

Questions and answers to prepare for an interview

Tell me about yourself

This is not an invitation to give your life history. In fact, you really need the interviewer to be more specific before you can give the answer they want. So ask them, 'What aspect of myself would you like me to tell you about?' They are most likely to ask you to talk about what you're like at work.

You should aim to describe the kind of person you are in a couple of minutes at most. Concentrate on positive qualities, and link them to the key responsibilities of the job you're applying for. For example: 'I'm a people person - I enjoy working with people and being part of a team. I'm the sort of person who likes to get stuck into a project, and I really enjoy seeing a project right through from initial planning to the final stages ...', and so on.

Should they ask to hear about what you're like away from work, you still want to give them an answer that means you're cut out for the job on offer. So, again, if you want to show you're a good team player, you might tell them, 'I'm very social; I have lots of friends and I spend a lot of time with them. I play a lot of sports such as ice hockey.'

I'm not suggesting here that you lie. You've got plenty of time to think about this question before you get to the interview and be ready with suitable and honest answers about your personal or business life. If the job calls for a good team player, for example, it's likely you are one or you wouldn't be applying, so you probably have plenty of examples you could choose from.

Why did you leave your last/present job?

Stay positive regardless of the circumstances. Never refer to a major problem with management and never speak ill of supervisors, co-workers or the organization. If you do, you will be the one looking bad. Keep smiling and talk about leaving for a positive reason such as an opportunity, a chance to do something special or other forward-looking reasons.

The only really good answer to this question is, 'Because I want to broaden my experience and I think I can do that better in a new organisation' (or words to that effect). If it's relevant to the job, you can expand on this briefly. For example, if the job entails giving a lot of presentations you might say, 'In particular, I enjoy presenting and it's something I've become very good at. Unfortunately, there aren't that many opportunities for me to develop my skills further where I am now.'

What experience do you have in this field?

Speak about specifics that relate to the position you are applying for. If you do not have specific experience, get as close as you can.

Do you consider yourself successful?

You should always answer yes and briefly explain why. A good explanation is that you have set goals, and you have met some and are on track to achieve the others.

What do co-workers say about you?

Be prepared with a quote or two from co-workers. Either a specific statement or a paraphrase will work. Jill Clark, a co-worker at Smith Company, always said I was the hardest workers she had ever known. It is as powerful as Jill having said it at the interview herself.

How would your friends describe you?

'What friends?' is the wrong answer to this question. In fact, it runs along much the same lines as 'How would your colleagues describe you?' Don't be unrealistic about yourself, but pick out the strongest points that will be relevant. It's always worth mentioning loyalty and supportiveness.

The interviewer is simply trying to get a more rounded picture of the kind of person you are, to help them assess whether you'll fit in with the people you'll be working with.

What do you know about this organization?

This question is one reason to do some research on the organization before the interview. Find out where they have been and where they are going. What are the current issues and who are the major players?

What have you done to improve your knowledge in the last year?

Try to include improvement activities that relate to the job. A wide variety of activities can be mentioned as positive self-improvement. Have some good ones handy to mention.

Are you applying for other jobs?

Be honest but do not spend a lot of time in this area. Keep the focus on this job and what you can do for this organization. Anything else is a distraction.

Why do you want to work for this organization?

This may take some thought and certainly, should be based on the research you have done on the organization. Sincerity is extremely important here and will easily be sensed. Relate it to your long-term career goals.

Do you know anyone who works for us?

Be aware of the policy on relatives working for the organization. This can affect your answer even though they asked about friends not relatives. Be careful to mention a friend only if they are well thought of.

What is your present salary?

You don't want to answer this. If you're offered the job, they'll try to get away with paying you as close as they can to your existing salary - at best it will hold the negotiating level down. Say something such as, 'I think salaries can be misleading, as it's really the whole remuneration package that counts. Of course, that's harder to quantify.' Then ask if you can return to the question later, once you get to a point where you need to talk about it in more detail (i.e., when they offer you the job).

What salary are you expecting?

You don't want to answer this one either, because there's no chance of getting any more than you say now, and a good chance of scaring them off if you ask too much. So answer a question with a question: 'What salary would you expect to pay for this post?' or ask what salary range has been allocated. If they refuse to answer at this stage, you can reasonably do so, too.

If they quote a salary and ask for your response, let them know you were thinking of something a little higher, but not out of their reach (assuming you'd agree to that yourself). If they suggest a range, quote them back a range that is higher but overlaps. So if they say £20-25,000, you might say you were thinking of £24-28,000. You're edging them up, but you're not putting them off.

How much do you think you're worth?

All these salary questions are good news, essentially. Why would they bother to ask unless they were thinking of offering you the job? This particular question is really the previous one again with a nasty twist to it. It's just a matter of justifying what you're asking for - once you've played the previous game of making them go first.

You should already have an idea of the going rate for the job in the industry or the organization (especially if it's an internal job), so ask for a little more and explain that you've studied salary surveys and so on and, since your experience and skills are above average for the job, you believe you're worth above the average pay. By the way, you can expect the interviewer to respond by saying that the figure you name is too high - that's just part of the negotiating tactic. Don't let it dent your confidence.

Are you a team player?

You are, of course, a team player. Be sure to have examples ready. Specifics that show you often perform for the good of the team rather than for yourself are good evidence of your team attitude. Do not brag, just say it in a matter-of-fact tone. This is a key point.

How long would you expect to work for us if hired?

Specifics here are not good. Something like this should work: I'd like it to be a long time. Or As long as we both feel I'm doing a good job.

Have you ever had to fire anyone? How did you feel about that?

This is serious. Do not make light of it or in any way seem like you like to fire people. At the same time, you will do it when it is the right thing to do. When it comes to the organization versus the individual who has created a harmful situation, you will protect the organization. Remember firing is not the same as layoff or reduction in force.

What is your philosophy towards work?

The interviewer is not looking for a long or flowery dissertation here. Do you have strong feelings that the job gets done? Yes. That's the type of answer that works best here. Short and positive, showing a benefit to the organization.

If you had enough money to retire right now, would you?

Answer yes if you would. But since you need to work, this is the type of work you prefer. Do not say yes if you do not mean it.

Have you ever been asked to leave a position?

If you have not, say no. If you have, be honest, brief and avoid saying negative things about the people or organization involved.

Explain how you would be an asset to this organization

You should be anxious for this question. It gives you a chance to highlight your best points as they relate to the position being discussed. Give a little advance thought to this relationship.

Why should we hire you?

Point out how your assets meet what the organization needs. Do not mention any other candidates to make a comparison.

Tell me about a suggestion you have made

Have a good one ready. Be sure and use a suggestion that was accepted and was then considered successful. One related to the type of work applied for is a real plus.

What irritates you about co-workers?

This is a trap question. Think real hard but fail to come up with anything that irritates you. A short statement that you seem to get along with folks is great.

What is your greatest strength?

Numerous answers are good, just stay positive. A few good examples: Your ability to prioritize, Your problem-solving skills, Your ability to work under pressure, Your ability to focus on projects, Your professional expertise, Your leadership skills, Your positive attitude

What is your biggest weakness?

Oooh, tricky. This is one of those really tough questions. It invites you to say something negative about yourself. Resist. The best defence to use is one of the following:

- Humour ('Double choc-chip ice cream')
- Something personal, not work related ('I'm useless at getting round to household jobs - changing lightbulbs and fixing leaky taps')
- Something from long ago, which you have now learnt from ('Fifteen years ago I'd have said paperwork, but I've learnt to set aside half an hour at the start of every day for it. Now I reckon I'm more on top of the paperwork than the rest of my colleagues')

· Something that your interviewer will see as a strength ('I'm dreadful at stopping in the middle of something. I tend to say at work until a task is done, even though my family often complain that I'm late home').

All of these answers should avoid giving away any real weaknesses (should you have any), and they also avoid making you come across as arrogant and too perfect - something that really gets up interviewers' noses.

Tell me about your dream job.

Stay away from a specific job. You cannot win. If you say the job you are contending for is it, you strain credibility. If you say another job is it, you plant the suspicion that you will be dissatisfied with this position if hired. The best is to stay generic and say something like: A job where I love the work, like the people, can contribute and can't wait to get to work.

Why do you think you would do well at this job?

Give several reasons and include skills, experience and interest.

What do you feel you can bring to this job?

This is another question that gives you a chance to shine. You need to link your past experience or skills to the requirements of the job. So pick about three key strong points in your favour that are relevant to this job. For example: 'I'm very experienced at dealing with customers, including tricky ones. I get on easily with other people so I work well in a team. And I'm naturally organised and find it easy to handle paperwork and fit in with whatever systems I need to. As I understand it, these are all important skills for this job.'

What kind of person would you refuse to work with?

Do not be trivial. It would take disloyalty to the organization, violence or lawbreaking to get you to object. Minor objections will label you as a whiner.

What is more important to you: the money or the work?

Money is always important, but the work is the most important. There is no better answer.

What do you enjoy most in your current job?

This can be a kind of trick question. The interviewer is tempting you to indicate that there are things you don't like about your job. If that's so, presumably there will be things about this job that you don't like too - which isn't very encouraging. So the only answer you can really give is to say that you enjoy everything about your job.

If you think this sounds a little implausible, you can pick out one or two favourite parts of the job - making sure that they will be important parts of this job too, should you get it. So you might say, 'I'm lucky, really. I can't think of anything I don't enjoy about my job. But I suppose the thing I enjoy most is dealing directly with customers. That's why I've applied for this job; because I'd like the opportunity to spend even more of my time doing it.'

This answers the other obvious flaw in the 'I enjoy everything' answer, which is that it begs the question, 'Why are you looking for another post?'

What is the biggest challenge you've faced at work?

So long as you're prepared, this is a great question. You need to have an answer ready for it in order to get the best from it. The idea is that you not only describe the challenge, but also how you coped with it. So you need to pick an example that leaves you looking good.

There is something else behind this question, too: the interviewer is also finding out what you consider a challenge. So think hard about the example you want to pick. Will it be a tough decision? A difficult situation? A system that needed overhauling to improve results? You get to choose, so pick something that will be relevant to this job, as always.

Just one rule of thumb to follow: it's dangerous to pick an example that involves problems with other people. It can give the impression that you find getting on with others a big challenge.

What would your previous supervisor say your strongest point is?

There are numerous good possibilities:

Loyalty, Energy, Positive attitude, Leadership, Team player, Expertise, Initiative, Patience, Hard work, Creativity, Problem solver.

Tell me about a problem you had with a supervisor

Biggest trap of all. This is a test to see if you will speak ill of your boss. If you fall for it and tell about a problem with a former boss, you may well blow the interview right there. Stay positive and develop a poor memory about any trouble with a supervisor.

What is your present (or most recent) boss like?

Never criticise any of your bosses - current, recent or otherwise. The interviewer may be your future boss, and wants to hear you being loyal to other bosses, even behind their backs. So always be positive - even if your boss is a first rate sh**. Just say something like, 'I'm lucky to have a boss who is very good at her job', and leave it there.

The point is not only that your interviewer wants to see that you are loyal, but also that your interviewer is aware they don't know the other side of the story. So you may know your complaints are justified, but to your interviewer they may just make you sound like a carping whinger who is likely to talk about them in the same terms if they employ you.

What has disappointed you about a job?

Don't get trivial or negative. Safe areas are few but can include: Not enough of a challenge. You were laid off in a reduction Company did not win a contract, which would have given you more responsibility.

What do you dislike most at work?

You love work, remember? This interviewer can safely hire you, knowing that you will be well motivated every minute of your working life. So if asked, you can't think of anything you dislike. The only possible exception is if this job is very different from your last, in which case you might say something like, 'I really enjoy my work. But occasionally I get a little frustrated in a small company that I don't get to meet customers as often as I'd like. That's one of the reasons why this job appeals to me so much.'

With intelligent handling of the questions, and following the guidelines here, you should be able to perform excellently at interview without any need to lie.

Tell me about your ability to work under pressure.

You may say that you thrive under certain types of pressure. Give an example that relates to the type of position applied for.

Do your skills match this job or another job more closely?

Probably this one. Do not give fuel to the suspicion that you may want another job more than this one.

What motivates you to do your best on the job?

This is a personal trait that only you can say, but good examples are: Challenge, Achievement, Recognition

Are you willing to work overtime? Nights? Weekends?

This is up to you. Be totally honest.

How would you know you were successful on this job?

Several ways are good measures:

You set high standards for yourself and meet them. Your outcomes are a success. Your boss tell you that you are successful

Would you be willing to relocate if required?

You should be clear on this with your family prior to the interview if you think there is a chance it may come up. Do not say yes just to get the job if the real answer is no. This can create a lot of problems later on in your career. Be honest at this point and save yourself future grief.

Are you willing to put the interests of the organization ahead of your own?

This is a straight loyalty and dedication question. Do not worry about the deep ethical and philosophical implications. Just say yes.

Describe your management style.

Try to avoid labels. Some of the more common labels, like progressive, salesman or consensus, can have several meanings or descriptions depending on which management expert you listen to. The situational style is safe, because it says you will manage according to the situation, instead of one size fits all.

What have you learned from mistakes on the job?

Here you have to come up with something or you strain credibility. Make it small, well intentioned mistake with a positive lesson learned. An example would be working too far ahead of colleagues on a project and thus throwing coordination off.

Do you have any blind spots?

Trick question. If you know about blind spots, they are no longer blind spots. Do not reveal any personal areas of concern here. Let them do their own discovery on your bad points. Do not hand it to them.

If you were hiring a person for this job, what would you look for?

Be careful to mention traits that are needed and that you have.

Do you think you are overqualified for this position?

Regardless of your qualifications, state that you are very well qualified for the position.

How do you propose to compensate for your lack of experience?

First, if you have experience that the interviewer does not know about, bring that up: Then, point out (if true) that you are a hard working quick learner.

What qualities do you look for in a boss?

Be generic and positive. Safe qualities are knowledgeable, a sense of humor, fair, loyal to subordinates and holder of high standards. All bosses think they have these traits.

Tell me about a time when you helped resolve a dispute between others.

Pick a specific incident. Concentrate on your problem solving technique and not the dispute you settled.

What position do you prefer on a team working on a project?

Be honest. If you are comfortable in different roles, point that out.

Describe your work ethic.

Emphasize benefits to the organization. Things like, determination to get the job done and work hard but enjoy your work are good.

What has been your biggest professional disappointment?

Be sure that you refer to something that was beyond your control. Show acceptance and no negative feelings.

How do you resolve conflict in your team?

You need to answer this question honestly, as always. And find an example of conflict in your team that you can use to demonstrate your skills at resolving it. The kind of techniques you need to demonstrate include:

- fairness
- addressing problems with individuals privately
- making sure you get to the root of the problem
- finding a solution that the people involved are willing to buy into.

Assuming it's true, you would also do well to point out, 'I find if a team is run fairly and the team members are well motivated, conflict very rarely arises.'

Tell me about the most fun you have had on the job.

Talk about having fun by accomplishing something for the organization.

Do you have any questions for me?

Always have some questions prepared. Questions prepared where you will be an asset to the organization are good. How soon will I be able to be productive? and What type of projects will I be able to assist on? are examples.

What do you think is the role of a ... (whatever your current job is)?

You should have thought this question through before you are asked it (as you should have done for all of these questions). I can't tell you the answer, since I don't know what post you've applied for. But you need to answer in terms of the big picture:

- The overall objective of the job
- Key responsibilities.

As you may realise, you can pick up big clues from the job description if you're applying for a job in your usual line of work. But you will also want to draw on your own experience.

This question is sometimes given as a test; if this happens, the interviewer will interrupt to disagree with you. Their aim is to see whether you can defend your case calmly and convincingly, so don't be thrown by their interruption.

Why do you want this job?

Try not to waffle about challenges and prospects. Talk in terms of benefits to them, and be specific about the kind of challenge you enjoy. For example: 'I'm a great organiser, and I'm looking for a post that gives me scope to plan and organise', or 'I get great satisfaction from working in a successful team, and this job seems to call for someone who can fit well into a tight, well-motivated team'.

This is also a good opportunity to show off the research you've done into the company - again keeping it brief and relevant. So you might say something like, 'I find growing companies have a more exciting, dynamic atmosphere to work in, and I know you've been growing by an average of six per cent for the last four years.'

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

You want to be careful how you answer this because, if you give a specific goal and the interviewer knows they cannot fulfil it, they will be put off hiring you. So keep it open. But remember that they want to know you have drive and will keep increasing your value to them. Say something like, 'I'm certainly ambitious, and I like to keep moving and progressing. But you can't fit a job to a preset list of conditions. I find it's far more rewarding to let the job lead you forward.'

What outside interests do you have?

Your interviewer is trying to find out more about you. Your interests will tell them whether you are sporty, competitive, enjoy dangerous hobbies, like solo or group activities, and so on. Don't invent hobbies (you don't want your interviewer to say, 'Bungee jumping? Me too! Where's your favourite location round here for a jump? What kind of equipment do you use?'), but select those hobbies or interests that show you as the kind of person your interviewer is looking for.

How do you get the best from people?

If you're a manager, this is a question you may well be asked. The kind of skills that interviewers want to hear about include:

- good communication
- teamwork skill
- recognizing each person as an individual
- setting a sound example
- praising good performances

What would your boss say about you?

Your interviewer may well be your prospective boss, so be careful. They want to know that you're an effective worker, but they don't want you stepping on their toes. So describe yourself as any boss would want to see you. For example, 'My boss would describe me as hard working, easy to motivate and loyal. She'd say that I work well on my own initiative, and I'm a supportive member of the team.' Resist the temptation to say 'I think my boss would say'. Be positive and certain in your answer.

If your interviewer is likely to be approaching your present boss at some stage for a reference, make sure that your answer tallies with what your boss is likely to say about you when your interviewer puts this particular answer to the test.

How do you evaluate your present company?

It's a great company which has taught you a lot and given you lots of excellent opportunities. I don't care what you tell your mates, as far as the interviewer is concerned, that's your answer and you're sticking with it.

This reply may understandably be followed with the question, 'Then why do you want to leave your job?' Discussed under 'Most Popular Interview Questions'.

What have you read and enjoyed lately?

Don't make up some fashionable answer here, or name a leading business book you haven't actually read. You may be asked questions about your answer. You don't have to mention the most recent book you've read, so pick one you've genuinely enjoyed that is slightly offbeat - you're not one of the crowd. You might want to choose an unusual classic, an avant-garde title or a biography - pick something that will show a side of you you'd like the interviewer to see.