

How to answer 23 of the most common interview questions

By Paul Michael

Let's face it; no one likes the interview process. Well, certainly not the people being interviewed anyway. You have to be on your best behavior, you only get one chance to get it right, and it's like taking your driving test all over again. Over the years I've been to countless interviews. To get my first job out of college I attended some 15-20 interviews a week. Whether it was in Britain or over here in the States, the questions never really seemed to change from job to job. Not only that, but the answers to them are usually the same, with your own personal interpretation of course. Here I present 23 questions you're likely to be asked, and how I have learned to answer them. Why 23? Because I had more than 20 and less than 25. Remember, being interviewed is a skill, and if you do the preparation you should ace it every time.

1. So, tell me a little about yourself.

I'd be very surprised if you haven't been asked this one at every interview. It's probably the most asked question because it sets the stage for the interview and it gets you talking. Be careful not to give the interviewer your life story here. You don't need to explain everything from birth to present day. Relevant facts about education, your career and your current life situation are fine.

2. Why are you looking (or why did you leave you last job)?

This should be a straightforward question to answer, but it can trip you up. Presumably you are looking for a new job (or any job) because you want to advance your career and get a position that allows you to grow as a person and an employee. It's not a good idea to mention money here, it can make you sound mercenary. And if you are in the unfortunate situation of having been down-

sized, stay positive and be as brief as possible about it. If you were fired, you'll need a good explanation. But once again, stay positive.

3. Tell me what you know about this company.

Do your homework before you go to any interview. Whether it's being the VP of marketing or the mailroom clerk, you should know about the company or business you're going to work for. Has this company been in the news lately? Who are the people in the company you should know about? Do the background work, it will make you stand out as someone who comes prepared, and is genuinely interested in the company and the job.

4. Why do you want to work at X Company?

This should be directly related to the last question. Any research you've done on the company should have led you to the conclusion that you'd want to work there. After all, you're at the interview, right? Put some thought into this answer before you have your interview, mention your career goals and highlight forward-thinking goals and career plans.

5. What relevant experience do you have?

Hopefully if you're applying for this position you have bags of related experience, and if that's the case you should mention it all. But if you're switching careers or trying something a little different, your experience may initially not look like it's matching up. That's when you need a little honest creativity to match the experiences required with the ones you have. People skills are people skills after all, you just need to show how customer service skills can apply to internal management positions, and so on.

6. If your previous co-workers were here, what would they say about you?

Ok, this is not the time for full disclosure. If some people from your past are going to say you're a boring A-hole, you don't need to bring that up. Stay positive, always, and maybe have a few specific quotes in mind. "They'd say I was a hard worker" or even better "John Doe has always said I was the most reliable, creative problem-solver he'd ever met."

7. Have you done anything to further your experience?

This could include anything from night classes to hobbies and sports. If it's related, it's worth mentioning. Obviously anything to do with further education is great, but maybe you're spending time on a home improvement project to work on skills such as self-sufficiency, time management and motivation.

8. Where else have you applied?

This is a good way to hint that you're in demand, without sounding like you're whoring yourself all over town. So, be honest and mention a few other companies but don't go into detail. The fact that you're seriously looking and keeping your options open is what the interviewer is driving at.

9. How are you when you're working under pressure?

Once again, there are a few ways to answer this but they should all be positive. You may work well under pressure, you may thrive under pressure, and you may actually PREFER working under pressure. If you say you crumble like aged blue cheese, this is not going to help you get your foot in the door.

10. What motivates you to do a good job?

The answer to this one is not money, even if it is. You should be motivated by life's noble pursuits. You want recognition for a job well done. You want to become better at your job. You want to help others or be a leader in your field.

11. What's your greatest strength?

This is your chance to shine. You're being asked to explain why you are a great employee, so don't hold back and stay do stay positive. You could be someone who thrives under pressure, a great motivator, an amazing problem solver or someone with extraordinary attention to detail. If your greatest strength, however, is to drink anyone under the table or get a top score on Mario Kart, keep it to yourself. The interviewer is looking for work-related strengths.

12. What's your biggest weakness?

If you're completely honest, you may be kicking yourself in the butt. If you say you don't have one, you're obviously lying. This is a horrible question and one that politicians have become masters at answering. They say things like "I'm perhaps too committed to my work and don't spend enough time with my family." Oh, there's a fireable offense. I've even heard "I think I'm too good at my job, it can often make people jealous." Please, let's keep our feet on the ground. If you're asked this question, give a small, work-related flaw that you're working hard to improve. Example: "I've been told I occasionally focus on details and miss the bigger picture, so I've been spending time laying out the complete project every day to see my overall progress."

13. Let's talk about salary. What are you looking for?

Run for cover! This is one tricky game to play in an interview. Even if you know the salary range for the job, if you answer first you're already showing all your cards. You want as much as possible, the employer wants you for as little as you're willing to take.

Before you apply, take a look at salary.com for a good idea of what someone with your specific experience should be paid. You may want to say, “well, that’s something I’ve thought long and hard about and I think someone with my experience should get between X & Y.” Or, you could be sly and say, “right now, I’m more interested in talking more about what the position can offer my career.” That could at least buy you a little time to scope out the situation. But if you do have a specific figure in mind and you are confident that you can get it, I’d say go for it. I have on many occasions, and every time I got very close to that figure (both below and sometimes above).

14. Are you good at working in a team?

Unless you have the I.Q. of a houseplant, you’ll always answer YES to this one. It’s the only answer. How can anyone function inside an organization if they are a loner? You may want to mention what part you like to play in a team though; it’s a great chance to explain that you’re a natural leader.

15. Tell me a suggestion you have made that was implemented.

It’s important here to focus on the word “implemented.” There’s nothing wrong with having a thousand great ideas, but if the only place they live is on your notepad what’s the point? Better still, you need a good ending. If your previous company took your advice and ended up going bankrupt, that’s not such a great example either. Be prepared with a story about an idea of yours that was taken from idea to implementation, and considered successful.

16. Has anything ever irritated you about people you’ve worked with?

Of course, you have a list as long as your arm. But you can’t say that, it shows you as being negative and difficult to work with. The best way to answer this one is to think for a while and then say

something like “I’ve always got on just fine with my co-workers actually.”

17. Is there anyone you just could not work with?

No. Well, unless you’re talking about murderers, racists, rapists, thieves or other dastardly characters, you can work with anyone. Otherwise you could be flagged as someone who’s picky and difficult if you say, “I can’t work with anyone who’s a Bronco’s fan. Sorry.”

18. Tell me about any issues you’ve had with a previous boss.

Arrgh! If you fall for this one you shouldn’t be hired anyway. The interviewer is testing you to see if you’ll speak badly about your previous supervisor. Simply answer this question with extreme tact, diplomacy and if necessary, a big fat loss of memory. In short, you’ve never had any issues.

19. Would you rather work for money or job satisfaction?

It’s not a very fair question is it? We’d all love to get paid a Trump-like salary doing a job we love but that’s rare indeed. It’s fine to say money is important, but remember that NOTHING is more important to you than the job. Otherwise, you’re just someone looking for a bigger paycheck.

20. Would you rather be liked or feared?

I have been asked this a lot, in various incarnations. The first time I just drew a blank and said, “I don’t know.” That went over badly, but it was right at the start of my career when I had little to no experience. Since then I’ve realized that my genuine answer is “Neither, I’d rather be respected.” You don’t want to be feared because fear is no way to motivate a team. You may get the job done but at what cost? Similarly, if you’re everyone’s best friend you’ll find it difficult to make tough decisions or hit deadlines. But when

you're respected, you don't have to be a complete bastard or a lame duck to get the job done.

21. Are you willing to put the interests of X Company ahead of your own?

Again, another nasty question. If you say yes, you're a corporate whore who doesn't care about family. If you say no, you're disloyal to the company. I'm afraid that you'll probably have to say yes to this one though, because you're trying to be the perfect employee at this point, and perfect employees don't cut out early for Jimmy's baseball game.

22. So, explain why I should hire you.

As I'm sure you know, "because I'm great" or "I really need a job" are not good answers here. This is a time to give the employer a laundry list of your greatest talents that just so happen to match the job description. It's also good to avoid taking potshots at other potential candidates here. Focus on yourself and your talents, not other people's flaws.

23. Finally, do you have any questions to ask me?

I'll finish the way I started, with one of the most common questions asked in interviews. This directly relates to the research you've done on the company and also gives you a chance to show how eager and prepared you are. You'll probably want to ask about benefits if they haven't been covered already. A good generic one is "how soon could I start, if I were offered the job of course." You may also ask what you'd be working on. Specifically, in the role you're applying for and how that affects the rest of the company. Always have questions ready, greeting this one with a blank stare is a rotten way to finish your interview. Good luck and happy job hunting.