

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Planning your answers to the most common job interview questions can help you feel more relaxed and confident - even if you can't predict exactly what you'll be asked

Employers need to understand why you want the job, why you're the best person for the role, and how well your personality will fit into the organisation. How you answer interview questions will be the key factor in their decision.

It's not just about the content of your answers - it's about the way you answer them. Confidence and enthusiasm are particularly important. Preparing in advance for some of the questions you expect to come up against will enable you to put in the best performance on the day. Here are some of the job interview questions you're most likely to face...

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

This question, usually the opener, tops the list of typical interview questions. It's incredibly important, as you can provide the interviewer with a great first impression. Preparation is key, but your answer shouldn't sound rehearsed. Focus on your skills, characteristics and successes, and how they make you a strong candidate in terms of the job description.

Keep your answer to less than five minutes. Generally, you should begin with an overview of your highest qualification and greatest achievements, before running through your work experience and giving examples of the skills that you've developed. If your work history is limited, focus on the areas of academia that you've most enjoyed and how this relates to the job.

Why did you choose your degree subject?

The employer wants to learn more about your interests and your motivations. There are no right or wrong answers: if you had a clear career path in mind when you chose your degree that's great - but don't worry if that's not the case.

Explain why you're passionate about the subject, how studying it has led to you to apply for this job, and the relevant transferable skills you've gained. You want to show that you're a good decision-maker, so try not to give the impression that your choice of degree was little more than an accident or that you haven't considered how it relates to the job.

Why do you want to work here?

Demonstrate that you've researched the role by discussing the skills and interests that led you to apply. Draw on what you enjoy - use examples from your academic, professional or extra-curricular life that suggest you're strongly motivated and can relate closely to the organisation. Talk about the particular aspect of the job advertisement that enticed you.

Similar questions include:

- What do you know about the company?
- What motivated you to apply for this job?

What are your strengths?

Pick three or four attributes desired by the employer in the person specification, such as teamwork, leadership, initiative and lateral thinking. Whichever strengths you pick, you must be able to evidence them with examples.

Similar questions include:

- How would a friend describe you?
- How would you describe your personality?
- What are three positive things your last boss would say about you?

What are your weaknesses?

You can positively frame your answer by picking characteristics that you've taken steps to improve. For example, self-confidence issues could have previously led to difficulty accepting criticism - but tell the interviewer that you've learned to embrace constructive feedback as it allows for self-improvement. Alternatively, discuss how you overcame a potential downside of your greatest strength. For example, you might have had to learn how to cope with conflict if you're a great team worker.

Never say that you have no weaknesses, that you're a perfectionist, or that you work too hard. These are clichéd responses that portray you as arrogant, dishonest or lacking in self-awareness.

Similar questions include:

- How do you respond to criticism?
- How would your worst enemy describe you?

How do you prioritise your work?

The employer wants to know whether you're organised, can meet deadlines and are able to handle multiple projects at the same time. The best way to answer this question is to provide examples of times when you've juggled a number of different tasks at the same time and still delivered them to a high quality and on time. These examples can come from previous jobs, university study or your extra-curricular activities. Give some detail about what methods you use to keep track of your progress and productivity.

How would you improve our product/service?

Your knowledge and understanding of what the company does will prove invaluable. Don't be too critical of the product or service - you want to work there

after all - but at the same, don't say you wouldn't change anything. The interviewer wants to hear some ideas.

Try to come up with one or two things that you think could be improved. The key is to offer an explanation of how and why you'd make these changes. Make sure you focus on relevant areas that you would have some responsibility for if you got the job.

Can you give an example of a time when you had to cope with a difficult situation?

This question is one of the most popular competency-based interview questions. It allows the employer to assess how calm and reliable you are under pressure. Outline an instance where you've coped with an unexpected problem, discussing how you reorganised and managed your time. Think about times where you've had to meet tight deadlines or handle difficult people.

Similar questions include:

- Give an example of a time when you had to cope under pressure.
- Give an example of a time when you've handled a major crisis.
- How do you manage your time and prioritise tasks?
- How do you respond to stress and pressure?

What has been your greatest achievement?

Ideally, your answer should evidence skills relevant to the job - such as teamwork, initiative, communication, determination and organisation. For inspiration, think about a time when you've received an award, organised an event, learned something new or overcome a major fear. Always prepare several examples.

Avoid the achievement of graduating from university - this won't distinguish you, unless you've had to deal with major difficulties such as illness or personal problems.

A similar question that you may be asked is 'What are you most proud of in your working life?'

What are your goals?

This is your chance to show the recruiter that you're ambitious and professionally determined. Talk enthusiastically about your realistic short and long-term targets, basing your answers on the employer, the industry and your skills and experiences.

Outline the various steps to your ideal job, but only in relation to the position that you're applying for and the company's career development offering. It's vital that you explain how your goals make you valuable to the organisation. You could

mention your knowledge of relevant professional bodies and qualifications, or reveal that you've researched the career paths followed by other graduates.

A similar question is 'What do you expect to be doing in five years' time?'

What are your salary expectations?

This can be an uncomfortable question to answer, as you don't want to undervalue yourself or give a figure so high that you rule yourself out of the job. If you decide to suggest a range, don't make it too wide as it will appear as though you are avoiding the question. Instead, narrow it down and mention that you're willing to be flexible and negotiate.

To prepare, check whether a salary or salary range is indicated in the job description and take that as your starting point. Then research similar roles to see what the average salary is across the industry or sector you want to work in. Job profiles will give you some examples.

If you're already in work, you may have been asked for your current salary when you applied for the job. Since gradual progression is most common, the employer may be surprised if your expectations are either below or significantly higher than your current salary.

Do you have any questions?

Arriving with no questions will give a bad impression. Anything that you ask should cover the work itself or career development. Prepare questions in advance and remember to ask questions if the moment naturally arises during the actual interview.