

Difficult interview questions and how to answer them

This briefing highlights some of the tough questions you might be faced with at interview - and suggests strategies to answer them as persuasively as possible.

Always bear in mind that every interviewer is trying to evaluate you on three key criteria:

- 1. Are you able to do the job?**
- 2. Are you willing to put in the effort to make the job a success?**
- 3. Are you manageable?**

Making the right first impression...

Why do you want to work here?

To answer this question you must have researched the company. Reply with the company's attributes as you see them. Cap your answer with reference to your belief that the company can provide you with a stable and happy work environment - and that such an atmosphere would encourage your best work.

How do you feel about your progress to date?

This question is not geared solely to rate your progress; it also rates your self-esteem. Be positive, yet do not give the impression you have already done your best work. Make the interviewer believe you see each day as an opportunity to learn and contribute, and that you see the environment at this company as conducive to your best efforts.

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. Of course, you will ask what opportunities exist within the company before being more specific.

What are your biggest accomplishments?

Keep your answers job-related. If you exaggerate contributions to major projects, you will be accused of 'coffee machine syndrome'; the affectation of a junior clerk who claimed success for an Apollo space mission based on his relationship with certain scientists - at the coffee machine! You might begin your reply with: *"Although I feel my biggest achievements are still ahead of me, I am proud of my involvement with... ..I made a contribution as part of that team and learned a lot in the process"*.

About you...

Tell me about yourself?

This is not an invitation to ramble on. If the context isn't clear, you need to know more about the question before giving an answer. Whatever direction your answer ultimately takes be sure that it has some relevance to your professional endeavours. You should also refer to one or more of your key personal qualities, such as honesty, integrity, being a team player, or determination. For example, if you choose 'team player', you can tell a story about yourself outside work - perhaps as a member of a sports team - that also speaks volumes about you at work.

How well do others feel about your job performance?

This is one very sound reason to ask for written evaluations of your work before leaving a company. You should also ask for a letter of recommendation whenever you leave a job. Don't thrust these under your interviewer's nose, but when you are asked the question, you can produce them with a flourish. If you don't have written evaluations, try to quote verbal appraisals, such as *"My boss said only a month ago that I was the most valuable engineer in the work group, because..."*.

What is your greatest strength?

Isolate high points from your background and build in a couple of your key personal qualities, such as pride in your work, reliability and the ability to stick with a difficult task, yet change course rapidly when required.

What is your greatest weakness?

This is a direct invitation to put your head in a noose. Decline the invitation. If there is a major part of the job at hand where you lack knowledge - but knowledge you will obviously pick up quickly - use that. For instance: *"I haven't worked with this type of spreadsheet before but, given my experience with six other types, I should pick it up in a few days"*.

Another option is to design the answer so your weakness is ultimately a positive characteristic. For example: *"I always give each project my best shot, so if I sometimes feel others aren't pulling their weight, I find it a little frustrating. 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 and showing how you overcame it.

What are you looking for in your next job?

You want a company where your talents and experience will allow you to contribute to their business. Avoid saying what you want the company to give you; you must say what you can give to your employer. The key word is contribution.

Under the spotlight...

Why do you want to leave your current job? (Or, why did you leave your last job?)

You should have an acceptable reason for leaving every job you have held but if you don't, pick one of the six acceptable reasons from this employment industry CLAMPS formula:

Challenge:	you weren't able to grow professionally.
Location:	the journey to work was unreasonably long.
Advancement:	there was nowhere for you to go.
Money:	you were underpaid for your skills and contribution.
Pride or prestige:	you wanted to be with a better company.
Security:	the company was not stable.

What kind of salary are you worth?

This question is asking you to name a desired figure but the twist is that it also asks you to justify that figure. It requires that you demonstrate careful analysis of your worth, industry norms and job requirements. You are recommended to try for a higher figure rather than a lower one. If their immediate response is to say that's too much, accept it as no more than a negotiating gambit, and come back with your own calm rebuttal: *"What did you have in mind?"*

Do you have any questions?

Almost always, this is a sign the interview is drawing to a close, and that you have one more chance to make a good impression. Remember the adage: people respect what you inspect, not what you expect. 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?
- How many people have held this position in the last couple of years?
- 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 does it typically last for?
- 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?
- Who will be the company's main 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 in the last five years? Is it profitable? How profitable? (you could research this on Companies House website before your interview www.companieshouse.gov.uk)
- If there is a written job description, can you see it?
- How regularly do performance evaluations occur? What models do they follow?