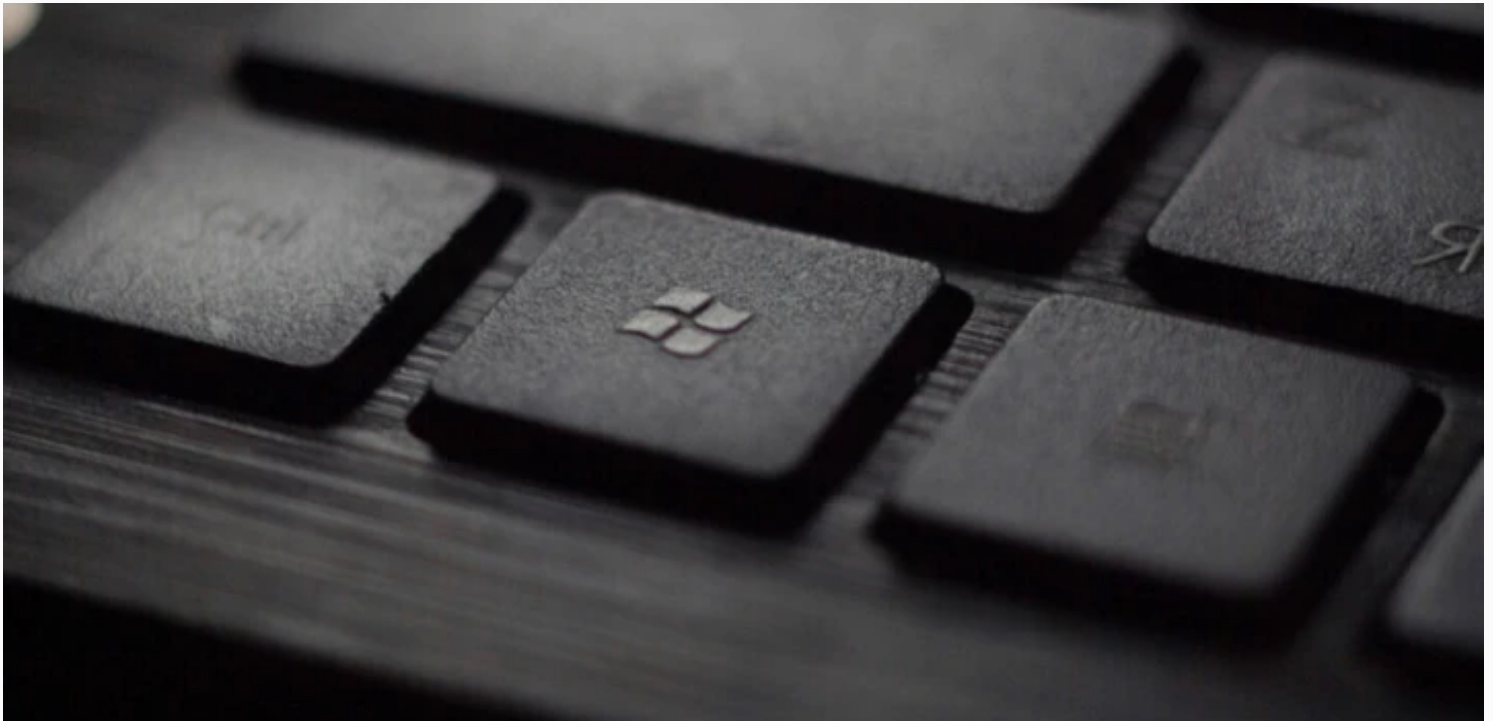


Microsoft PM interview: the only post you'll need to read

COMPANY GUIDES

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PM interviews are really challenging. The questions are difficult, specific to Microsoft, and cover a wide range of topics.

The good news is that the right preparation can make a big difference and help you land a PM job at Microsoft. We have put together the ultimate guide below to help you maximize your chances of success.

Note that at Microsoft PMs are referred to as Program Managers and usually have more responsibilities in execution and delivery than Product Managers at other companies such as Google or Facebook.

Here's an overview of what we will cover:

- [Process and timeline](#)
- [Example questions](#)

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1. Interview process and timeline ↑



What's the Microsoft PM interview process and timeline? On average it takes four to eight weeks to get an offer, but it can sometimes take longer.

The Microsoft PM interview steps:

1. [Resume](#), [cover letter](#), and referrals

4. Hiring committee review
5. You get an offer!

1.1 What interviews to expect

First, it's important that you understand the different stages of your interview process with Microsoft. Here is what you can expect:

- Resume and cover letter screening / employee referral
- Phone screen: one interview
- On-site: four to five interviews

In most cases, the Microsoft interview process starts with an HR recruiter call. The objective of this conversation is to understand more about your background and to confirm that you've got a chance of getting the job at all. You can expect behavioral questions such as, "Tell me about yourself," "[Why Microsoft?](#)" or, "Tell me about a product or feature you launched from start to finish." And you should also be prepared for a couple questions around general product thinking like, "What's your favorite Microsoft product and how would you improve it?"

If you get past this HR screen the recruiter will then organize on-site interviews. You'll typically spend a full day at one of Microsoft's offices and participate in four to five interviews. Each interview will last about 45 to 60mins and be a one-on-one with a mix of other folks from the PM team. In most cases you will be interviewed by your future PM peers, a senior PM, and a senior executive who is likely the hiring manager leading your recruitment. You can expect a lot of behavioral questions (more on that below), but there will be plenty of technical, design, strategy, estimation, analysis, and puzzle questions as well.

1.2 What happens behind the scenes

Your recruiter is leading the process and taking you from one stage to the next. Here's what happens at each of the stages described above:

- After the phone screen, your recruiter decides to move you to the on-site interviews or not, depending on how well you've done in relation to the criteria provided to them by the hiring manager.

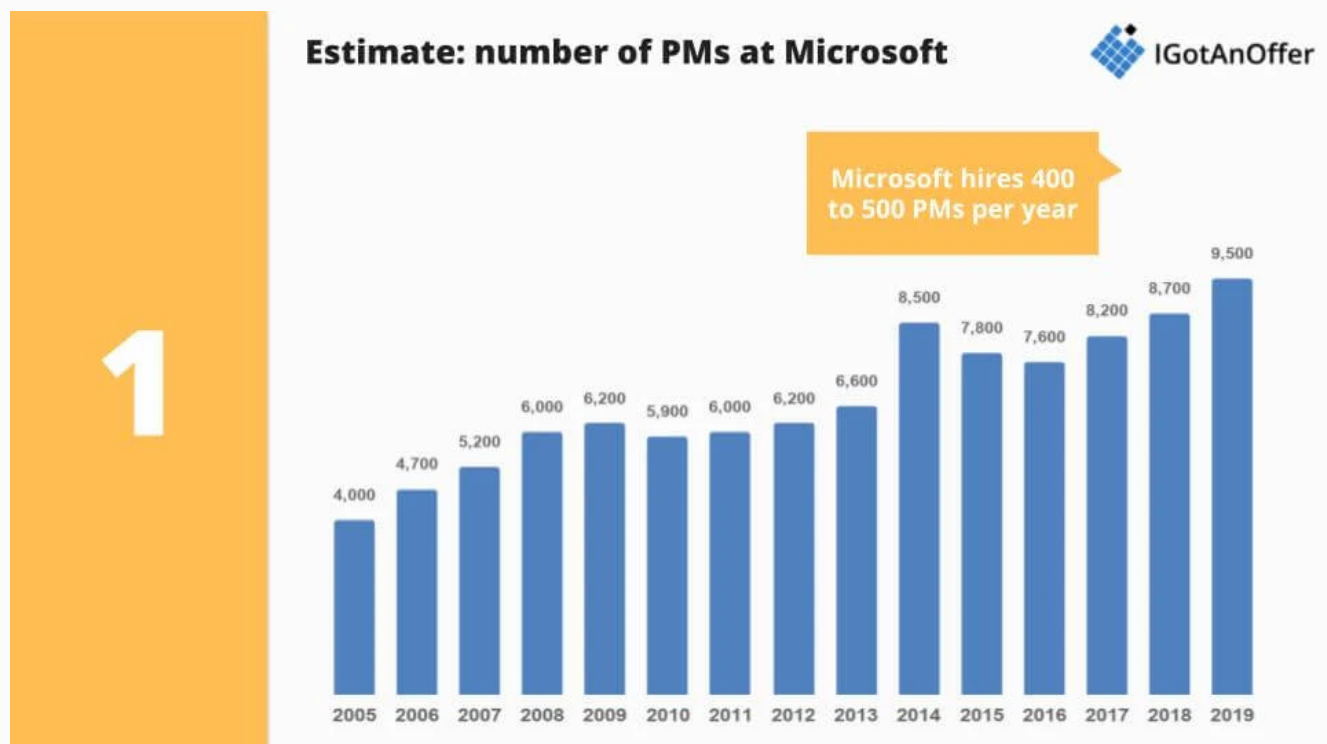
- If recommended by the majority, at the end of the day you'll be invited to what Microsoft commonly calls the "as appropriate" interview (given it is only scheduled if you have enough positive recommendations at that point). This interview is an opportunity to ask intelligent questions about the organization and show off your passion for Microsoft, the department, and the industry.
- If the majority of all interviewers recommend you, the hiring team will make you an offer usually within a week.

It's also important to note that recruiters and people who refer you have little influence on the overall process. They can help you get an interview at the beginning but that's about it.

1.3 How many PMs does Microsoft hire every year?

At this point you might be wondering what your chances are. The good news is that Microsoft hires an increasing number of engineers and PMs every year.

Using the number of employees listed in Microsoft's annual reports, data available from LinkedIn, and industry averages, we estimate that the number of PMs at Microsoft grew from about 4,000 to 9,000 between 2005 and 2019. At the time of writing this article, Microsoft hires about 400 to 500 new PMs per year.



Microsoft needs more and more PMs every year which might lead you to believe that getting hired isn't that hard. But this actually isn't the case. Microsoft received [2m applications in 2018](#) across all its departments but only ended up hiring [7k employees in the same year](#). The success rate is therefore 0.35% and the company is one of the toughest employers to break into in the world.

The good news is that cracking PM interviews is actually really manageable once you know how to prepare. So, let's take a look at the different types of questions Microsoft will ask you.

2. Example questions ↑

The main difficulty with PM interviews at Microsoft is that you will be asked a wide range of questions. We've grouped them in five buckets and analyzed how frequently they were asked by Microsoft interviewers using questions reported by former candidates on Glassdoor.com.



Here are the results of our analysis:

1. Behavioral questions (34%)
2. Design questions (21%)

5. Other questions (10%)

Let's step through each type of question, discuss why Microsoft asks these questions, and take a look at a few examples in each category.

2.1 Behavioral questions (34%)

As in most interview processes you'll need to answer behavioral interview questions. Microsoft places a heavy emphasis in this area, and the questions asked tend to fall into three categories:

- your motivation to work at Microsoft and as a PM
- your past experiences
- your understanding of what good PMs do and don't do

These questions aren't particularly hard compared to some of the others listed in this article and are sometimes overlooked by candidates. It's worth spending time to prepare answers for them to build a small edge against other applicants.

For more information, check out our article on how to answer [behavioral interview questions](#) and the "Why Microsoft?" question.

Example behavioral questions asked by Microsoft

- Tell me about yourself
- Why Microsoft?
- Why Program Management?
- What's your favorite Microsoft product, and how would you improve it?
- Why do you want this job and what can you bring that we don't already have?
- Tell me about a time when you faced conflict within a team, and how you dealt with it
- Tell me about a product you lead from idea to launch
- How do you get people to agree with your point of view?
- How do you know what your customers want?
- Explain the PM position to someone that doesn't get it

2.2 Design questions (21%)

A core task for PMs is to help design new product features and improve existing ones. It's therefore not surprising that design questions are a part of Microsoft PM interviews.

These questions assess your customer empathy, creativity, and ability to use a structured approach to design products. Here are a few questions Microsoft has asked in the past. For more information check out our articles on how to answer [product design questions](#), [product improvement questions](#) and the [favorite product question](#) in PM interviews.

Example product design questions asked by Microsoft

- Design an elevator system
- How would you design an alarm clock for the blind?
- Design a 3 button remote for a television
- Design a kitchen
- Thinking of a product you've started using a lot lately and considering how to improve the user experience, draw out a new UI/UX
- Design the UI/UX for Disney's new streaming platform
- Design the most engaging user interface for a music app that you can think of

Exercise: Pick one of the questions above and answer it in the comment section below without looking at other people's answers. Our team will get back to you with suggestions on how to improve your answer.

2.3 Technical questions (21%)

Microsoft expects a fair amount of technical knowledge from candidates. Microsoft PMs tend to be more technical than average, usually having a degree in computer science or significant previous experience with software and engineering.

As a consequence, you'll typically need to answer a few technical questions during your interview process. As you can see below these questions are not a test of coding expertise in a particular language. They are centered on whether or not you understand

questions.

Example technical questions asked by Microsoft

- How would you explain Cloud to your grandmother?
- What is the runtime of merge sort, and why?
- What is the difference between C++ and Java?
- Given an infinite list, how would you find and then remove the second to last element in the list?
- Explain the concept of big O notation
- Design a method that removes every other node from a linked list
- How does the internet work?

Exercise: Pick one of the questions above and answer it in the comment section below without looking at other people's answers. Our team will get back to you with suggestions on how to improve your answer.

2.4 Strategy questions (14%)

PMs are responsible for setting the product vision and roadmap to deliver it. In other words, they're in charge of product strategy.

In your interviews you'll therefore be given strategic questions to discuss with your interviewer. These questions assess if you're comfortable thinking about the wide range of aspects good PMs need to take into account when making product decisions. This includes competition, pricing, marketing, time to market, etc.

Thinking through all these aspects requires creativity and a structured approach. For more information, check out our article on [how to answer strategy interview questions](#).

Example strategy questions asked by Microsoft

- Imagine you're a PM at a startup that works with big data. Now what?
- If you were a PM on Microsoft Surface and Delta asked you to design the perfect airline entertainment system, what would you do? Walk through your thoughts and pitch it.

- You are king of an island. You want to switch which side of the road everyone is driving on. How do you go about doing it?

Exercise: Pick one of the questions above and answer it in the comment section below without looking at other people's answers. Our team will get back to you with suggestions on how to improve your answer.

2.5 Other questions (10%)

Good PMs are critical thinkers and can make confident and swift decisions. Making these decisions often requires analytical and estimation skills which Microsoft will test you on in the recruiting process.

- **Analysis questions:** These questions test how well you work with available data. A good PM can identify the correct KPIs for a product and use them to deliver results.
- **Estimation questions:** In estimation questions, interviewers don't care so much about whether you get to the right answer or not. What they are really interested in is how you think through the problem and how comfortable you are making assumptions and simple calculations.
- **Puzzles questions:** Microsoft interviewers also like to ask puzzle questions. They are testing your general knowledge of math and scientific concepts, as well as your ability to deal with seemingly impossible problems by thinking "outside the box."

For more information, check out our articles on how to answer [metric questions](#) and [estimation questions](#) in PM interviews.

Example other questions asked by Microsoft

Analysis questions:

- How would you track user engagement in an app and what KPIs would you use to improve it?
- What metrics would you use to measure success for Microsoft Outlook?

Estimation questions:

- How much money do Americans spend on cat food every year?
- How would you go about estimating the number of gas stations in the USA?

scales only twice?

- A windowless room has three identical light bulbs connected to one of three switches outside the room. The door is closed and all bulbs are switched off. Before opening the door you can flip the switches as much as you want but once you open the door, you may no longer touch the switches. How can you tell which switch goes to which light?

Exercise: Pick one of the questions above and answer it in the comment section below without looking at other people's answers. Our team will get back to you with suggestions on how to improve your answer.

3. Preparation tips ↑

Now that you know what questions to expect, let's focus on how to prepare. Here are the five most important things you can do to get an offer as a Microsoft program manager.

3.1 Deep dive into the product / organization

As you've probably figured out from the example questions listed above, you can't become a PM at Microsoft without being familiar with the company's products and its organization. You'll therefore need to do some homework before your interviews.

Here are some resources to help you get started with this:

- [Microsoft annual report](#) (by Microsoft)
- [Microsoft strategy teardown](#) (by CB Insights)
- [Microsoft vision and mission analysis](#) (by Panmore Institute)

3.2 Brush up on product fundamentals

If you're already an experienced PM then this step doesn't apply to you. But if you're more junior or if you're trying to break into product management then it's worth spending some time refreshing your memory about basic product management concepts.

Here is a list of free resources to give you a starting point:

- [Product Management Guides](#) (by Aha.io)
- [Product Design](#) (by Udacity)
- [What distinguishes the top 1% of product managers from the top 10%?](#) (by Ian McAllister on quora)
- [Product vs. Feature Teams](#) (by Silicon Valley Product Group)
- [What's something product managers know that others don't?](#) (by Dan Schmidt on quora)
- [Product Requirements Document Example](#) (by Product Hunt)
- [Data-Driven Product Management: Choosing the Right Metrics for Your Product](#) (by productcoalition.com)
- [How Should Product Managers Say No?](#) (by productcoalition.com)

3.3 Learn a consistent method for answering PM interview questions

As mentioned previously, Microsoft will ask you questions that fall into certain categories: design, strategy, estimation, behavioral, technical, and data analysis. Approaching each question with a predefined method will enable you to build strong interview habits.

Then, when it comes time for your interviews, these habits will reduce your stress and help you to make a great impression. Here is a list of our free guides on different types of PM interview questions to help you prepare:

- [Behavioral questions](#)
- [Product design questions](#)
- [Product improvement questions](#)
- [Favorite product question](#)
- [Strategy questions](#)
- [Metric questions](#)
- [Technical questions](#)
- [Estimation questions](#)
- [Prioritization questions](#) (by Product Manager HQ)

conditions. That's where practice comes into play.

3.4 Practice by yourself or with peers

In our experience, practicing by yourself is a great way to prepare for PM interviews. You can ask and answer questions out loud, to help you get a feel for the different types of PM interview questions. Practicing by yourself will help you perfect your step-by-step approach for each question type. It also gives you time to correct your early mistakes.

If you have friends or peers who can do mock interviews with you, that's a great option too. This can be especially helpful if your friend has experience with PM interviews, or is at least familiar with the process. You can also find peers to practice with on websites like Pramp.

3.5 Practice with experienced PM interviewers

Finally, you should also try to practice with experienced PM interviewers as they'll be able to give you much more accurate feedback than friends and peers. If you know a PM who can help you, that's fantastic! But for most of us, it's tough to find the right connections to make this happen. And it might also be difficult to practice multiple hours with that person unless you know them really well.

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 leading tech companies like Microsoft. [Learn more and start scheduling sessions today.](#)

PM Interview Coaching



Any questions about Microsoft PM interviews?

If you have any questions about Microsoft PM interviews, do not hesitate to ask them below and we will be more than happy to answer them. All questions are good questions, so go ahead!

Keep reading: [product manager interview articles](#)

