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Google GCA interviews (what to expect & how to prepare)

PRODUCT MANAGEMENT   FEB. 15, 2023

Google GCA interviews (General Cognitive Ability interviews) are difficult to prepare for. The questions are open-ended, and some may seem completely unrelated to the job you've applied for.

We're here to help. We've studied hundreds of real interview questions across 10 roles at Google and used them to put together this guide to Google GCA interviews, including practice questions and a preparation plan.

The first thing that you should know about answering GCA interview questions? Don't rush to find a solution.

Let's get started.

- What is the Google GCA interview?
- Google GCA interview questions
  - Behavioral GCA interview questions
  - Hypothetical GCA interview questions
- How to prepare for a Google GCA interview
  - How to answer behavioral GCA questions
  - How to answer hypothetical GCA questions

1. What is the Google GCA interview?

Before diving into GCA interview questions, let's take a look at what the GCA interview is and how it fits into the larger Google interview process.

1.1 What exactly is Google looking for?

Google evaluates its candidates on four main attributes: Role-Related Knowledge (RRK), General Cognitive Ability (GCA), Leadership, and Googleyness.

Here's an overview of each of these attributes:

1. **Role-related knowledge and experience (RRK).** The company wants to make sure that you have the right experience, domain expertise, and competencies for the position you're applying for. More information in this guide.

2. **General cognitive ability (GCA).** The company wants to hire smart employees who can learn and adapt to new situations. Here your interviewer will try to understand how you solve hard problems and how you learn.

3. **Leadership.** Google looks for a particular type of leadership called "emergent leadership." You'll typically be working in cross-functional teams at Google, and different team members are expected to step up and lead at different times in the lifecycle of a project when their skills are needed.

4. **Googleyness (i.e. culture fit).** The company wants to make sure Google is the right environment for you. Your interviewer will check whether you naturally exhibit the company's values, including: being comfortable with ambiguity, having a bias to action, and a collaborative nature.

These attributes are assessed across the interview process, most notably during the final onsite or virtual loop.

In some cases, candidates' final interviews are explicitly labeled with these attributes (e.g. one GCA interview, two RRK interviews, and one Googliness and Leadership interview).

In other cases, candidates' interviews are labeled by the skills necessary for the position (e.g. two Coding interviews, one System Design interview, and one Leadership interview), in which case the interviewers will include questions that test a combination of these attributes in each round.

Now let's take a closer look at GCA interviews and interview questions.

1.2 The Google GCA interview

Let's get more specific on what exactly to expect in the General Cognitive Ability interview.

Google GCA interviews typically last 45-60 minutes and are run by a hiring manager, a senior employee, or the manager of the team you're applying to join.

Here is how Google describes the GCA interview: "We ask open-ended questions to learn how you approach and solve problems. There's no one right way to answer—your ability to explain your thought process and how you use data to inform decisions is what is the most important."

Here are some important points to take away from this definition:

- Answering "open-ended questions" means you'll have to solve ambiguous problems, which may appear to have nothing to do with the position you've applied for.

- As there is "no one right way to answer," the questions may appear very broad and confusing at first, until you are able to break them down and show your reasoning.

- Interviewers are looking for "your ability to explain your thought process" as well as

"how you use data to inform decisions," so it will be key to walk through your process out loud, and to structure your response within a framework.

The exact questions that interviewers ask in GCA interviews vary by role, but according to Google, there are 2 general types of questions that come up across roles: behavioral and hypothetical. GCA interviews typically include one hypothetical question and one behavioral question, with a series of related follow-up questions.

2. Google GCA Interview questions

Now that we've explored the Google GCA interview and what you can expect, let's get into some example GCA questions that have been asked in past interviews.

As we mentioned before, there are two types of questions that come up in GCA interviews:

- **Behavioral questions**, usually starting with "tell me about a time...", which test your alignment with the role based on examples from your past experience
- **Hypothetical questions**, which explore how you would react to hypothetical scenarios that are likely to come up on the job

We've divided the sample questions below into these two categories. These questions come from real interview reports from past candidates on Glassdoor, as well as from Google and its own recruiters. Note that some questions have been edited for grammar or clarity.

2.1 Google GCA behavioral interview questions

Google asks behavioral questions to get an idea of your past experiences and what you will be like as an employee at Google. You'll notice that in the majority of these questions, Google is looking to understand more about your motivations, and how you've acted to solve ambiguous problems in the past.

These are good questions for you to demonstrate your alignment with Google by showing such qualities as comfort with ambiguity or a bias for action. They want to see that you've learned from past mistakes and that you've done your research on Google itself.

Practice using the questions below.

Example Google GCA interview questions: Behavioral

- Tell me about a time when you led a team.

- Tell me about a time when you communicated effectively.

- Tell me about a time when you failed.

- Tell me about a time when you had to change.

- Tell me about your biggest work achievement.

- Tell me about a time when you created something from nothing.

- Tell me about your favorite Google product.

- Tell me about a challenge or conflict you've faced at your past or current job.

- Tell me about a time when you had to come up with a creative solution to solve a problem.

2.2 Google GCA hypothetical interview questions

Google is looking for candidates that have not only exhibited excellent problem solving in past roles, but who will also be able to adapt to the evolving challenges that will arise in future positions. To test this, interviewers ask hypothetical questions.

In some cases, these questions will appear to have little to do with the job you're applying for (e.g. "how would you open a pastry shop?"). Interviewers ask questions like these to see how you improvise under pressure, and how you would break an unfamiliar problem into actionable steps.

In other cases, the interviewer will present a hypothetical question that is related to your position. This is most common in engineering roles, as many coding and system design questions inherently require problem solving and data-driven reasoning.

So we've divided the GCA hypothetical questions below into a few different categories: general questions that may appear in any Google GCA interview, and hypothetical questions that have been asked in specific technical roles, according to data from Glassdoor.

Example Google GCA interview questions: Hypothetical

General / Non-role specific

- Imagine you are in charge of organizing the grand opening event of a new Google office. How would you plan this event?

- How would you convince a GCP customer to expand their cloud services?

- How would you go about opening a pastry shop?

- How would you measure the effectiveness of our employee referral program?

- There are 2 million businesses on Apps/GSuite. Let's say you were tasked to design and build a customer support operation for our Apps/GSuite customers. How would you proceed?

- If you were the chief traffic officer of New York City and someone asked you to reduce traffic gridlock, how would you solve this?

Software Engineer / Engineering manager

- How would you design a boggle solver?

- How would you design a function that schedules jobs on a rack of machines knowing that each job requires a certain amount of CPU & RAM, and each machine has different amounts of CPU & RAM? Multiple jobs can be scheduled on the same machine as long as it can support it.

Product Manager

- How would you explain the concept of "recursion" to my grandma?

- How much money is spent on gas in the US every year?

Technical Program Manager

- How does the cloud work?

- How would you write a program to select two numbers whose sum is lower than a target number?

Data Scientist

- In what situation would you consider mean over median?

- How would you make an unfair coin fair?

3. How to prepare for Google GCA interviews

Right, now that we've been through the Google GCA sample questions, we'd like to offer some resources to help you prepare.

Here are three steps that you can take to help you prepare for your Google GCA interview.

3.1 Learn about Google's culture

Many candidates fail to do this. But you should take the time to make sure it's actually the right company for you, and to gain insights about the company that will help you during the interview process.

If you know people who work at Google or used to work there, talk to them to understand what the culture is like. In addition, we would recommend reading the following resources:

- Google's mission statement (by Google)

- Google's values (by Google)

- Google strategy teardown (by CBS Insights)

- Google's company blog (by Google)

3.2 Practice by yourself

Once you've got a working knowledge of Google's culture and strategy, it's time to start practicing your answers to the different types of questions that can come up in Google GCA interviews, as well as during the rest of the process.

For more information about the specific interview process for the role that you're applying to, take a look at one of our complete interview guides below.

Note that the guides below categorize the interview questions by question type (e.g. product design, product improvement, strategy) rather than by interview type (e.g. RRK, GCA, etc.). As RRK and GCA interviews contain a mix of question types, we find it useful to investigate each type, as well as how to answer them. You'll learn more about that in the guides below.

- Google product manager

- Google associate product manager

- Google product marketing manager

- Google program manager

- Google technical program manager

- Google software engineer

- Google engineering manager

- Google system design interviews

- Google data scientist

- Google (technical) account manager

- Google machine learning engineer

- Google data engineer

3.2.1 Practice behavioral questions

When answering behavioral questions, you should focus on your most relevant achievements and communicate them in a clear way. An easy way to achieve this is to use a step-by-step method to tell your stories.

So we've developed the IGotAnOffer method to help you add structure and clarity to your answers. Here it is:

1. **Situation:** Start by giving the necessary context of the situation you were in. Describe your role, the team, the organization, the market, etc. You should only give the minimum context needed to understand the problem and the solution in your story. Nothing more.

2. **Problem:** Outline the problem you and your team were facing.

3. **Solution:** Explain the solution you came up with to solve the problem. Step through how you went about implementing your solution, and focus on your contribution over what the team / larger organization did.

4. **Impact:** Summarize the positive results you achieved for your team, department, and organization. As much as possible, quantify the impact.

5. **Lessons:** Conclude with any lessons you might have learned in the process.

Use this method to practice your answers to the questions in section 2.1. For more information about Google behavioral interviews, including more practice questions and a full sample answer, take a look here.

3.2.2 Practice hypothetical questions

As we mentioned in section 2, hypothetical questions in Google GCA interviews may come in the form of a general problem-solving question, or they may include details that are relevant to the job you're applying to.

In both cases, it helps to approach the problem with a structured method. We recommend using the steps that Google lays out in the video below:

- **Take a moment before responding**: Don't rush into your answer. You can ask your interviewer for a few moments to think, or ask them to repeat the question.

- **Ask clarifying questions**: Take the time to extract the relevant information from the interviewer, to pinpoint what steps will be necessary to solve the problem.

- **Share logical assumptions**: As the interviewer will not be giving you all the information needed to answer the question, you'll have to make assumptions to narrow down the problem. Share the assumptions you're making, so that the interviewer can accept, or steer you in a different direction.

- **Show your work**: Communicate your thought process out loud, so that the interviewer can follow along.

- **Consider the pros and cons**: Consider the trade-offs of your solution, and if there is a different way of going about it that may improve the outcome.

- **Think about how you measure success**: Set metrics that measure the success of your solution.

- **Tie it back to the role**: Consider the key outcomes and goals of the role that you're applying for. Explain how your solution to this problem ties in with those goals.

As you practice hypothetical and behavioral questions, ask yourself questions and answer them, as two people would in an interview. This will help you practice your frameworks for hypothetical questions and establish answers to common behavioral questions.

3.3 Do mock interviews

Practicing by yourself will only take you so far. One of the main challenges of GCA interviews is communicating your different answers in a succinct and clear way.

3.3.1 Mock interviews with peers

As a result, we strongly recommend practicing with a peer interviewing you. If possible, a great place to start is to practice with friends. This can be especially helpful if your friend has experience with Google interviews, or is at least familiar with the process.

3.3.2 Mock interviews with real Google ex-interviewers

Finally, you should also try to practice Google mock interviews with expert ex-interviewers, as they'll be able to give you much more accurate feedback than friends and peers.

If you know someone who has experience running interviews at Google or another big tech company, then that's fantastic. But for most of us, it's tough to find the right connections to make this happen.

Here's the good news. We've already made the connections for you. We've created a coaching service where you can practice 1-on-1 with ex-interviewers from Google and other leading tech companies. Learn more and start scheduling sessions today.

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