

While some job interviewers [take a fairly unusual approach to interview questions](#), most job interviews involve an exchange of common [interview questions](#) and answers. (Including some of the [most often-asked behavioral interview questions](#).) Here are some of the most common [interview questions](#), along with the best way to answer them:

## 1. "Tell me a little about yourself."

If you're the interviewer, there's a lot you should already know: The candidate's resume and cover letter should tell you plenty, and LinkedIn and Twitter and Facebook and Google can tell you more.

The goal of an interview is to determine whether the candidate will be outstanding in the job, and that means evaluating the skills and attitude required for that job. Does she need to be an empathetic leader? Ask about that. Does she need to take your company public? Ask about that.

If you're the candidate, talk about why you took certain jobs. Explain why you left. Explain why you chose a certain school. Share why you decided to go to grad school. Discuss why you took a year off to backpack through Europe, and what you got out of the experience.

When you answer this question, connect the dots on your resume so the interviewer understands not just what you've done, but also *why*.

## 2. "What are your biggest weaknesses?"

Every candidate knows how to answer this question: Just pick a theoretical weakness and magically transform that flaw into a strength in disguise!

For example: "My biggest weakness is getting so absorbed in my work that I lose all track of time. Every day I look up and realize everyone has gone home! I know I should be more aware of the clock, but when I love what I'm doing I just can't think of anything else."

So your "biggest weakness" is that you'll put in more hours than everyone else? Great...

A better approach is to choose an actual weakness, but one you're working to improve. Share what you're doing to overcome that weakness. No one is perfect, but showing [you're willing to honestly self-assess and then seek ways to improve](#) comes pretty darned close.

### 3. "What are your biggest strengths?"

I'm not sure why interviewers ask this question; your resume and experience should make your strengths readily apparent.

Even so, if you're asked, provide a sharp, on-point answer. Be clear and precise. If you're a great problem solver, don't just say that: Provide a few examples, pertinent to the opening, that *prove* you're a great problem solver. If you're an emotionally intelligent leader, don't just say that: Provide a few examples that prove [you know how to answer the unasked question](#).

In short, don't just claim to have certain attributes -- *prove* you have those attributes.

### 4. "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Answers to this question go one of two basic ways. Candidates try to show their incredible ambition (because that's what they think you want) by providing an extremely optimistic answer: "I want your job!" Or they try to show their humility (because that's what they think you want) by providing a meek, self-deprecating answer: "There are so many talented people here. I just want to do a great job and see where my talents take me."

In either case you learn nothing, other than possibly how well candidates can sell themselves.

For interviewers, here's a better question: "What business would you love to start?"

That question applies to any organization, because every employee at every company should have an entrepreneurial mind-set.

The business a candidate would love to start tells you about her [hopes and dreams](#), her interests and passions, the work she likes to do, the people she likes to work with ... so just sit back and listen.

## **5. "Out of all the other candidates, why should we hire you?"**

Since a candidate cannot compare himself with people he doesn't know, all he can do is describe his incredible passion and desire and commitment and ... well, basically beg for the job. (Way too many interviewers ask the question and then sit back, arms folded, as if to say, "Go ahead. I'm listening. Try to convince me.")

And you learn nothing of substance.

Here's a better question: "What do you feel I need to know that we haven't discussed?" Or even "If you could get a do-over on one of my questions, how would you answer it now?"

Rarely do candidates come to the end of an interview feeling they've done their best. Maybe the conversation went in an unexpected direction. Maybe the interviewer focused on one aspect of their skills and totally ignored other key attributes. Or maybe candidates started the interview nervous and hesitant, and now wish they could go back and better describe their qualifications and experience.

Plus, think of it this way: Your goal as an interviewer is to learn as much as you possibly can about every candidate, so don't you want to give them the chance to ensure you do?

Just make sure to turn this part of the interview into a conversation, not a soliloquy. Don't just passively listen and then say, "Thanks. We'll be in touch." Ask follow-up questions. Ask for examples.

And of course if you're asked this question ... use it as a chance to highlight things you haven't been able to touch on.

## 6. "How did you learn about the opening?"

Job boards, general postings, online listings, job fairs ... most people find their first few jobs that way, so that's certainly not a red flag.

But a candidate who continues to find each successive job from general postings probably hasn't figured out what he or she wants to do -- and where he or she would like to do it.

He or she is just looking for a job; often, *any* job.

So don't just explain how you heard about the opening. Show that you heard about the job through a colleague, a current employer, by following the company ... show that you know about the job *because you want to work there*.

Employers don't want to hire people who just want a job; they want to hire people who want a job with *their* company.

## 7. "Why do you want *this* job?"

Now go deeper. Don't just talk about why the company would be great to work for; talk about how the position is a perfect fit for what you hope to accomplish, both short-term and long-term.

And if you don't know why the position is a perfect fit ... look somewhere else. Life is too short.

## 8. "What do you consider to be your biggest professional achievement?"

Here's an interview question that definitely requires an answer relevant to the job. If you say your biggest achievement was improving throughput by 18 percent in six months but you're interviewing for a leadership role in human resources ... that answer is interesting but ultimately irrelevant.

Instead, talk about an underperforming employee you "rescued," or how you overcame infighting between departments, or how so many of your direct reports have been promoted....

The goal is to share achievements that let the interviewer imagine you in the position -- and see you succeeding.

## **9. "Tell me about the last time a co-worker or customer got angry with you. What happened?"**

Conflict is inevitable when a company works hard to get things done. Mistakes happen. Sure, strengths come to the fore, but weaknesses also rear their heads. And that's OK. No one is perfect.

But a person who tends to push the blame -- and the responsibility for rectifying the situation -- onto someone else is a candidate to avoid. Hiring managers would much rather choose candidates who focus not on blame but on addressing and fixing the problem.

Every business needs employees who willingly admit when they are wrong, step up to take ownership for fixing the problem, and, most important, learn from the experience.

## **10. "Describe your dream job."**

Three words describe how you should answer this question: relevance, relevance, relevance.

But that doesn't mean you have to make up an answer. You can learn something from every job. You can develop skills in every job. Work backward: Identify things about the job you're interviewing for that will help you if you do land your dream job someday, and then describe how those things apply to what you hope to someday do.

And don't be afraid to admit that you might someday move on, whether to join another company or -- better -- to [start your own business](#). Employers no longer expect "forever" employees.

## 11. "Why do you want to leave your current job?"

Let's start with what you *shouldn't* say (or, if you're the interviewer, what are definite red flags).

Don't talk about how your boss is difficult. Don't talk about how you can't get along with other employees. Don't bad-mouth your company.

Instead, focus on the positives a move will bring. Talk about what you want to achieve. Talk about what you want to learn. Talk about ways you want to grow, about things you want to accomplish; explain how a move will be great for you *and* for your new company.

Complaining about your current employer is a little like people who gossip: If you're willing to speak badly of someone else, you'll probably do the same to me.

## 12. "What kind of work environment do you like best?"

Maybe you love working alone ... but if the job you're interviewing for is in a call center, that answer will do you no good.

So take a step back and think about the job you're applying for and the company's culture (*because every company has one, whether intentional or unintentional*). If a flexible schedule is important to you, but the company doesn't offer one, focus on something else. If you like constant direction and support and the company expects employees to self-manage, focus on something else.

Find ways to highlight how the company's environment will work well for you -- and if you can't find ways, don't take the job, because you'll be miserable.

## 13. "Tell me about the toughest decision you had to make in the last six months."

The goal of this question is to evaluate the candidate's reasoning ability, problem-solving skills, judgment, and possibly even willingness to take intelligent risks.

Having no answer is a definite warning sign. *Everyone* makes tough decisions, regardless of their position. My daughter worked part-time as a server at a local restaurant and made difficult decisions all the time -- like the best way to deal with a regular customer whose behavior constituted borderline harassment.

A good answer proves you can make a difficult analytical or reasoning-based decision -- for example, wading through reams of data to determine the best solution to a problem.

A great answer proves you can make a difficult interpersonal decision, or better yet a difficult data-driven decision that includes interpersonal considerations and ramifications.

Making decisions based on data is important, but almost every decision has an impact on people as well. The best candidates naturally weigh all sides of an issue, not just the business or human side exclusively.

## **14. "What is your leadership style?"**

This is a tough question to answer without dipping into platitudes. Try sharing leadership examples instead. Say, "The best way for me to answer that is to give you a few examples of leadership challenges I've faced," and then share situations where you dealt with a problem, motivated a team, worked through a crisis. Explain *what* you did and that will give the interviewer a great sense of how you lead.

And, of course, it lets you highlight a few of your successes.

## **15. "Tell me about a time you disagreed with a decision. What did you do?"**

No one agrees with every decision. Disagreements are fine; it's what you do when you disagree that matters. (We all know people who love to have the "meeting after the meeting," where they've supported a decision in the meeting but they then go out and undermine it.)

Show that you were professional. Show that you raised your concerns in a productive way. If you have an example that proves you can effect change, great -- and if you don't, show that you can support a decision even though you think it's wrong (as long as it's not unethical, immoral, etc.).

Every company wants employees willing to be honest and forthright, to share concerns and issues ... but to also get behind a decision and support it as if they agreed, even if they didn't.

## **16. "Tell me how you think other people would describe you."**

I hate this question. It's a total throwaway. But I did ask it once, and got an answer I really liked.

"I think people would say that what you see is what you get," the candidate said. "If I say I will do something, I do it. If I say I will help, I help. I'm not sure that everyone likes me, but they all know they can count on what I say and how hard I work."

Can't beat that.

## **17. "What can we expect from you in your first three months?"**

Ideally the answer to this should come from the employer: They should have plans and expectations for you.

But if you're asked, use this general framework:

- You'll work hard to determine how your job creates value -- you won't just stay busy, you'll stay busy doing the right things.
- You'll learn how to serve all your constituents -- your boss, your employees, your peers, your customers, and your suppliers and vendors.
- You'll focus on doing what you do best -- you'll be hired because you bring certain skills, and you'll apply those skills to make things happen.



- You'll make a difference -- with customers, with other employees, to bring enthusiasm and focus and a sense of commitment and teamwork.

Then just layer in specifics that are applicable to you and the job.

## **18. "What do you like to do outside of work?"**

Many companies feel cultural fit is extremely important, and they use outside interests as a way to determine how you will fit into a team.

Even so, don't be tempted to fib and claim to enjoy hobbies you don't. Focus on activities that indicate some sort of growth: skills you're trying to learn, goals you're trying to accomplish. Weave those in with personal details. For example, "I'm raising a family, so a lot of my time is focused on that, but I'm using my commute time to learn Spanish."

## **19. "What was your salary in your last job?"**

This is a tough one. You want to be open and honest, but frankly, some companies ask the question as the opening move in salary negotiations.

Try an approach recommended by Liz Ryan. When asked, say, "I'm focusing on jobs in the \$50K range. Is this position in that range?" (Frankly, you should already know -- but this is a good way to deflect.)

Maybe the interviewer will answer; maybe she won't. If she presses you for an answer, you'll have to decide whether you want to share or demur. Ultimately your answer won't matter too much, because you'll either accept the salary offered or you won't, depending on what you think is fair.

## **20. "A snail is at the bottom of a 30-foot well. Each day he climbs up three feet, but at night he slips back two feet. How many days will it take him to climb out of the well?"**

Questions like these have become a lot more popular (thanks, Google) in recent years. The interviewer isn't necessarily looking for the right answer but instead a little insight into your reasoning abilities.

All you can do is talk through your logic as you try to solve the problem. Don't be afraid to laugh at yourself if you get it wrong -- sometimes the interviewer is merely trying to assess how you deal with failure.

## **21. "What questions do you have for me?"**

Don't waste this opportunity. Ask smart questions, not just as a way to show you're a great candidate but also to see if the company is a good fit for you -- after all, you're being interviewed, but you're also interviewing the company.

Here goes:

## **22. "What do you expect me to accomplish in the first 90 days?"**

If you weren't asked this question, ask it yourself. Why? Great candidates want to hit the ground running. They don't want to spend weeks or months "getting to know the organization." They don't want to spend huge chunks of time in orientation, in training, or in the futile pursuit of getting their feet wet.

They want to make a difference -- and they want to make that difference *right now*.

## **23. "If you were to rank them, what are the three traits your top performers have in common?"**

Great candidates also want to be great employees. They know every organization is different -- and so are the key qualities of top performers in those organizations. Maybe your top performers work longer hours. Maybe creativity is more important than methodology. Maybe constantly landing new customers in new markets is more important than building long-term customer relationships. Maybe the key is a willingness

to spend the same amount of time educating an entry-level customer as helping an enthusiast who wants high-end equipment.

Great candidates want to know, because (1) they want to know if they will fit in, and (2) if they do fit in, they want to know how they can be a top performer.

## **24. "What *really* drives results in this job?"**

Employees are investments, and you expect every employee to generate a positive return on his or her salary. (Otherwise why do you have them on the payroll?)

In every job some activities make a bigger difference than others. You need your HR team to fill job openings, but what you really want is for them to find the right candidates, because that results in higher retention rates, lower training costs, and better overall productivity.

You need your service techs to perform effective repairs, but what you really want is for those techs to identify ways to solve problems and provide other benefits -- in short, to build customer relationships and even generate additional sales.

Great candidates want to know what truly makes a difference and drives results, because they know helping the company succeed means they will succeed as well.

## **25. "What are the company's highest-priority goals this year, and how would my role contribute?"**

Is the job the candidate will fill important? Does that job *matter*?

Great candidates want a job with meaning, with a larger purpose -- and they want to work with people who approach their jobs the same way.

Otherwise a job is just a job.

## **26. "What percentage of employees was brought in by current employees?"**

Employees who love their jobs naturally recommend their company to their friends and peers. The same is true for people in leadership positions -- people naturally try to bring on board talented people they previously worked with. They've built relationships, developed trust, and shown a level of competence that made someone go out of their way to follow them to a new organization.

And all of that speaks incredibly well to the quality of the workplace and the culture.

## **27. "What do you plan to do if...?"**

Every business faces a major challenge: technological changes, competitors entering the market, shifting economic trends. There's rarely one of Warren Buffett's moats protecting a small business.

So while some candidates may see your company as a stepping-stone, they still hope for growth and advancement. If they do eventually leave, they want it to be on their terms, not because you were forced out of business.

Say I'm interviewing for a position at your ski shop. Another store is opening less than a mile away: How do you plan to deal with the competition? Or you run a poultry farm (a huge industry in my area): What will you do to deal with rising feed costs?

Great candidates don't just want to know what you think; they want to know what you plan to do -- and how they will fit into those plans.