*6 Interview Questions for Systems Administrators*

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* July 17, 2014
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Leslie Stevens-Huffman is a business and careers writer based in Southern California. She has more than 20 years’ experience in the staffing industry and has been writing blog posts, sample resumes and providing sage career advice to the IT professionals in our Dice Community since 2006. Leslie has a bachelor’s degree in English and Journalism from the University of Southern California.

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The role of the [systems administrator](http://www.dice.com/job/results?caller=searchagain&q=Systems+Administrator&x=all&p=/?icid=dicenews) is strong and the job’s outlook is healthy, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicting growth of about 11.7 percent between 2012 and 2022. That should create approximately 42,900 new positions.

[](http://insights.dice.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Dice_News_Icon_04_250x200_ScreenRes.jpg)What makes one sys admin stand out from others? Curiousity, according to “Ski” Kacoroski, who services more than 3,000 users as assistant systems administrator for the Northshore School District in Bothell, Wash. He also serves as vice president for LOPSA, the[League of Professional Systems Administrators](https://lopsa.org/).

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Curiosity begets in-depth troubleshooting, a deep understanding of [network architecture](http://www.dice.com/job/results?caller=searchagain&q=Network+Architecture&x=all&p=/?icid=dicenews) and proactive problem resolution, he says. “You’ll encounter more problems if you settle for a quick fix like rebooting the server,” Kacoroski explains. “You need curiosity to discover the root cause of problems and optimize network performance by preventing further issues.”

During interviews, Kacoroski asks these questions to identify system admins with deep knowledge of operating systems and inquiring minds.

**What happens when I type this at a shell prompt: “telnet www.wikipedia.org?”**

* **What Most People Say: “**You’ll connect to the Wikipedia server through port 80.”
* **What You Should Say: “**How much time do I have to answer? Fifteen minutes? Great. I’ll walk you through every step and connection in the process.”
* **Why You Should Say It:**A systems administrator must be able to troubleshoot the entire stack because you never know where the source of a problem lies, says Kacoroski. You need to prove that you know where to look for problems to distinguish yourself during an interview.

**A stakeholder gives you a six-hour task that must be completed today. Later, another user gives you a six-hour project with the same deadline. Neither user will budge. What do you do?**

* **What Most People Say: “**I’d prioritize the most high profile project or the request from the well-connected stakeholder.” Or, “I’d stay until I finish both projects.”
* **What You Should Say:** “I’d come up with a few solutions and run them by my manager.”
* **Why You Should Say It:**Systems admins make recommendations, not decisions, notes Kacoroski. Inexperienced professionals don’t understand their role, so they’ll mistakenly try to complete both projects. “Systems administrators don’t understand all the political ramifications, cost constraints or technical challenges that impact decisions,” Kacoroski says. “It’s better to play a supporting role and let your manager make the tough calls.”

**An HTTP monitor says the website is down. You can telnet to the port. What do you do?**

* **What Most People Say:**“I’d check to see if the Web page is up. If it is, I’d assume there was something wrong with the monitor and alert the hardware guys.”
* **What You Should Say:**“If the Web page is up when I telnet to the port, I’d ask how long the monitor has been down. Then, I’d check to see if the outage was due to flapping, a system outage or a system overload that occurred during back-up. I’ll modify the monitor, once I identify the issue. Should I describe my troubleshooting process?”
* **Why You Should Say It:**The best systems admins want to understand why a problem occurred to keep it from cropping up again. Be ready to walk the interviewer through your troubleshooting process even if they ask you to fix a simulated problem on a virtual machine.

**How have you used your knowledge of operating systems to optimize the network?**

* **What Most People Say:**“I’ve connected users to the underlying hardware and used the operating system as a resource manager.”
* **What You Should Say:** “I’ve used an operating systems to track files, manage data input and output on multiple devices and allocate resources such as CPU, RAM, disk, network, video and sound to various processes. Beyond the basics, I’ve used my knowledge of various operating systems to improve system design and architecture and run apps more efficiently. May I share an example?”
* **Why You Should Say It:**Systems admins do more than troubleshoot: They’re responsible for optimizing the processing environment. The more you know about how an operating system works, the better you’ll be at planning and designing a stable and efficient network and ensuring that all components work effectively together.

**Name three characteristics of a systems admin that you possess.**

* **What Most People Say:**“I’m a good communicator with great troubleshooting skills. I can’t think of a third.”
* **What You Should Say:**“I like helping people. I’m curious about how systems work and I’m passionate about fixing things right.”
* **Why You Should Say It:** Understanding the traits that lead to success is critical. Other desirable traits for systems admins include risk aversion, persistence and the ability to get things done.

**What do you do when your initial solution to a problem fails?**

* **What Most People Say:**“I keep trying different things until the problem is fixed.”
* **What You Should Say:** “I always have a Plan B and a Plan C in case my initial solutions fails. Here’s an example.”
* **Why You Should Say It:**Systems admins can’t be afraid to fail, Kacoroski believes. “You always need a back-up plan because the first fix rarely works,” he says. “Top candidates can articulate their problem-solving progression and what they’ve learned from their mistakes.”

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