

Answering 6 common interview questions

While you'll never be able to anticipate every question you might be asked in an interview, you can get a head start by developing strong, concise answers to commonly used questions. Most interviewers will ask similar questions like these to gain knowledge about a candidate's abilities and qualifications and compatibility with the job and the company.

1. Tell me about yourself: This is often the opening question in an interview. It's also one of the most difficult if you're not prepared. Remember, the interviewer does not want to hear about your hometown or your scrapbooking hobby.

This question calls for your one-minute commercial that summarizes your years of experience and skills and your personality in the context of the job for which you are interviewing. Get to the point and sell your professional self. Develop a few brief sentences that demonstrate you have what it takes to do the job -- experience, proven results and desire to contribute.

2. Why should we hire you?: The key to answering any question about you versus your competition is using specifics.

"Everybody is going to speak in generalities, so you need something that will make you stand out a bit," said Linda, a teacher in Springfield, Ohio. Give real examples that show them you are best-suited for the job. Linda says she would point out her achievements and accomplishments throughout her career that are relevant to the open position, as well as her experiences in dealing with different types of students and teaching situations.

Pinpoint the qualities you have that are truly valuable to the company.

3. Why do you want to work here? What do you know about our company?: Peter, a physician in Indianapolis, said that research is important in answering these questions.

"I would use this opportunity to show off what I know about the company and, more importantly, how I would fit in."

Susan, a vice president of benefits in Chicago, said that she would address issues and challenges in the company to demonstrate the depth of her knowledge.

"I usually talk about revenue, numbers of employees, and also challenges in their type of business and how my experience relates to that," she said. "I would point out things I have done in similar companies that could address their problems."

4. What are your weaknesses?: The secret to answering this question is using your weaknesses to your advantage.

"I would turn my weaknesses into strengths," said Tara, an attorney. "For example, if my weaknesses include my lack of patience I would then state that because of this, I have learned to take special measures to ensure that I remain calm and attentive."

Just make sure that you do give a real answer to this question. None of us is without faults, so don't pretend that you do not have weaknesses.

5. What did you dislike about your last job? Why did you leave your last job?: You need to be cautious about these kinds of questions and make sure you do not end up sounding bitter.

"I would never talk down about my former company, the boss, or my former co-workers," Tara said.

You need to have a good understanding about the job for which you're applying to turn this question into a positive one. It may be best to say that you really enjoyed many aspects of your job, then focus on how this new job will give you the opportunity to contribute more in a particular area that is key to the position.

6. Where do you see yourself in five years?: An interviewer does not want to hear that your five-year aspiration is to be sailing in the Caribbean or working in a different industry. You need to talk about goals you have that relate to the job. This will demonstrate that you understand the industry, the company and are motivated to succeed there. Susan, the director of public relations at a major car rental company, said she would keep her answer specific to her field, such as stating that she sees herself as a vice president of corporate communications.

Preparation is the key to answering any question with poise and confidence. Always keep in mind -- whatever the question is -- that the interviewer is trying to uncover if you are a good fit and can make a positive contribution in the job.