determine deadlines and how they will evaluate the success of the project. I would outline my approach, breaking the project down into component parts, getting approval on both the approach and the costs. I would keep my supervisors up-to-date on a regular basis, and seek input whenever needed. My supervisors would expect three things from me - the facts, an analysis of potential problems, and that I not be intimidated, as that would jeopardize the project's success. I would comfortably satisfy those expectations."

"The other people are those who work with and for me. With those people, I would outline the project and explain how a successful outcome will benefit the company. I would assign the component parts to those best suited to each and arrange follow-up times to assure completion by deadline. My role here would be to facilitate, motivate and bring the different personalities together to form a team. As for comfort level, I find this type of approach enables me to interact comfortably with all levels and types of people."

44. ***Tell me about an event that really challenged you. How did you meet the challenge? In what way was your approach different from others?***

This is a straightforward two-part question. The first probes your problem-solving abilities. The second asks you to set yourself apart from the herd. First of all, outline the problem. The blacker you make the situation, the better. Having done that, go ahead and explain your solution, its value to your employer and how it was different from other approaches.

45. ***How would you go about making a decision when no procedure exists?***

This question probes your analytical skills, integrity and dedication. Most of all, the interviewer is testing your manageability and adherence to procedures. You need to cover that with, "I would act without my manager's direction only if the situation was urgent and my manager were not available. Then, I would take command of the situation, make a decision based upon the facts and implement it. I would update my boss at the earliest opportunity."

46. ***That is an excellent answer. Now give me a balanced view, can you give me an example that didn't work out so well?***

Here, you are required to give an example of an inadequacy. The trick is to pull something from the past and to finish with what you learned from the experience.

47. ***What kinds of decisions are most difficult for you?***

You are human. Admit it, but be careful what you admit. If you have ever had to fire someone, you are in luck because no one likes to do that. Emphasize that having reached a logical conclusion, you act.

48. ***What area of your skills/professional development do you want to improve at this time?***

Another "tell-me-all-your-weaknesses" question. You should try to avoid damaging your

candidacy by tossing around careless admissions.

49. ***Your application shows you have been with one company a long time without any appreciable increase in rank or salary. Tell me about this.***

To begin, you should analyze why this state of affairs does exist. Then, when you have determined the cause, practice saying it out loud to yourself as you would say it during an actual interview. It may take a few tries.

Try to avoid putting your salary history on application forms. No one is going to deny you an interview for lack of a salary history if your skills match what the job requires.

50. ***See this pen I'm holding? Sell it to me.***

In today's business world, everyone is required to sell—sometimes products, but more often ideas, approaches and concepts. As such, you are being tested to see whether you understand the basic concepts of features-and-benefits selling, how quickly you think on your feet and how effective your verbal communication is.

You say calmly, "Let me tell you about the special features of this product. First of all, it's a highlighter that will emphasize important points in reports or articles and that will save you time in teaching the important features. The casing is wide enough to enable you to use it comfortably at your desk or on a flip chart. It has a flat base to help it stand on its own. At one dollar, it is disposable and affordable enough for you to have a handful for your desk, briefcase, car and home. And the bright yellow color means you'll never lose it."

Then close with a smile and a question of your own that will bring a smile to the interviewer's face, like, "How many gross shall we deliver?"

51. ***Why should I hire an outsider when I could fill the job with someone inside the company?***

The question isn't as stupid as it sounds. Obviously, the interviewer has examined existing employees with an eye toward their promotion or reassignment. Just as obviously, the job cannot be filled from within the company. If it could be, it would be and for two very good reasons: It is cheaper for the company to promote from within and it is good for employee morale. Your answer should include two steps. The first is a simple recitation of your skills and personality profile strengths tailored to the specific requirements of the job.

For the second step, realize first that whenever a manager is filling a position, he or she is looking not only for someone who can do the job, but also for someone who can benefit the department in a larger sense. No department is as good as it could be. Each has weaknesses that need strengthening. Therefore, in the second part of your answer, include a question of your own, such as, "Those are my general attributes. However, if no one is promotable from inside the company, that means you are looking to add strength to your team in a special way. In what ways do you hope the final candidate will be able to benefit your department?" The answer to this is your cue to sell your

applicable qualities.

52. ***Why were you out of work for so long?***

You must have a sound explanation for any and all gaps in your employment history. If not, you are unlikely to receive a job offer. Emphasize that you were not just looking for another paycheck. You were looking for a company with which to settle and to which to make a long-term contribution.

53. ***Why have you changed jobs so frequently?***

If you have jumped around, blame it on youth (even the interviewer was young once). Now you realize what a mistake your job-hopping was and, with your added domestic responsibilities, you are now much more settled. Or you may wish to impress on the interviewer that your job-hopping was never as a result of poor performance and that you grew professionally as a result of each job change.

54. ***What was there about your last company that you didn't particularly like or agree with?***

You are being checked out as a potential "fly in the ointment." If you have to answer, it might be about how some employees disregarded the bottom line by consciously misunderstanding directives.

Or: "I didn't like the way some people gave lip service to 'the customer comes first' but really didn't go out of their way to keep the customer satisfied. I don't think it was a fault of management, just a general malaise that seemed to affect a lot of people."

55. ***What are some things you find difficult to do? Why do you feel that way?***

This is a variation on a couple of earlier questions. Remember, anything that goes against the best interests of your employer is difficult to do. If you are pressed for a job function you find difficult, answer in the past tense. That way, you show that you recognize difficulty but that you obviously handle it well.

56. ***What were some of the minuses on your last job?***

A variation on the question, "What interests you least about this job?" which was handled earlier. Use the same type of answer. For example, "Like any salesperson I enjoy selling, not doing the paperwork. I grin and bear it."

If you are not in sales, use the sales force as a scapegoat. "In accounts receivable, it's my job to get the money in to make payroll. Half the time, the goods get shipped before I get the paperwork because sales says, 'It's a rush order.' That's a real minus to me. It was so bad at my last company; we tried a new approach. We met with sales and explained our problem. The result was that incremental commissions were based on cash in, not on bill date. They saw the connection and things are much better now."