


14 tips that are designed to help you succeed in interviews

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Savvy hiring managers have honed their ability to ask the least amount of questions yielding the greatest depth of information. One way they do this is by asking seemingly simple questions that get you to reveal information you may have been trying to conceal. In other words: questions designed to trick you.

"To uncover areas that may reflect inconsistencies, hiring managers sometimes ask these tricky questions," says Tina Nicolai, executive career coach and founder of Resume Writers' Ink.

Lynn Taylor, a national workplace expert and the author of "Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant: How to Manage Childish Boss Behavior and Thrive in Your Job," says they use these queries to break through the "traditional interview noise and clutter," and to get to the "raw you."

"While some of these questions may seem as if they're designed to put you on the defensive, the intent is usually to evaluate candidate responses on multiple levels - not just at face value," Taylor explains.

"Hiring managers can discern a great deal about job seekers with thought provoking, challenging questions. If they cross the line by being too tricky, unfair, or irrelevant, they can easily lose excellent talent."

1) How would you describe yourself in one word?

Why do they ask this? The question is likely being asked to elicit several data points: your personality type, how confident you are in your self perception, and whether your work style is a good fit for the job, Taylor explains.

What makes it tricky? This question can be a challenge, particularly early on in the interview, because you don't really know what personality type the manager is seeking. "There is a fine line between sounding self-

congratulatory versus confident, and humble versus timid," Taylor says. "And people are multifaceted, so putting a short label on oneself can seem nearly impossible."

What response are they looking for? Proceed cautiously, warns Taylor. "If you know you are reliable and dedicated, but love the fact that your friends praise your clever humor, stick with the conservative route." If you are applying for an accounting job, the one word descriptor should not be "creative," and if its an art director position, you don't want it to be, "punctual," for example. "Most employers today are seeking team players that are levelheaded under pressure, upbeat, honest, reliable, and dedicated. However, it would be a mistake to rattle off adjectives that you think will be well received. This is your opportunity to describe how your best attributes are a great match for the job as you see it."

2) How does this position compare to others you are applying for?

Why do they ask this? They are basically asking: "Are you applying for other jobs?" "The hiring manager is first trying to figure out how active you are in your job search," Nicolai says. Then, once you open up, they want to see how to speak about other companies or positions you are interested in — and how honest you are.

What makes it tricky? If you say, "This is the only job I'm applying for," that'll send up a red flag. Very few job applicants only apply to the one single job — so they may assume you are being dishonest. However, if you openly speak about other positions you are pursuing, and you speak favourably about them, the hiring manager may worry that you'll end up taking another job elsewhere, and they won't want to waste their time. "Speaking negatively about other jobs or employers isn't good either," she says.

What response are they looking for? It is appropriate to say, "There are several organizations with whom I am interviewing, however, I not yet decided the best fit for my next career move." "This is positive and

protects the competitors," says Nicolai. "No reason to pit companies or to brag."

3) Can you name three of your strengths and weaknesses?

Why do they ask this? The interviewer is looking for red flags and deal breakers, such as inability to work well with coworkers and/or an inability to meet deadlines. "Each job has its unique requirements, so your answers should showcase applicable strengths, and your weaknesses should have a silver lining," Taylor says. "At the very least, you should indicate that negative attributes have diminished because of positive actions you have taken."

What makes it tricky? You can sabotage yourself addressing either. Exposing your weaknesses can hurt you if not ultimately turned into positives, she says. "Your strengths may not align with the skill set or work style required for the job. It's best to prepare for this question in advance, or risk landing in a minefield."

What response are they looking for? Hiring managers want to know that your strengths will be a direct asset to the new position and none of your weaknesses would hurt your ability to perform. "They are also looking for your ability to self assess with maturity and confidence," says Taylor.

4) Why do you want to work here?

Why do they ask this? Interviewers ask this because they want to know what drives you the most, how well you researched them, and how much you want the job.

What makes it tricky? "Clearly you want to work for the firm for several reasons," Taylor says. "But just how you prioritize them reveals a lot about what is important to you." You may be thinking to yourself, "I'm not getting paid what I'm worth," or, "I have a terrible boss," or, "All things

being equal, this commute is incredibly short" — none of which endears you to the hiring manager. "You are also being tested on your level of interest for the job," she says.

What response are they looking for? Hiring managers want to see that you have taken the time to research the company and understand the industry.

They also want to know that you actually want this job (and not just any job); that you have a can-do attitude; that you are high energy; that you can make a significant contribution; that you understand their mission and goals; and that you want to be part of that mission.

5) Why do you want to leave your current job?

Why do they ask this? "Your prospective boss is looking for patterns or anything negative, especially if your positions are many and short-term," Taylor explains. They may try to determine if you currently have or had issues working with others leading to termination, if you get bored quickly in a job, or other red flags.

What makes it tricky? No one likes talking about a job they dislike and why. If not answered diplomatically, your answer could raise further questions and doubts, or sink your chances entirely.

What response are they looking for? They are hoping that you are seeking a more challenging position that is a better fit for your current skill set. "Know that hiring managers don't mind hearing that you are particularly excited about the growth opportunity at their company."

6) What are you most proud of in your career?

Why do they ask this? Interviewers ask this because they want to understand what you are passionate about, what you feel you excel at, and whether you take pride in your work. "How you describe your favourite project, for example, is almost as important as the project

itself," Taylor says. "It's assumed that if you can speak with conviction and pride about your past work, you can do the same during important presentations at the new employer."

What makes it tricky? Managers may assume that this type of work is what you really want to do most or focus on in the future. It can make you sound one-dimensional if you don't put it in the context of a larger range of skills and interests.

What response are they looking for? Hiring managers want to see your ability to articulate well, foster enthusiasm in others, and your positive energy. "But one note of caution: In all your zeal to share your successes, remain concise," Taylor suggests. "You want to showcase your ability to present well once on the job."

7) What kind of boss and coworkers have you had the most and least success with, and why?

Why do they ask this? Interviewers are trying to ascertain if you generally have conflicts with people and/or personality types. "Secondarily, they want to know how you can work at your best," says Taylor.

What makes it tricky? You run the risk of appearing difficult by admitting to unsuccessful interactions with others, unless you keep emotions out of it. You may also inadvertently describe some of the attributes of your prospective boss. If you say, "I had a boss who held so many meetings that it was hard to get my work done," and your interviewer turns beet red — you might have hit a nerve.

What response are they looking for? "They want to hear more good than bad news," Taylor explains. "It's always best to start out with the positive and downplay the negatives." You don't want to be evasive, but this is not the time to outline all your personality shortcomings either. Here you have an opportunity to speak generally about traits that you admire in others, yet appear flexible enough to work with a variety of personality types. For example: "I think I work well with a wide gamut of

personalities. Some of my most successful relationships have been where both people communicated very well and set mutual expectations upfront."

8) Have you ever considered being an entrepreneur?

Why do they ask this? The interviewer is testing to see if you still have the hidden desire to run your own company, thus abandoning ship, Taylor says. "No firm wants to sense this, as they will begin to ponder whether their valuable training time and money could vanish."

What makes it tricky? Most everyone has considered being an entrepreneur at some point in their lives, but to varying degrees. This question is tricky because you can unwittingly be lured into talking about your one-time desire to be your own boss with too much perceived enthusiasm. An employer may fear that you still hope to eventually go out on your own, and they'll consider you a flight risk.

What response are they looking for? It's okay to tell a prospective manager that you once considered entrepreneurship or have worked as an independent contractor. It can easily be turned into a positive by stating that you already experienced it or thought about it, and it's not for you. That might be more convincing than saying, "No, I never considered that."

This is an opportunity to discuss why working in a corporate environment as part of a team is most fulfilling to you. You may also enjoy the specialized work in your field more than the operational, financial, or administrative aspects of entrepreneurship. You can further allay their fears by explaining exactly why their company appeals to you.

9) If you could work for any company, where would you work?

Why do they ask this? Hiring managers want to ascertain how serious you are about working for them in particular, versus the competition, as well as your level of loyalty, Taylor says. "It also helps them weed out candidates who may veer from the core career. You may have heard that

is a great place to work, but that off-road strategy would spell doom, as you have been given the opportunity to theoretically work at your dream job. The interviewer isn't making conversation here, so stay focused on the job at hand."

What makes it tricky? You might get caught up in the casual flow of the discussion and inadvertently leak out some well-respected firms, but this is counterproductive and only instills some doubt about your objectives.

What are they seeking? "Your interviewer wants to know that you are interviewing at your first company of choice." A response to this might be, "Actually, I have been heavily researching target firms, and [your company] seems like the ideal fit for my credentials. It's exciting to me that [your company] is doing XYZ in the industry, for example, and I'd like to contribute my part."

10) What would you do if you won \$5 million tomorrow?

Why do they ask this? They want to know whether you'd still work if you didn't need the money. Your response to this question tells the employer about your motivation and work ethic. They may also want to know what you'd spend the money on, or whether you'd invest it. This tells them how responsible you are with your money, and how mature you are as a person.

What makes it tricky? Questions that are out of left field can ambush you, causing you to lose composure. "They have nothing to do with the job at hand, and you may wonder if there is any significance to them," Taylor says. "Whether there is or not, the fact remains that you can easily lose your cool if you don't pause and gather your thoughts before you respond to a question like this."

What response are they looking for? They want to hear that you'd continue working because you are passionate about what you do — and they want to know you'd make smart financial decisions. If you'd do something irresponsible with your own money, they'll worry you'll be careless with theirs.

11) Have you ever been asked to compromise your integrity by your supervisor or colleague? Tell us about it.

Why do they ask this? Your prospective boss is evaluating your moral compass. They want to know how you handled a delicate situation that put your integrity to the test, Taylor explains. "They may also dig too deeply to test your level of discretion." Essentially they want to know: Did you use diplomacy? Did you publicly blow the whistle? Did a backlash ensue? What was your thought process?

What makes it tricky? Interviewers want to know how you manage sensitive matters, and are also wary of those who badmouth former employers, no matter how serious the misdeed. "They will be concerned if you share too much proprietary information with the interviewer," she says. "So it is tricky because you must carefully choose your words, using the utmost diplomacy."

What response are they looking for? It's wise to be clear, concise, and professional in your answer, without revealing any internal practices of prior employers. "You have nothing to gain by divulging private corporation information."

Something like this might work: "There was one time where a fellow worker asked me to get involved in a project that seemed unethical, but the problem resolved itself. I try to be as honest as possible early on if a project creates concern for me about the company, as I'm very dedicated to its success."

12) Can you give us a reason someone may not like working with you?

Why do they ask this? Prospective bosses want to know if there are any glaring personality issues, and what better way than to go direct to the source? "They figure that the worst that can happen is you will lie, and they may feel they are still adept at detecting mistruths," Taylor explains. "The negative tone of the question is bound to test the mettle of even the most seasoned business professionals."

What makes it tricky? You can easily shoot yourself in the foot with this question. If you flip and say, "I can think of a reason anyone wouldn't like working with me," you are subtly insulting the interviewer by trivializing the question. So you have to frame the question in a way that gets at the intent without being self-effacing. "Hiring managers are not seeking job candidates who have self-pity," she says.

What response are they looking for? You don't want to say, "Well I'm not always the easiest person to be around, particularly when under deadlines. I sometimes lose my temper too easily." You might as well pack up and look for the nearest exit. "Conversely, you can lead with the positive and go from there: Generally I have been fortunate to have great relationships at all my jobs. The only times I have been disliked — and it was temporary — was when I needed to challenge my staff to perform better. Sometimes I feel we must make unpopular decisions that are for the larger good of the company," Taylor suggests.

13) Why have you been out of work for so long?

Why do they ask this? "Interviewers are sceptical by design," Taylor says. "Sometimes you are guilty until proven innocent — until all the perceived skeletons in the closet have been removed." This is a daunting question in particular because it can seem offensive. The implication is that you might not be motivated enough to secure a job; you are being distracted by other pursuits; your skills set may not be up to date; there is an issue with your past employers, or a host of other concerns.

What makes it tricky? The way its worded is naturally designed to test your resilience. The key is not to take the bait and just answer the intent of the question in a calm, factual manner.

What response are they looking for? The hiring manager wants to be assured that you possess initiative even when unemployed, as this drive and tenacity will translate well in a corporate setting. Sample responses: "I have been interviewing steadily, but want to find the ideal fit before I jump in and give my typical 110%," or, "I'm active in my job search, and I

keep my skills current through [courses, volunteering, social media, business networking groups]." "If you took off time to take care of a personal matter, you can certainly state that without giving a lot of detail," Taylor says.

Make sure you are accountable. Don't blame the unemployment rate, your market, industry, or anything else. This is about how active and excited you are to be making a contribution to the employer.

14) How did you make time for this interview? Where does your boss think you are right now?

Why do they ask this? Hiring managers want to find out if your priorities are in the right place: current job first, interviews second. "They know that the habits you follow now speak to your integrity and how you will treat your job at their company should you undertake a future job search," says Taylor. "They also want to know how you handle awkward situations where you cannot be truthful to your boss. Ideally your interview is during a break that is your time, which is important to point out."

What makes it tricky? The implication is, "How is it searching for a job behind your bosses back?" For most employed job seekers, it's uncomfortable to lie about their whereabouts. So they are vague and treat it like any other personal matter they handle on their time.

What response are they looking for? It's wise to explain that you always put your job first, and schedule interviews before or after work, at lunchtime, during weekends if appropriate, and during personal time off. If asked pointedly, "Where does your boss think you are right now?" be vague. Don't say: "I took a sick day." Instead, Taylor suggests you try something like: "My boss understands that I have certain break periods and personal time — he doesn't ask for details. He's most interested in my results."

