

50 Tough Interview Questions (Revised 2003)

You and Your Accomplishments

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

Because this is often the opening question, be careful that you don't run off at the mouth. Keep your answer to a minute or two, and consider four topics:

- *Early Years*
- *Education*
- *Work History*
- *Recent Career Experience*

2. What can you do for us that some else can't?

Here you have every right and perhaps obligation to toot your own horn and be a bit egotistical.

- *Talk about your record of getting things done.*
- *Mention specifics from your resume or inventory of accomplishments*
- *Say that your skills and interests, combined with history of getting things done, makes you valuable.*
- *Mention ability to set priorities, identify problems, and use your experience and ability to solve them.*

3. Why should we hire you?

Create your answer by thinking in terms of your ability, your experience, and your energy. See Question 2 for more detail.

4. What do you look for in a job?

Keep you answer oriented toward the opportunities at the organization.

- *Talk about desire to perform and be recognized for contributions*
- *Orient your answer toward opportunities rather than personal security*

5. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our firm?

Be realistic.

- *Say that, while you would expect to meet pressing demands and pull your own weight from the first day, it might take six months to a year before you could expect to know the organization and its needs enough to make a major contribution.*

6. Did you change the nature of your job?

Tell how you improved it.

7. Can you work under pressure and deal with deadlines?

Observe that both are facts of business life.

- *Take examples from your list of accomplishments to show how you have dealt successfully with pressure and deadlines in the past.*

8. In your present (last) position, what problems did you identify that had previously been overlooked?

Be brief and don't brag. Indicate the positive changes your suggestions or leadership resulting in.

9. If you could start your career over again what would you do differently?

The best answer is, "Not a thing."

- *You should try to present yourself as a person who is happy with his or her life.*
- *You've enjoyed its ups and learned from its downs.*
- *You would not, as a result, want to change things that brought you to where you are today.*
- *Mention that it is the past, after all, that has prepared you for this position.*

10. What career options do you have at this moment?

You should try to identify three areas of interest, one of which includes this company and job.

- *The other two should be in related fields.*

11. How would you define success?

Think in terms of a sense of well-being.

- *Consider opportunity and responsibility as components of success.*

12. How successful do you think you've been so far?

Say that, all in all, you're happy with the way your career has progressed.

- *Given the normal ups and downs of life, you feel that you've done quite well and expect to continue to succeed in the future.*
 - *Present a positive and confident picture of yourself, but don't overstate your case. An answer like, "Everything is wonderful; I'm overjoyed!" is likely to make an interviewer wonder whether you're trying to fool him or yourself. The most convincing confidence is quiet confidence.*
-
-
-
-

Our Organization

13. What do you know about our organization?

You should be able to discuss the following:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| • <i>Production Services</i> | • <i>Goals</i> |
| • <i>Revenues</i> | • <i>Management Style</i> |
| • <i>Reputation</i> | • <i>People</i> |
| • <i>Image</i> | • <i>History and Philosophy</i> |

However, don't act as if you know everything about the place.

- *Let answers show that you have taken the time to do some research, but don't overwhelm the interviewer.*
 - *Make it clear that you wish to learn more.*
 - *Give answers in a positive tone. Don't say, "Well, everyone tells me the company's in a heap of trouble, and that's why I'm here" – even if it is why you're there.*
-
-
-
-

14. Tell us why you want to work for us?

The deadliest answer you can give is "Because I like people." What else would you like—animals? Here and throughout the interview, a good answer comes from having done your homework so you can speak in terms of the company's need.

- *You might say your research has shown that the company is doing things you would like to be involved with, and that it's been doing them in ways that interest you.*

- If the company is known for strong management, your answer should be you would like to be part of that team.
- If the company puts a great deal of emphasis on research and development emphasize the fact that you want to create new things and you know this is a place where inventiveness is encouraged.
- If the organization stresses financial controls, your answer should mention a reverence for numbers.

If you feel that you have to concoct an answer to this question, then you probably shouldn't be taking the interview, because you probably shouldn't be considering a job with that organization. Your homework should include learning enough about the company to avoid approaching places where you wouldn't be able or wouldn't want to function.

15. Please give me the definition of (the position for which you are being interviewed).

Keep you answers brief and task oriented.

- *Think in terms of responsibilities and accountability.*
- *Make sure that you really do understand what the position involves before you attempt an answer.*
- *If you aren't sure, ask the interviewer, he or she may answer the question for you.*

16. Do you prefer staff or line work?

Say that it depends of the job and its challenge.

17. Don't you think you might be better suited for a different size company? To a different type company?

Tailor you answer to the job being discussed.

- *Say that your preferences for the size or type of company generally depend on the job in question.*
- *Note that your research has shown you that this organization and this job meet you criteria.*

18. If you could choose any company, where would you go?

Talk about the job and the company for which you are being interviewed.

19. What other jobs are you considering?

Restrict your answer to fields similar to the one in which this company operates.

20. What are your long-range goals?

Refer back to the self-assessment phase of your career continuation efforts. Don't answer, "I want the job you've advertised."

- *Relate your goals to the company you're interviewing for: "In a firm like yours, I would like to"*

21. What do you find most attractive about this position? What seems least attractive about it?

List three or four attractive features of the job, and mention a single, minor, unattractive item.

22. In your current (last) position, what features do (did) you like the most? The least?

Be careful and be positive. Describe more features that you liked than disliked.

- *Don't site personality problems.*
- *If you make your last job sound terrible, an interviewer may wonder why you've remained there until now, or whether you have an attitude problem that would be likely to show up on a new job, too.*

23. In your current (last) position, what have been (were) your five most significant accomplishments?

Have specific examples ready.

- *If you are asked for five examples, don't cite ten.*
- *If you want to show that you were responsible for more than five achievements, you can say, "I've given you five that seem the most important to me. There are others, if you'd like to hear about some other area of my work" Then if the interviewer asks for additional accomplishments, you can give them without appearing to boast.*

24. How long will you stay with us?

Say that you are interested in a career with the organization, but admit that you would have to continue to feel challenged to remain with an organization. Think in terms of, "As long as we both feel achievement oriented."

25. Your resume suggests that you may be overqualified or too experienced for this position. What do you think?

Emphasize your interest in establishing a long term association with the organization, and say that you assume if you perform well in this job, new opportunities will open up for you.

- *Mention that a strong company needs a strong staff.*
- *Observe that individuals are always at a premium*
- *Suggest that because you are so well qualified, the company will get a fast return on investment.*
- *Say that a growing, growing, energetic company can never have too much talent.*

Management Style

26. What is your management style?

You should know enough about the company's style to know that your management style will compliment it. Possible styles include:

- *Task oriented (Problem solving)*
- *Results oriented (Effect on bottom line)*
- *Participative style (open-door method motivating people and delegating)*

27. Are you a good manager? Can you give me some examples? Do you feel that you have top management potential?

Keep your answer achievement and task-oriented.

- *Rely on examples from your career to support your statements.*
- *Stress your experience and your energy.*

28. What do you think is the most difficult thing about being a manager or an executive?

Mention planning, execution, and cost control.

- *The most difficult task may be to motivate and manage employees to get tasks routinely planned and completed on time and within budget.*

29. Do you consider yourself a leader?

Take examples from your work experience.

30. What do you look for when you hire people?

Think in terms of skills, initiative, and adaptability to work comfortably and productively with others.

- *Mention that you like to hire people who appear capable of moving up in an organization.*

31. Have you ever had to fire people? What were the reasons, and how did you handle the situation?

Admit that the situation wasn't easy, but say that it worked out well, both for the company and, you think for the individual or individuals involved.

- *Show that, like anyone else, you don't enjoy unpleasant tasks, but that you can resolve them efficiently and, in the case of firing someone, humanely.*

Industry Trends

32. What important trends do you see in our industry?

Be prepared with two or three trends that illustrate how well you understand your industry.

- *You might consider technological challenges or opportunities*
- *Economic conditions*
- *Current competitive situation*
- *Regulatory demands related to the direction in which your business is heading.*

33. What are the frontier or cutting-edge issues in our industry?

Be prepared with two or three key issues.

Reasons for Your Search (or Why You Are Out of Work)

34. Why are you leaving (did leave) your present (last) position?

Be brief, to the point, and as honest as you can without hurting yourself.

- *Refer back to the planning phase of your job search, where you considered this topic as you thought about reference statements.*
- *If you were laid off in a staff reduction, say so*
- *Otherwise indicate that the move was your decision, the result of your desire to advance your career.*
- *Don't mention personality conflicts.*
- *The interviewer may spend some time probing you on this issue, particularly if it's clear that you were terminated. Be as positive and honest as you can. The "We agreed to disagree" approach suggested earlier may be useful.*
- *Don't fabricate a story for an interview; even in today's reference-shy climate, your story may be checked.*

35. Why haven't you found a job before now?

Say that finding a job isn't difficult, but that finding the right job deserves time and demands careful planning.

36. Did you think of leaving your present position before? If so, what do you think held you there?

You might say that the challenge of the job held you in the past but, as that seemed to diminish, you reached the decision to investigate new opportunities.

37. What do you think of your (former) boss?

Be as positive as you can.

- *A potential boss will anticipate that you might talk about him or her in similar terms at some point in the future.*

38. Will you be out to take your boss's job?

Say that while you certainly hope to win additional responsibility in the organization, you've always focused on getting the current job done.

Strengths and Weaknesses

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

Be specific. Don't be emotional.

- *Think in terms of constructive criticism*
- *Show that you responded positively and benefited from that criticism.*

40. If I spoke with your (former) boss, what would he or she say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Name three or four strengths and only one weakness. Be honest but not negative.

41. What are your strong points?

Present at least three.

- *Use concrete, work-related examples to illustrate them.*
- *Try to relate your answer to the interviewing organization and the specific job opening.*

42. What are your weak points?

Don't say you have none. But try to make a negative sound like a strength carried a bit to far.

- *"I sometimes get impatient and become deeply involved when a project is running late.*
- *Don't offer a list of weaknesses*
- *A good interviewer may press you a bit by saying, "Is there anything else?" You might answer "No, I don't think so on that topic."*
- *If the interviewer persist, come up with a second weakness, but only if you are asked for it. Don't offer negative information unnecessarily.*
- *If the interviewer continues and asks for a third weakness, say politely that you really can't think of anything else.*
- *Finally, show that you are working to correct your weaknesses.*

Salary-Related Questions

43. Why aren't you earning more at your age?

Say that is one reason you're conducting this job search. Don't be defensive.

44. What do you feel this position should pay?

Salary is a delicate topic.

- *We suggest that you defer tying yourself to a precise figure for as long as you can do it politely.*

- *You might say, “I understand that the range for this job is between \$X and \$Y. That seem appropriate for the job as I understand it.”*
 - *You might answer the question with a question. “Perhaps you can help me on this one. Can you tell me if there is a range for similar jobs in the organization?”*
 - *If you’re asked the question during an initial screening interview, you might say that you feel you need to know more about the responsibilities involved before giving a meaningful answer. Here too, either by asking the interviewer or doing research during your investigation of the company, you can try to find out whether there is a salary grade attached to the job. If there is, and if you can live with it, say that the range seems right to you.*
 - *If the interviewer continues to probe, you might say, “You know I am making \$X now. Like everyone else, I’d like to improve on that figure, but my major interest is in the job itself.” Remember the act of taking a new job does not, in and of itself, make you worth more money.*
 - *If no price range is attached to the job, and the interviewer continues to press the subject, then you will have to respond with a number. You can’t leave the impression that it doesn’t really matter, that you’ll accept what ever is offered. If you’ve been making \$96,000 annually, you can’t say that a \$42,000 figure would be fine without sounding like you are giving up on yourself. (If you are making a radical career change, however, a substantial disparity may be more reasonable and understandable)*
 - *Don’t sell yourself short, but continue to stress the fact that the job itself is the most important thing in your mind. The interviewer may be trying to determine just how much you want the job. Don’t leave the impression that money is the only thing important to you. Link questions of salary to the work itself.*
 - *If a search firm is involved, your contact there may be able to help with the salary question. A search firm representative may even be able to run interference for you. If, for instance, this person tells you what the position pays, and you respond that you are earning that amount now and would like to do a bit better, he or she might go back to the employer and purpose that you be offered an additional ten percent.*
 - *But, whenever possible, say as little as you can about salary until you reach the final stage of the interviewing process. At that point, you know the company is genuinely interested in you and is more likely to be flexible in salary negotiations.*
-
-
-
-

Personality Traits

45. Do you have any objection to psychological tests?

Say you would feel comfortable taking them.

46. Do you speak to others before they speak to you?

The interviewer is probably trying to determine your ability to deal with unstable or unanticipated situations.

- *Say that your actions depend on specific circumstances.*
- *While you wouldn't normally start a conversation with a stranger on the street, for example, you feel comfortable initiating discussions with people you don't know in normal business or social settings.*

47. What was the last book you read? Movie you saw? Sporting event you attended?

Try to show that you lead a balanced life when answering questions about outside activities.

48. Are you creative?

Be prepared with work related examples of creativity.

49. How would you describe your own personality?

It may be wise to say you are the proud owner of a balanced personality.

“When Can You Start?”

50. When could you start?

Be prepared to give a date or commit to a time and date that you can commit to a start date.

- *“Are you offering the position to me now?” might be a good response if an offer has not yet been made.*
