

60 TOUGHEST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & RECOMMENDED ANSWERS

— Sangeeta Tyagi

If you were to search “sample interview questions and answers” on the Internet, you would get over six million results. That’s six million different opinions about what the most common interview questions are and how to answer them. That’s a lot to absorb. So where do you turn and which are correct? Truth be told, it’s difficult to say and it will vary by person and by interview. However, you can certainly prepare for the interview by looking at the most common type of questions that come up and writing down your potential answers so that you can be prepared.

Using our experience and additional research, we’ve compiled a list of 60 tough interview questions that could come up in your interview. We have added ideas suggesting the interviewers’ issues, and then your best answers for each question. These, of course, are general questions. You will likely get some specific to the industry, occupation and position for which you are applying.

Question 1: Tell me about yourself.

TRAPS: Beware, about 80% of all interviews begin with this “innocent” question. Many candidates, unprepared for the question, skewer themselves by rambling, recapping their life stories, delving into ancient work history or personal matters. (Note: Do NOT ask “What would you like to know?” Take the initiative, interpret the question for yourself, and go forth.)

BEST ANSWER: Start with the present and tell why you are well qualified for the position – and if you wish to add more, mention personal traits you want them to know about (professional, detail-oriented, strong verbal and written skills, get along w/ co-workers well, etc. etc.). Remember, the key to all successful interviewing is to match your qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. In other words you must sell what the buyer is buying. This is the single most important strategy in job hunting, and interviewing.

Question 2: What are your greatest strengths?

TRAPS: This question seems like a softball lob, but be prepared. You don’t want to come across as egotistical or arrogant. Neither is this a time to be humble.

BEST ANSWER: Prior to any interview, you should have a mentally-prepared list of your greatest strengths. You should also have a specific example or two illustrating each strength, chosen from your most recent and impressive achievements. Have this list of your greatest strengths and corresponding examples from your achievements so well-committed to memory that you can recite them cold after being shaken awake at 2:30 AM. This is a chance to brag, so make the list as numerous as you’re comfortable with.

Question 3: What are your greatest weaknesses?

TRAPS: Beware - this is an eliminator question, designed to shorten the candidate list. Any admission of a weakness or fault could earn you an "A" for honesty, but an "F" for the interview.

PASSABLE ANSWER: Disguise a strength as a weakness.

Example:

"I sometimes push my people too hard. I like to work with a sense of urgency and everyone is not always on the same wavelength."

Drawback: This strategy is better than admitting a flaw, but it's so widely used, it is transparent to any experienced interviewer; also, it sounds like working with you is probably difficult.

BEST ANSWER: While acknowledging you're flawed, as we all are, assure the interviewer that you can think of nothing that stands out as a weakness where THIS job is concerned.

Example:

"I believe we all have weaknesses – I have some, and most likely you have as well – but based on what you've told me about this position, I believe I'd make an outstanding match, and see no significant weakness where this work is concerned."

Question 4: Tell me about the greatest mistake you ever made in your life.

TRAPS: Some interviewers ask this question on the chance you'll admit to something major and disqualifying, but if not, at least they'll see how you think on your feet. Some unprepared candidates, flustered by this question, unburden themselves of guilt from their personal life or career, perhaps expressing regrets regarding a parent, spouse, child, etc. All such answers can be disastrous.

BEST ANSWER: As with faults and weaknesses, never confess a major blunder. However, don't seem as if you're stonewalling either. Best strategy: Pause for reflection, as if the question never occurred to you. Then say, "You know, I've made my share of mistakes in life, but really can't think of anything I'd call the 'greatest.'" (Pause again, then): "I would add that as a general principle, I've found that the best way to avoid regrets is to prevent mistakes in the first place. In being detail-oriented, I try to cross all t's, dot all i's; and manage financial matters diligently; and in my relations with people, if misunderstandings or difficulties arise, I try to speak directly with those involved to head off any chance of festering or lingering issues."

Question 5: Why are you leaving (or did you leave) this most recent position?

TRAPS: Never badmouth your previous industry, company, board, boss, staff, employees or customers. This rule is set in stone: never be negative. Any mud you hurl will backfire. Especially avoid words like "personality clash", "didn't get along", or others which can cast you in a bad (or discontented) light.

BEST ANSWER:

If you currently have a job: If you're not yet 100% committed to leaving your present post, don't be afraid to say so. Since you have a job, you are in a stronger position than someone who does not. But don't be coy either. State honestly what you'd be hoping to find in a new spot.

If you do not have a job: If you were fired or quit under bad circumstances, rehearse your response to this question well beforehand. Choices include: a) the whole truth, even if it hurts, - candidly, succinctly and without a trace of bitterness - from the company's point of view, indicating that you can understand why it happened, and might have made the same decision yourself; or b) some version thereof, depending on the circumstances. Recognize that in some cases, the prospective employer can learn the true details, or some of

them, by checking. If your firing was the result of a takeover, merger, division wide layoff, etc., that can help. Decide how you wish to proceed.

For all prior positions: Make sure you've prepared a brief reason for leaving. Best reasons: more money, opportunity, responsibility, growth, or geography (too-lengthy commute).

Question 6: Why should I hire you?

TRAPS: Believe it or not, this is a killer question because so many candidates are unprepared for it. If you stammer or ad-lib, you've blown it.

BEST ANSWER: Whether your interviewers ask you this question explicitly or not, this is the most important question of your interview, because they must answer this question favorably in their own minds before you will be hired. So help them out! Walk through each of the position's primary requirements as you understand them, and follow each with a reason why you meet that requirement so well.

Examples:

"As I understand your needs, you are first and foremost looking for someone who can manage the sales and marketing of your book publishing division. As you've said, you need someone with a strong background in trade book sales. This is where I've spent almost all my career, so I've chalked up 18 years of experience exactly in this area. I believe that I know the right contacts, methods, principles, and successful management techniques as well as any person can in our industry."

"You also need someone who can expand your book distribution channels. In my prior post, my innovative promotional ideas doubled, then tripled the number of outlets selling our books. I'm confident I can do the same for you."

"You need someone to give a new shot in the arm to your mail order sales, someone who knows how to sell in space and direct mail media. Here, too, I believe I have exactly the experience you need. In the last five years, I've increased our mail order book sales from \$600,000 to \$2,800,000, and now we're the country's second leading marketer of scientific and medical books by mail." Etc., etc., etc.

Every one of these selling "couplets" (their need matched by your qualifications) is a touchdown that runs up your score. It is your best opportunity to outsell your competition.

Question 7: Aren't you overqualified for this position?

TRAPS: The employer may be concerned that you'll grow dissatisfied and leave.

BEST ANSWER: As with any objection, don't view this as a sign of imminent defeat. It's an opportunity to rearrange the interviewer's thinking about this situation, seeing advantages instead of drawbacks.

Examples:

"I believe that there could be very positive benefits for both of us in this match."

"Because of my unusually strong experience in _____, I could start to contribute right away, perhaps much faster than someone who'd have to be brought along more slowly."

"I bring the value of all the training and years of experience that other companies have invested in my employment. With me, you'll receive all that value at no cost or training effort; with someone who has yet to acquire that experience, he'd have to gain it on your nickel."

"I can help your business in many areas, including... (how to hire, train, motivate, etc.) When it comes to knowing how to work well with people and getting the most out of them, there's just no substitute for what I've learned over many years of front-line experience."

"Although my past job titles have included more responsibility and salary than the one you have available, this position is the role I love best, and in which I find the greatest satisfaction. I'll be happy doing this work, and that's what matters most to me, far more than money or title."

"Most important, I'm looking to make a long term commitment in my career now. I've had enough of jobhunting and want a permanent spot at this point. I also know that if I perform this job with excellence, other opportunities cannot help but open up for me right here. In time, I'll find many other ways to help this company and in so doing, help myself. The long-term commitment is the key element."

NOTE: The main concern behind the "overqualified" question is that you will leave your new employer as soon as something better comes your way. Anything you can say to demonstrate the sincerity of your commitment to the employer and reassure him that you're looking to stay for the long-term will help you overcome this objection.

Question 8: Where do you see yourself five years from now?

TRAPS: One reason interviewers ask this question is to see if you're settling for this position, and using it merely as a stopover until something better comes along. Or they could be trying to gauge your level of ambition. If you're too specific, i.e., naming the promotions you someday hope to win, you'll sound presumptuous. If you're too vague, you'll seem unfocused.

BEST ANSWER: Here again, assure your interviewer that you're looking to make a long-term commitment...that this position entails exactly what you're looking to do, and what you do extremely well. As for your future, you believe that if you perform each job at hand with excellence, future opportunities will take care of themselves.

Example:

"I am intensely interested in making a long-term commitment to my next opportunity. Judging by what you've told me about this position, it's exactly what I'm looking for and what I am very well qualified to do. In terms of my future career path, I'm confident that if I do my work with excellence, opportunities will inevitably open up for me. It's always been that way in my career, and I'm confident I'll have similar opportunities here."

NOTE: This question can also be a probe for learning of "older" workers' intentions to retire in the near future; if you are within range of retirement age, it is wise to assure the interviewer that you expect to remain with the employer for an indefinite period of time, and certainly for five years, if both parties are happy.

Question 9: Describe your ideal company, location and job.

TRAPS: This is often asked by experienced interviewers who view you as possibly overqualified, but know better than to show their hands by posing a concern directly - so they'll use this question instead, which can often get a candidate to reveal that indeed, he or she is looking for something other than the position at hand.

BEST ANSWER: The only right answer is to describe a very close version of what this company is offering, being sure to make your answer believable with specific reasons, stated with sincerity, why each quality represented by this opportunity is attractive to you.

NOTE: Remember that if you're coming from a company that's the leader in its field, or from a glamorous or much admired company, industry, city or position, your interviewer and his company may well have a

"lessthan" complex. That is, they may feel a bit defensive about being "second best" to the place you've left, worried that you may consider them a lesser light.

This anxiety could well be there even though you've done nothing to inspire it. You must go out of your way to soothe such anxiety, even if it's not expressed, by putting their virtues high on the list of exactly what you're looking for, providing credible reasons for seeking this opportunity.

If you do not express genuine enthusiasm for the firm, its culture, location, industry, etc., you may fail to answer this self-esteem issue and, as a result, leave the interviewer suspecting that a hot shot like you, coming from a Fortune 500 company in New York, just wouldn't be happy at an unknown manufacturer based in Podunk City.

Question 10: Why do you want to work at our company?

TRAPS: This question tests whether you've done any homework about the firm. If you haven't, you lose. If you have, you win big.

BEST ANSWER: This question is your opportunity to hit the ball out of the park, thanks to the in-depth research you should do before any interview. Best sources for researching your target company: annual reports, the corporate newsletter, contacts you know at the company or its suppliers, advertisements, articles about the company in the trade press, and (absolutely) any company website.

Question 11: What are your career options right now?

TRAPS: The interviewer is trying to find out, "How desperate are you?"

BEST ANSWER: Prepare for this question by thinking of how you can position yourself as a desired commodity. If you are still working, describe the possibilities at your present firm and why, though you're greatly appreciated there, you're looking for something more (challenge, money, responsibility, etc.). Also mention that you're seriously exploring opportunities with one or two other firms.

If you're not working, you can talk about other employment possibilities you're actually exploring. But do this with a light and confident touch, speaking only in general terms. You don't want to seem controlling and coy – or desperate.

Question 12: Why have you been out of work so long?

TRAPS: A tough question if you've been on the sidelines a long time. You don't want to seem like "damaged goods."

BEST ANSWER: You want to emphasize factors which have prolonged your job search by your own choice.

Examples:

"After my job was terminated, I made a conscious decision not to jump on the first opportunity to come along. I decided to take time to think through what I do best, what I most want to do, where I'd like to do it...and then identify those companies that could offer such an opportunity."

"The recession (consolidation, stabilization, etc.) in the (banking, financial services, manufacturing, advertising, etc.) industry had a powerful ripple effect on people in my previous position."

"Between my being selective and the companies in our industry downsizing, the process has taken time. But in the end, I'm convinced that when I do find the right match, all that careful evaluation will have been well worthwhile, both for the company that hires me and myself."

“I’d had a lengthy period of very consistent hard work, and felt ready for a breather, so I _____ (spent time with family, traveled, built an in-law unit behind the house, etc.) before commencing an active job search.”

Question 13: Tell me honestly about the strong points and weak points of your (former or present) boss (company, management team, etc.).

TRAPS: Skillful interviewers sometimes make it almost irresistible to open up and air a little dirty laundry from your previous position. DON’T bite!

BEST ANSWER: Remember the rule: Never be negative. Stress only the good points, no matter how charmingly you’re invited to be critical. The interviewer doesn’t care a whit about your previous boss. He wants to find out how loyal and positive you are, and whether you’ll criticize co-workers and supervisors if invited to do so by someone in your new workplace. This question is your opportunity to demonstrate your loyalty to those with whom you work.

Question 14: What good books have you read lately?

TRAPS: As in all matters of your interview, never fake familiarity you don’t have. Yet you don’t want to seem like a dim bulb who hasn’t read a book since high school English.

BEST ANSWER: Unless you’re up for a position in academia or as book critic for *The New York Times*, you’re not expected to be a literary lion. But it wouldn’t hurt to have read a handful of any recent and influential books in your profession and/or on management. Consider it part of the work of your job search to read up on a few of these, but make sure they are quality books that reflect favorably upon you, nothing far out of date or considered within the field to be unworthy. Finally, add a recently published bestselling work of fiction by a world-class author and you’ll pass this question with flying colors.

Question 15: Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized.

TRAPS: This is a tough question because it’s a more clever and subtle way to get you to admit to a weakness or past mistake. You can’t dodge it by pretending you’ve never been criticized; we all have. Yet it can be damaging to admit potential faults and failures that you’d just as soon leave buried. This question is also intended to probe how well you accept criticism and direction.

BEST ANSWERS: Begin by emphasizing the extremely positive feedback you’ve gotten throughout your career and (if it’s true) that your performance reviews have been uniformly excellent.

Mention that of course, no one is perfect, and you always welcome suggestions on improving your performance. Then, give an example of a not-too-damaging learning experience from early in your career and relate the ways this lesson has since helped you. This demonstrates that you learned from the experience, and the lesson is now one of your strongest assets.

If you are pressed for a recent criticism, choose something fairly trivial that in no way is essential to your successful performance. Add that you’ve learned from this, too, and over the past several years/months, it’s no longer an area of concern because you now make it a regular practice to...etc.

Another way to answer this question would be to describe your intention to broaden your mastery of an area of growing importance in your field. For example, this might be a computer program you’ve been meaning to sit down and learn... a new management technique you’ve read about...or perhaps attending a seminar on some cutting-edge branch of your profession. Again, the key is to focus on something not essential to your brilliant performance and usual excellence, but which adds yet another dimension to your already solid knowledge base.

Question 16: What are your outside interests?

TRAPS: This question is usually about balance and quality of life: you want to be well-rounded, not a complete workaholic. But your potential employer could also be concerned that a heavy extracurricular load will interfere with your commitment to work duties.

BEST ANSWERS: Try to gauge how this company's culture would look upon your favorite outside activities and be guided accordingly. (Probably best to avoid sky diving, bungee jumping, and motocross, for example.)

You can also use this question to shatter any stereotypes that could limit your chances. If you're over 50, for example, describe pursuits that enhance physical health. If younger, mention an activity that connotes wisdom and institutional trust (serving on the board of a popular charity).

But above all, remember that your employer is hiring you based on what you can do for the company, not your family, yourself or outside organizations, no matter how admirable those activities may be.

Question 17: How do you feel about reporting to a younger person (minority, woman, etc)?

TRAPS: It's a shame that some interviewers feel the need to ask this question, but many understand the reality that prejudices still exist among some job candidates, and it's better to try to flush them out beforehand; it could also reflect the fact that the company harbors some prejudicial attitudes of a particular nature.

The trap here is that in today's politically sensitized environment, even a well-intentioned answer can result in planting your foot neatly in your mouth. Avoid anything that smacks of a patronizing or an insensitive attitude, such as "I think they make terrific bosses" or "Hey, some of my best friends are..."

Of course, since almost anyone with an IQ above room temperature will be trying to steadfastly affirm the right answer here, your interviewer will first be judging your sincerity. You must make your answer believable and not just automatic. If the firm is wise enough to have promoted people on the basis of ability alone, they're likely quite proud of it, and prefer to hire others who will wholeheartedly share their strong sense of fair play.

BEST ANSWER: You greatly admire a company that hires and promotes on merit, and you couldn't agree more with that philosophy. The age (gender, race, etc.) of the person you report to would certainly make no difference to you.

Question 18: On confidential matters...

TRAPS: When an interviewer presses you to reveal confidential information about a present or former employer, you may feel it's a no-win situation. If you cooperate, you could be judged untrustworthy. If you don't, you may irritate the interviewer and seem obstinate, uncooperative or overly suspicious.

BEST ANSWER: Your interviewer may press you for this information for two reasons.

First, many companies use interviews to research the competition. It's a perfect set-up. Here, in their own lair, is an insider from the enemy camp who can reveal prized information on the competition's plans, research, financial condition, etc.

Second, the company may be testing your integrity to see if you can be cajoled or bullied into revealing confidential data. What to do? The answer here is easy. Never reveal anything truly confidential about a present or former employer. By all means, explain your discomfort diplomatically. For example, "I certainly want to be as open as I can about that. But I also wish to respect the rights of those who have trusted me with their most

sensitive information, just as you would hope to be able to trust any of your key people when talking with a competitor..."

And certainly you can allude to your finest achievements in specific ways that don't reveal the combination to the company safe.

But be guided by the golden rule. If you were the owner of your present company, would you feel it ethically wrong for the information to be given to your competitors? If so, steadfastly refuse to reveal it.

Remember that this question pits your desire to be cooperative against your integrity. Faced with any such choice, always choose integrity. It is a far more valuable commodity than whatever information the company may pry from you. Moreover, once you surrender the information, your stock goes down. They will surely lose respect for you.

Occasionally an interviewer will press candidates unmercifully for confidential information. If he doesn't get it, he grows visibly annoyed, relentlessly inquisitive, yet it's all an act. He couldn't care less about the information. This is his way of testing the candidate's moral fiber. Only those who hold fast are hired.

Question 19: Looking back, what would you do differently in your life?

TRAPS: This question is another usually asked to uncover any life-influencing mistakes, regrets, disappointments or problems that may continue to affect your personality and performance.

You do not want to give the interviewer anything negative to remember you by, such as some great personal or career disappointment, even long ago, that you wish could have been avoided.

Nor do you wish to give any answer which may hint that your whole heart and soul will not be in your work. However, if there was a crossroads moment in life that you can use here without fear of a negative result, go ahead and use it – just think carefully beforehand.

BEST ANSWER: Indicate that you are a person who sees the bright side of just about everything, and that in general, you wouldn't change a thing.

Question 20: Could you have done better in your last job?

TRAPS: This is no time for true confessions of major or even minor problems.

BEST ANSWER: Again, never be negative.

Example:

"I suppose with the benefit of hindsight you can always find things that could have been made better, but off the top of my head, I can't think of anything of major consequence."

NOTE: Another possibility is to describe a situation for which you were not directly responsible, but which created difficulties that were unfortunate. It could be a team-related misfortune.

For example, describe the disappointment you felt with a test campaign, new product launch, merger, etc., which looked promising at first, but led to underwhelming results. "I wish we could have known at the start what we later found out (about the economy turning, the marketplace changing, etc.), but since we couldn't, we just had to go for it. And we did learn from it..."

Question 21: Can you work under pressure?

TRAPS: An easy question, but you want to make your answer believable. Have a success-oriented anecdote prepared.

BEST ANSWER: Absolutely! (...and then prove it with a vivid example or two of a goal or project accomplished under severe pressure.)

Question 22: Who has inspired you in your life and why?

TRAPS: The two traps here are unpreparedness and irrelevance. If you grope for an answer, it seems you've never been inspired. If you ramble about your high school basketball coach, you've wasted an opportunity to present qualities of great value to the company.

BEST ANSWER: Have a few heroes in mind, from your mental "Board of Directors" - Leaders in your industry, from history, or anyone who has been your mentor – work-related when possible.

Be prepared to give examples of how their words, actions or teachings have helped inspire your achievements. As always, prepare an answer which highlights qualities that would be highly valuable in the position you are seeking.

Question 23: What was the toughest decision you ever had to make?

TRAPS: Giving an unprepared or irrelevant answer.

BEST ANSWER: Be prepared with a good example, explaining why the decision was difficult...the process you followed in reaching it...the courageous or effective way you carried it out...and the beneficial results. (And again: work-related is best.)

Question 24: Tell me about the most boring job you've ever had.

TRAPS: You give a very memorable description of a very boring job. Result? You become associated with this boring job in the interviewer's mind.

BEST ANSWER: You have never allowed yourself to grow bored with a job, because there's always a way to keep it interesting, including taking on tasks to help others when your work is finished.

Example:

"Perhaps I've been fortunate, but I've never found myself bored with any job I've ever held. I've always enjoyed hard work. As with actors who feel there are no small parts, I also believe that in every company or department there are exciting challenges and intriguing problems needful of energetic and enthusiastic solutions – one just has to look for them."

Question 25: Have you been absent from work more than a few days in any previous position?

TRAPS: If you've had a problem, lying could result in the interviewer discovering the truth; you could be found out. Yet admitting an attendance problem could raise many flags.

BEST ANSWER: If you have had no problem, emphasize your excellent and consistent attendance record throughout your career. Also describe how important you believe such consistent attendance is for a key employee...why you feel an obligation to set an example ...and why there's just no substitute for being there with your people to keep the operation running smoothly.

If you do have a past attendance problem, you want to minimize it, making it clear that it was an exceptional circumstance and that its cause has been corrected.

To do this, give the same answer as above but preface it with something like, "Other than being out last year (or whenever) because of (your reason, which is now in the past), I have never had a problem and have enjoyed an excellent attendance record throughout my career. Furthermore, I believe, consistent attendance is important because..." (Pick up the rest of the answer as outlined above.).

Question 26: What changes would you expect to make if you came on board?

TRAPS: Watch out! This question can derail your candidacy just as you are about to be hired.

Reason: No matter how bright you are, you cannot know the right actions to take in a position before you settle in and get to know the operation's strengths, weaknesses, key people, financial condition, methods of operation, etc. If you lunge at this temptingly baited question, you will probably be seen as someone who shoots from the hip.

Moreover, no matter how comfortable you may feel with your interviewer, you are still an outsider. No one, including your interviewer, likes to think that a know-it-all outsider is going to come in, turn the place upside down and with sweeping, grand gestures, promptly demonstrate what jerks everybody's been for years.

BEST ANSWER: You, of course, will want to take a good hard look at everything the company is doing before making any recommendations.

Examples:

"Well, I wouldn't be a very good doctor if I gave my diagnosis before the examination. Should you hire me, as I hope you will, I'd want to take a close look at everything you're doing and understand the process. I'd like to have in-depth meetings with you and the other key people to get a firm grasp of what you feel is working well, and what could be improved."

"From what you've told me so far, the areas of greatest concern to you are..." (name them. Then do two things. First, ask if these are in fact the major concerns. If so, then reaffirm how your experience in meeting similar needs elsewhere might prove very helpful).

NOTE: This kind of question can be related to 30-60-90 day planning; if appropriate, share your first-three-month concept after deciding how best to create such plans.

Question 27: I'm concerned that you don't have ... ("x" college degree/ "x" certification or licensure/ as much experience as we'd like in "x" area....)

TRAPS: This could be a make-or-break question. The interviewer is mostly pleased, but has doubts over one area or qualification lacking. If you can be reassuring on this point, the job may be yours.

BEST STRATEGY: Before going into any interview, identify the weakest aspects and/or missing qualifications from this company's point of view. Then prepare the best approach possible to shore up your defenses. To get past this question with flying colors, you are going to emphasize your experience and strong qualifications, and while being honest about the missing piece(s), emphasize how this will not diminish your status as the best candidate for the job.

More specifically, when the interviewer poses as objection like this, you should... 1.

Agree on the importance of this missing qualification.

2. Explain that your overall strength may indeed be greater than your resume indicates because (mention something additional not emphasized in the resume, if it's there...)

3. Assert that it's really your combination of strengths and qualifications that's most important.

Then review the areas of your greatest strengths that match up most favorably with the company's most urgently-felt wants and needs.

NOTE: This is a powerful way to handle this question for two reasons. First, you're validating (and not avoiding) your interviewer's area of concern. But more importantly, you're then shifting the focus away from this one isolated area and putting it on the unique combination of strengths you offer, strengths which tie in perfectly with the employer's greatest needs.

Question 28: How do you feel about working nights and weekends?

TRAPS: Blurt out "no way, Jose" and you can kiss the job offer goodbye. But what if you have a family and want to work a reasonably normal schedule? Is there a way to get both the job and the schedule you want?

BEST ANSWER: First, if you're a confirmed workaholic, this question is a softball lob. Whack it out of the park on the first swing by saying this kind of schedule is just your style. Add that your family understands it. Indeed, they're happy for you, as they know you get great satisfaction from your work, which nurtures the family in an important way.

If however, you prefer a more balanced lifestyle, answer this question with another: "What's the norm for your best people here?"

If the hours still sound unrealistic for you, ask, "Do you have any top people who perform exceptionally for you, but who also have families and like to get home in time to see them at night?" Chances are this company does, and this associates you with this other "top-performers-who-leave-not-later-than-six" group.

Depending on the answer, be honest about how you would fit into the picture. If all those extra hours make you uncomfortable, say so, but phrase your response positively.

Example:

"I love my work and do it exceptionally well. I think the results speak for themselves, especially in...(mention your two or three qualifications of greatest interest to the employer. Remember, this is what he wants most, not a workaholic with weak credentials). Not only do I bring these qualities, but I've built my whole career on working not just hard, but smart. I think you'll find me one of the most productive people here. I do have a family who enjoy seeing me after work and on weekends. They add balance and richness to my life, which in turn helps me be happy and productive at work. If I could handle some of the extra work at home in the evenings or on weekends, that would be ideal. You'd be getting a person of exceptional productivity who meets your needs with strong credentials. And I'd be able to handle some of the heavy workload at home, allowing the family to see me a bit more. Everybody would win."

Question 29: Are you willing to relocate or travel?

TRAPS: Answer with a flat "no" and you may slam the door shut on this opportunity. But what if you'd really prefer not to relocate or travel, yet wouldn't want to lose the job offer over it?

BEST ANSWER: First find out where you may have to relocate and how much travel may be involved. Then respond to the question. If there's no problem, say so enthusiastically.

If you do have a reservation, there are two schools of thought on how to handle it.

One advises you to keep your options open and your reservations to yourself in the early going, by saying, "no problem." Your strategy here is to get the best offer you can, then make a judgment whether it's worth it to you to relocate or travel. Also, by the time the offer comes through, you may have other offers and can make a more informed decision. Why kill off this opportunity before it has chance to blossom into something really special? And if you remain unemployed months from now, you might wish you hadn't slammed the door on relocating or traveling.

The second way to handle this question is to voice a reservation, but assert that you'd be open to relocating (or traveling) for the right opportunity. The goal here is to maximize the financial and benefit offer details, figuring that if you must relocate or travel, they will have to ante up significantly to get you.

The answering strategy you choose depends on how eager you are for the job. If you want to leave no opening for moving and travel, choose the first approach. If you want to play a little harder-to-get in hopes of generating a more enticing offer, choose the second.

Question 30: Do you have the stomach to fire people? Have you had experience firing people when necessary?

TRAPS: This "innocent" question could be a trap door which sends you down a chute and lands you in a heap of dust outside the front door. Why? Because its real intent is not just to see if you've got the stomach to fire, but also to uncover poor judgment in hiring which has caused you to fire a number of folks. Also, if you fire so often, you could be a tyrant. So don't rise to the bait by boasting how many you've fired, unless you've prepared to explain why it was beyond your control, and not the result of your poor hiring procedures or foul temperament.

BEST ANSWER: Describe the rational and sensible management process you follow in both hiring and firing.

Example:

"My entire management approach is to hire the best people I can find, train them thoroughly and well, fire up their excitement and pride in being part of our team, and then work with them to achieve our goals together. If all that is accomplished, especially choosing the right people, I've found you don't have to fire very often.

"So with me, firing is a last resort. But when it's got to be done, it's got to be done, and the faster and cleaner, the better. A poor employee can wreak terrible damage in undermining the morale of an entire team of good people. When there's no other way, I've found it's better for all concerned to act decisively in severing relationships that aren't working out."

Question 31: Why have you had so many jobs?

TRAPS: Your interviewer fears you may leave this position quickly, as you have others. He's concerned you may be unstable, or a "problem person" who has had trouble succeeding with others in past jobs.

BEST ANSWER: First, before you even get to the interview stage, you should try to minimize your image as a job hopper. If there are several entries on your resume of less than one year, consider eliminating the least important ones. Perhaps you can specify the time you spent at previous positions in rounded years, not in months and years.

Example:

Instead of showing three positions this way:

6/2013 - 3/2014, Position A;
4/2014 - 12/2015, Position B; 1/2015
- 8/2015, Position C

...it would be better to show simply:
2013 - 2014, Position A; 2014 -
2015 Position C.

In other words, you would drop Position B altogether. This can make a bit of difference in reducing your image as a job hopper. Once this question comes up, you must try to reassure the interviewer. Describe each position as part of an overall pattern of growth and career destination. Be careful not to blame other people for your frequent changes. But you can and should attribute certain changes to conditions beyond your control.

Example:

Thanks to an upcoming merger, you wanted to avoid an ensuing bloodbath, so you made a good, upward career move before your department came under the axe of the new owners. The not-so-long-ago economic downturn can also be named as a culprit for short-term contract positions having been the norm for several years.

You might also cite the job(s) where you stayed the longest and affirm that this is the type of situation you're seeking now.

Question 32: What do you see as the proper role/mission of...

...a good (job title you're seeking);
...a good manager;
...an executive in serving the community; ...a
leading company in our industry; etc.

TRAPS: These and other "proper role" questions are designed to test your understanding of your place in the bigger picture of your department, company, community and profession....as well as the proper role each of these entities should play in its bigger picture.

The question is most frequently asked by the most thoughtful individuals and companies...or by those concerned that you're coming from a place with a radically different corporate culture (such as from a big government bureaucracy to an aggressive small company).

The most frequent mistake interviewees make in answering is simply not being prepared (seeming as if they've never given any of this a thought)...or in phrasing an answer best suited to their prior organization's culture instead of the hiring company's.

BEST ANSWER: Think of the most essential ingredients of success for each category above - your job title, your role as manager, your firm's role, etc. Identify at least three but no more than six qualities you feel are most important to success in each role. Then commit your response to memory. Here, again, the more clarity you may have about the position's requirements, the wants and needs of the interviewer, and the more homework you've done to identify the culture of the firm, the more on-target your answer will be.

NOTE: Those encountering these kinds of questions are likely candidates for high positions in an organization.

Question 33: What would you say to your boss if he's crazy about an idea, but you think it stinks?

TRAPS: This is another question that pits two values, in this case loyalty and honesty, against one another.

BEST ANSWER: Remember the rule stated earlier: In any conflict between values, always choose integrity.

Example:

When evaluating anything, it's important to emphasize the positive. What (if anything) can you find to like about this idea?

Then, as to your reservations, point them out, as specifically, objectively and factually as you can. After all, the most important thing you owe the boss is honesty; if you can't be counted on for that, then everything else you may do or say could be questioned. You also want to express your thoughts in a constructive and possibly creative way. So, the goal in this case would be to see if you and the boss could make this idea even stronger and more appealing, in ways that might effectively overcome any initial reservation you or others may have about it.

Of course, if you're overruled and the boss says, "No, let's do it my way," then you must give your full and enthusiastic support to make it work as well as possible.

Question 34: How could you have improved your career progress?

TRAPS: This is another variation on the question, "If you could, how would you live your life over?" Remember, you're not going to fall for any such invitations to rewrite personal history. It can be a mistake if you do.

BEST ANSWER: You're generally quite happy with your career progress. Maybe, if you had known something earlier in life (impossible to know at the time, such as the booming growth in a branch in your industry...or the corporate downsizing that would phase out your last job), you might have moved in a certain direction sooner. But all things considered, you take responsibility for where you are and how you've gotten there; ...and you harbor no regrets.

NOTE: A natural next step once you address "how you've gotten here" would be to move on to "where I see myself moving forward" – but that's outside the scope of THIS question, and can lead to further discussion of "five years etc. from now" – which you might already have answered, or wish to avoid, unless you're ready to address enthusiastically where you wish to take your career from here – choices to make.

Question 35: What would you do if a colleague at your level wasn't pulling his/her weight...and this was hurting your department?

TRAPS: This question and other hypothetical ones test your sense of human relations and how you might handle office politics.

BEST ANSWER: Try to gauge the political style of the firm and be guided accordingly. In general, fall back on universal principles of effective human relations - which in the end, embody the way you would like to be treated in a similar circumstance.

Example:

"Good relations would call for me to go directly to the person and address the situation, to try to enlist his/her help in a constructive, positive solution. If I sensed resistance, I would be as persuasive as I can to explain the

benefits we all gain from working together, and the problems we, the company, and our customers will experience if we don't."

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION: And what would you do if no change in behavior ensues?

ANSWER: "One thing I wouldn't do is let the problem slide, because overlooking it would set a bad precedent, and the situation would inevitably worsen. I would try over and over again, in whatever way I could, to solve the problem, involving wider and wider circles of people, both above and below the offending individual and including my own boss if necessary, so that everyone involved can see the rewards for teamwork and the drawbacks of non-cooperation. I might add that in my experience, it's very rare that this persistent and constructive approach hasn't resolved things successfully."

Question 36: You were with your former employer a long time. Won't it be hard switching to a new company?

TRAPS: Your interviewer is worried that this old dog will find it hard to learn new tricks.

BEST ANSWER: To overcome this concern, you must point to the many ways you have grown and adapted to changing conditions at the previous job. It has not been a static situation. Highlight the different responsibilities you've held, the wide array of new situations you've faced and conquered.

As a result, you've learned to adapt quickly to whatever is thrown at you, and you thrive on the stimulation of new challenges. To further assure the interviewer, describe any similarities between the new position and your prior one. Return to the point that their needs and your skills are such a close match, you expect to be completely comfortable in this new environment.

Question 37: May I contact your present employer for a reference?

TRAPS: If you're trying to keep your job search private, this is the last thing you want. But if you don't cooperate, won't you seem as if you're trying to hide something?

BEST ANSWER: Express your concern that you'd like to keep your job search private, but that in time, it will be perfectly okay.

Example:

"My present employer is not aware of my job search and, for obvious reasons; I'd prefer to keep it that way. I'd be most appreciative if we kept our discussion confidential for now. At the point you've decided I'm your favored candidate, and have tendered a job offer, then by all means you should contact them. I'm very proud of my record there."

Question 38: Give me an example of your creativity (analytical skill...managing ability, etc.)

TRAPS: The worst offense here is simply being unprepared. Your hesitation may seem as if you're having a hard time remembering the last time you were creative, analytical, etc.

BEST ANSWER: Remember from Question 2 that you should commit to memory a list of your greatest and most recent achievements, ever ready on the tip of your tongue.

If you have such a list, it's easy to present any of your achievements in light of the quality the interviewer is asking about. For example, the smashing success you orchestrated at last year's trade show could be used as an example of creativity, or analytical ability, or your ability to manage.

Question 39: Where could you use some improvement?

TRAPS: Another tricky way to get you to admit weaknesses. Don't fall for it.

BEST ANSWER: Keep this answer, like all your answers, positive. A good way to answer this question is to identify a cutting-edge branch of your profession (one that's not essential to your employer's needs) as an area you're very excited about and want to explore more fully over the next six months.

Question 40: What do you worry about?

TRAPS: Admit to worrying and you could sound preoccupied. Saying you never worry doesn't sound credible.

TWO POSSIBLE GOOD ANSWERS: Redefine the word 'worry' so that it does not reflect negatively on you.

Example:

"I wouldn't call it worry, but I am a strongly goal-oriented person. So I keep turning over in my mind anything that seems to be keeping me from achieving those goals, until I find a solution. That's part of my tenacity, I suppose."

OR: "I've never been much of a worrier. What I try to do instead is I focus on whatever issues are before me, and put my energy into finding positive solutions for the tasks at hand."

Question 41: Could you be considered a workaholic? (or) How many hours a week do you normally work?

TRAPS: You don't want to give a specific number to the latter question. Make it too low, and you may not measure up. Too high, and you'll forever feel guilty about sneaking out the door at 5:15.

BEST ANSWER: If you are in fact a workaholic and you sense this company would like that: Say you are indeed a confirmed workaholic, that you often work nights and weekends. Your family accepts this because it makes you fulfilled.

If you are not a workaholic: "I wouldn't call myself a workaholic, but I have always worked hard and put in long hours when necessary. It goes with the territory. I don't generally keep track of hours, because my work is a labor of love, and I enjoy nothing more than solving problems."

Question 42: What's the most difficult part of being a (your job title)?

TRAPS: Unless you phrase your answer properly, your interviewer may conclude that whatever you identify as "difficult" is where you are weak.

BEST ANSWER: First, redefine "difficult" as "challenging," which is more positive. Then, identify an area everyone in your profession considers challenging and in which you excel. Describe the process you follow that enables you to get splendid results...and be specific about those results.

Example:

"I think every sales manager finds it challenging to motivate the troops in a recession. But that's probably the strongest test of a top sales manager. I feel this is one area where I excel."

"When I see the first sign that sales may slip or that sales force motivation is flagging because of a downturn in the economy, here's the plan I put into action immediately..." (followed by a description of each step in the process...and most importantly, the exceptional results you've achieved).

Question 43: The "Hypothetical Problem"

TRAPS: Sometimes an interviewer will describe a difficult situation and ask, "How would you handle this?" Since it is virtually impossible to have all the facts in front of you from such a short presentation, don't fall into the trap of trying to solve this problem and giving your verdict on the spot. It will make your decision-making process seem woefully inadequate.

BEST ANSWER: Instead, describe the rational, methodical process you would follow in analyzing this problem, with whom you'd consult, generating possible solutions, choosing the best course of action, and monitoring the results.

Remember, in all such "What would you do?" questions, always describe your process or working methods, and you'll never go wrong.

Question 44: The Behavioral Question ("Tell About a Time When...")

TRAPS: Behavioral interview questions – designed to learn how you behaved in certain situations in the past, predictive of how you'll behave in similar scenarios in the future - are seductive in terms of length; if not prepared, the interviewee often goes on and on, telling everything in order to cover all bases.

BEST ANSWER: A P-A-R approach to these answers is recommended: Briefly describe the problem (P) or situation you were facing; describe the Action (A) you took to address it; and always finish with how things turned out – the Result (R). Anticipate the types of behavioral questions you may face in your area of work, and practice keeping the answers to a reasonable length.

Question 45: What was the toughest challenge you've ever faced?

TRAPS: Being unprepared or citing an example from so early in your life that it doesn't score many points for you at this stage of your career.

BEST ANSWER: Be prepared for this question, and have a (preferably) recent example that's job-related; this could also make use of the P-A-R approach mentioned just above.

Example:

"Bringing the last project we managed in under budget and on time was truly difficult ...(tell why, what was done to make a success, and spell out the end result)."

Question 46: Would you consider starting your own business?

TRAPS: If you say "yes" and elaborate enthusiastically, you could be perceived as a loose cannon in a larger company, too entrepreneurial to make a good team player...or someone who had to settle for the corporate life because you couldn't make a go of your own business.

Also too much enthusiasm in answering "yes" could rouse the paranoia of a small company indicating that you may plan to go out on your own soon, perhaps taking some key accounts or trade secrets with you. On the other hand, if you answer "no, never" you could be perceived as a security-minded drone who never dreamed a big dream.

BEST ANSWER: Again it's best to:

1. Gauge this company's corporate culture before answering and...
2. Be honest (which doesn't mean you have to vividly share your fantasy of the franchise or bed-and-breakfast you someday plan to open).

In general, if the corporate culture is that of a large, formal, military-style structure, minimize any indication that you'd love to have your own business. You might say, "Oh, I may have given it a thought once or twice, but my whole career has been in larger organizations. That's where I have excelled and where I want to be."

If the corporate culture is closer to the free-wheeling, everybody's-a-deal-maker variety, then emphasize that in a firm like this, you can virtually get the best of all worlds, the excitement of seeing your own ideas and plans take shape...combined with the resources and stability of a well-established organization. Sounds like the perfect environment to you.

In any case, no matter what the corporate culture, be sure to indicate that any desires about running your own show are part of your past, not the present or future. The last thing you want to project is an image of either a dreamer who failed and is now settling for the corporate cocoon...or the restless maverick who will fly out the door with key accounts, contacts and trade secrets under his arms just as soon as his bankroll has gotten rebuilt.

Always remember: Match what you want with what the position offers.

Question 47: What are your goals?

TRAPS: Not having any...or having only vague generalities, not highly specific goals; and not being prepared for this question.

BEST ANSWER: Many employers in a position to hire you are strong believers in goal-setting. (It's one of the reasons they've been high achievers.) They like to hire in kind. If you're vague about your career and personal goals, it could be a big turnoff to many people you will encounter in your job search.

Be ready to discuss your goals for each major area of your life: career, personal development and learning, physical (health), community service - and if you wish to branch into more private aspects for whatever reasons - family and spiritual goals as well. Well-roundedness as an individual and value systems are at the heart of the matter.

Be prepared to describe each goal in terms of specific milestones you wish to accomplish along the way, time periods you're allotting for accomplishment, why the goal is important to you, and the specific steps you're taking to bring it about. (But be mindful of length - do this as concisely as possible.)

Question 48: What do you look for when you hire people?

TRAPS: Being unprepared for the question.

BEST ANSWER: Speak your own thoughts here, but for the best answer weave them around the three most important qualifications for any position.

1. Can the person do the work (qualifications)?
2. Will the person do the work (motivation)?
3. Will the person fit in (company culture/ team considerations, positive attitude)?

Question 49: Sell me this stapler (or this pencil...this clock...or some other object on the desk).

TRAPS: Some interviewers, especially business owners and hard-charging executives in marketing-driven companies, feel that good salesmanship is essential for any key position and ask for an instant demonstration of your skill. Be ready.

BEST ANSWER: Predictably, you already know the most important secret of all great salesmanship - "find out what people want, then show them how to get it."

If your interviewer picks up his stapler and asks, "sell this to me," you are going to demonstrate this proven master principle. Here's how:

"Well, a good salesman must know both his product and his prospect before he sells anything. In selling this, I'd first get to know everything I could about it, all its features and benefits.

Then, in selling it to YOU, I would have done my research on how you might use a fine stapler like this. The best way to do that is by asking some questions. May I ask you a few questions?"

Then ask: "Out of curiosity, if you didn't already have a stapler like this, why would you want one? And in addition to that? Any other reason? Anything else? And would you want such a stapler to be reliable?...Hold a good supply of staples?" (Ask more questions that point to the features this stapler has.)

Once you've asked these questions, thank the interviewer, and then make your presentation, citing all the features and benefits of this stapler, and why it's exactly what the interviewer just told you he's looking for. Then close with: "Just out of curiosity, what would you consider a reasonable price for a quality stapler like this...a stapler you could have right now and would (then repeat all the problems the stapler would solve for him)? Whatever he says, (unless it's zero), say, "Okay, we've got a deal."

NOTE: If your interviewer tests you by fighting every step of the way, denying that he even wants such an item, don't fight him. Take the product away from him by saying, "Mr. Prospect, I'm delighted you've told me right up front that there's no way you'd ever want this stapler. As you well know, the first rule of the most productive salespeople in any field is to meet the needs of people who really need and want our products, and it just wastes everyone's time if we try to force it on those who don't. And I certainly wouldn't want to waste your time. But we sell many items. Is there any product on this desk you would very much like to own...just one item?" When he points something out, repeat the process above. If he knows anything about selling, he may give you a standing ovation.

Question 50: Looking back on your last position, have you done your best work?

TRAPS: Tricky question. Answer "absolutely" and it can seem like your best work is behind you. Answer, "no, my best work is ahead of me," and it can suggest you didn't give it your all.

BEST ANSWER: To cover both possible paths this question can take, your answer should state that you've always given your best in the past, but you expect the best is yet to be done, because a new position usually presents new and intriguing challenges. (Then be prepared for a follow-up question about what you perceive to be the new and exciting challenges.)

ALSO: You can suggest that, like an athlete at the top of his/her game, you are just hitting your career stride thanks to several factors. Then, recap those factors, highlighting your strongest qualifications.

Question 51: What was the toughest part of your last job?

TRAPS: This is slightly different from question 42 earlier, "What's the most difficult part of being a (job title...)", because it focuses specifically on the most recent position. Your interviewer will assume that whatever you found toughest may give you a problem in your new position.

BEST ANSWER: If possible, the toughest aspect of the last job was also the most satisfying to problem-solve – so that identifying the difficulty is followed by your ability to successfully address it.

If that's not possible, state that there was nothing in your prior position that you found overly difficult, and let your answer go at that. If pressed to expand your answer, you could state that all aspects of the position were enjoyable, and pinpoint those you enjoyed the most – and in the best case, these are aspects important to the upcoming position, as well.

Question 52: How do you define success...and how do you measure up to your own definition?

TRAPS: Seems like an obvious enough question. Yet many interviewees, unprepared for it, fumble the ball.

BEST ANSWER: Give a well-accepted definition of success that leads right into your own stellar collection of achievements.

Example:

"The best definition I've come across is that success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal."

"As to how I would measure up to that definition, I would consider myself both successful and fortunate..."
(Then summarize your career goals and how your achievements have indeed represented a progressive path toward realization of your goals.)

Question 53: Tell me something negative you've heard about our company. (A variation on "What do you know about our company?")

TRAPS: This is a common fishing expedition to see what the industry grapevine may be saying about the company. But it's also a trap because as an outsider, you never want to be the bearer of unflattering news or gossip about the firm. It can only hurt your chances and sidetrack the interviewer from getting sold on you. It's also possible you've never heard a thing gossip-wise – but you want to take this opportunity to share positive things you've learned through your researching the organization – reasons to want to join their team.

BEST ANSWER: Nothing negative! Present the GOOD things you've heard, and/or the (laudatory) facts and conclusions drawn from the research you've done on them that make you excited about the position.

Question 54: Why should I hire you from the outside when I could promote someone from within?

TRAPS: This question isn't as aggressive as it sounds. It represents the interviewer's own dilemma over what may be a common problem. He's hopefully leaning toward you already, and for reassurance, wants to hear what you have to say on the matter.

BEST ANSWER: Help him see the qualifications that only you can offer.

Example:

In general, I think it can be a good policy to hire from within - although bringing in a fresh perspective from the outside, someone like myself who can strengthen the team with qualities and qualifications that may not currently be present, may be the best solution. I feel that I can fill that bill because...(then recap your strongest qualifications that match up with his greatest needs)."

Question 55: The Illegal Question

TRAPS: Illegal questions include any regarding your age...number and ages of your children or other dependents...marital status...maiden name...religion...political affiliation...ancestry... national origin...birthplace...naturalization of your parents, spouse or children...disease... disabilities...clubs...or spouse's occupation...unless any of the above are in some way directly related to your performance of the job. You also aren't supposed to be asked about arrests, though you can be asked about convictions.

Under the ever-present threat of lawsuits, most interviewers are well aware of these taboos. Yet, you may encounter, usually on a second or third interview, a senior executive who doesn't interview much and forgets it's illegal to ask such questions – or actually has an innocent interest in one or more of the above, and (somehow) doesn't know the law.

BEST ANSWER: You can handle an illegal question in several ways. First, you can assert your legal right not to answer. But this could frighten or embarrass your interviewer and dent any rapport you had.

Second, you can swallow your concerns over privacy and answer the question straightforwardly if you feel this is best for you. For example, your interviewer, a devout individual, recognizes you from church and mentions it. Here, you could gain by speaking about the church.

Third, if you don't want your privacy invaded, you can diplomatically answer the concern behind the question without answering the question itself.

Example:

If you are over 50 and are asked, "How old are you?" you can answer with a friendly, smiling question of your own on whether there's a concern that your age may affect your performance. Follow this up by reassuring the interviewer that there's nothing in this job you can't do and, in fact, your age and experience are the most important advantages you offer the employer for the following reasons...

Another example: If asked, "Do you plan to have children?" you could answer, "I am wholeheartedly dedicated to my career, and have no plans regarding children." (You needn't fear you've pledged eternal childlessness. You have every right to change your plans later. Get the job first and then enjoy all your options.)

Fourth, you can answer with humor: "I have to tell you, a man in a job search workshop told me I'd never have to answer a question of that nature, because it doesn't address my ability to do the work (big smile)."

Most importantly, remember that illegal questions arise from fear that you won't perform or fit in well. The best answer of all is to get the job and perform brilliantly. All concerns and fears will then vanish, replaced by respect and appreciation for your work.

Question 56: The Unasked Illegal Question

TRAPS: Much more frequent than the illegal question (see Question 55) is the unasked illegal question. It's asked only in the interviewer's mind. Because it's illegal, it's won't be expressed to you, so you have no chance to respond to it - but it doesn't mean the interviewer doesn't have it.

Example:

You're physically challenged, or a single mother returning to your professional career, or over 50, or a member of an ethnic minority, or fit any of a dozen other categories that do not strictly conform to the majority in a given company. Your interviewer wonders, "Is this person really able to handle the job?"..."Is he or she a 'good fit' at a place like ours?"..."Will the chemistry ever be right with someone like this?" But the interviewer never raises such questions because they're illegal. So what can you do?

BEST ANSWER: If you're concerned that the interviewer has an illegal question, more than likely an answer has already been formulated - so you might as well help out.

How? Well, you obviously can't respond to a question that hasn't even been asked. To bring one up and take a stab at a presumption could well offend an interviewer. And there's always the chance he wasn't even concerned about the issue until you brought it up, and only then begins to wonder. So, you can't address unasked illegal questions head-on. But what you can do is make sure there's enough counter-balancing information to more than reassure an employer that there's no problem in the guessed-at area of concern.

For example, let's say you're a sales rep who had polio as a child and you require a cane to walk. You know your condition has never impeded your performance, yet you're concerned that your interviewer may secretly be wondering about your stamina or ability to travel. Make sure that you hit these abilities very hard, leaving no doubt about your capacity to handle them well.

So, too, if you're in any different category from what passes as "normal." Make sure, without in any way seeming defensive about yourself, that you mention strengths, accomplishments, preferences, affiliations and behaviors that strongly counterbalance any unspoken concern your interviewer may have.

Question 57: "The Opinion Question" - What do you think about ...Abortion...The President...The Death Penalty...(or any other controversial subject)?

TRAPS: Obviously, these and other "opinion" questions should never be asked. Sometimes they come up near the end of the interview process, in its final stages, perhaps over a combination dinner/interview. A possible scenario might be that the interviewer has had a drink or two, is feeling relaxed, and is spouting off about something that bugged him in today's news. If you give your opinion and it's the opposite of his, you won't change his opinions, but you could possibly lose the job offer.

BEST ANSWER: In all of these instances, just remember the tale about the young truth seeker and the wise old man. The wise man is being pressed to answer the ultimate questions of suffering, life, and death. But no matter how hard the youth presses, the wise man only answers each difficult question with a question in reply. Exasperated, the young man demands, "Why do you always answer a question with another question?" To which the wise man says, "And why not?"

If you are ever uncomfortable with an interview question, asking a question in return can be the greatest escape hatch ever invented. It throws the onus back on the other person, sidetracks the discussion from going further into an area of risk to you, and gives you time to think of an effective response, or even better, your next question!

In response to any of the "opinion" questions cited above, merely responding, "Why do you ask?" can dissipate any pressure to give your opinion. But if your interviewer again presses you for an opinion, you can ask yet another question. You could also assert a generality that almost everyone would agree with. For example, if your interviewer is complaining about the state of things, then suddenly turns to you and asks if you're a Republican or Democrat, you could respond by saying, "Actually, I'm finding it difficult to support any of the politicians these days."

(Of course, your best question of all may be whether you want to work for someone opinionated.)

Question 58: If you won \$10 million in the lottery, would you still work?

TRAPS: Your totally honest response might be, "Heavens, no, are you serious?" That might be so, but any answer which shows you as fleeing work if given the chance could make you seem lazy. On the other hand, if

you answer, "Oh, I'd want to keep doing exactly what I am doing, only doing it for your firm," you could easily inspire your interviewer to silently mutter to himself, "Yeah, sure. Gimme a break." This type of question is aimed at getting at your bedrock attitude about work and how you feel about what you do. Your best answer will focus on your positive feelings.

BEST ANSWER:

Examples:

"After I floated down from cloud nine, I would still hold my basic belief that achievement and purposeful work are essential to a happy, productive life. After all, if money alone bought happiness, then all rich people would be happy, and that's not the case."

"I love the work I do, and I think I'd always want to be involved in my career in some fashion. Winning the lottery would make it more fun, because it would mean having more flexibility, more options...who knows?"

"I'd not only return to work, but would gift my co-workers and the company with a share of my winnings, to show my commitment to the team and the organization, and bring us closer together!"

Question 59: "The Salary Question" - How much money do you want?

TRAPS: May also include "What salary are you worth?" or "How much are you making now?" This is your most important negotiation. Handle it wrong and you can blow the job offer or go to work at far less than you might have gotten.

BEST ANSWER: For maximum salary negotiating power, remember these six guidelines:

1. Never bring up salary. Let the interviewer do it first. Good salespeople sell their products thoroughly before talking price. So should you. Make the interviewer want you first, and your bargaining position will be much stronger.
2. If your interviewer raises the salary question too early, before you've had a chance to create desire for your qualifications, postpone the question, saying something like, "Money is important to me, but is not my main concern. Opportunity and growth are far more important. What I'd rather do, if you don't mind, is fully discuss my fit for the position, and then talk about money."
3. The #1 rule of any negotiation is: the side with more information has the advantage. After you've done a thorough job of selling the interviewer and it's time to talk salary, the secret is to get the employer talking about what he's willing to pay before you reveal what you're willing to accept. So, when asked about salary, respond by asking, "I'm sure the company has already established a salary range for this position. Could you tell me what that is?" Or, "I want an income commensurate with my ability and qualifications. I trust you'll be fair with me. What does the position pay?" Or, more simply, "What do you typically someone with my qualifications?"
4. Know beforehand what you'd accept. Do research on the salary in your city or region for similar positions. Then, once an offer is made, aim for the high end of the range. It shows confidence and you may just get it.
5. Never lie about what you currently make, but feel free to point out the differences between the job currently being discussed and responsibilities of the previous position – in other words, address the relevancy (and/or lack thereof) of past salary where this job is concerned.
6. If a job offer is made, but the salary is disappointing, explore all avenues to extra benefits and perks that might make the overall package more worthy.

Question 60: On a scale of one to ten, rate me as an interviewer.

TRAPS: Give a perfect "10," and you'll seem too easy to please. Give anything less than a perfect 10, and he could press you as to where you're being critical, and that road leads downhill for you.

BEST ANSWER: Once again, never be negative. The interviewer may well resent criticism coming from you. This is the time to show your positive side. And: no numerical rating! Simply praise whatever interview style has been used.

If it's been tough, say: "You have been thorough and tough-minded, challenging me to think my answers through carefully! I'm impressed (and tired)!"

If it's been welcoming and easy-going, say: "You have made me feel at ease, and less nervous than in other interviews. Thank you very much!"

If pressed for a number, say: "If you offer me the position, your rating will be 10.5!"

Follow **Swapnil Tighare** For such Insightful posts.



SWAPNIL TIGHARE

@swapnil_tighare