

# Jacob Kaplan-Moss

ARCHIVE



## Unpacking Interview Questions: The Weakness Question

*Each day this week I'll be sharing one of the questions I use when I interview for technical roles. I'll unpack the question, when to ask it, and how to evaluate answers. [You can see all articles in this series here.](#)*

### Background

*Who this is for:* everyone.

*What it measures:* candor, self-awareness, ability to learn new skills, and (sometimes) overall job fit.

Like [yesterday's question](#), this is another classic. But unlike yesterday's, which is fairly straightforward, asking about a weakness is actually quite difficult to do in a way that gives valuable results. There's a reason I saved it for last: of [all the questions I unpacked in this series](#), this one's by far the most tricky to ask well.

You've likely been asked a version of this question at least once, and chances are you hated it. You might even have this question on your "never ask" list. I'm going to try to convince you that you're wrong: **asking about a weakness is a fantastic interview question – but only if you do it right.**

It's hard to explain the value – and what I mean by "right" – without looking at the question itself, so I'll jump right into the question and come back after to explain.

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### The question

**I want to ask you about one of your weaknesses. Consider all the skills you bring to work, ranked from strongest to weakest. Please pick one that's below average, and tell me about it.**

That's the minimal version of the question, but in practice it's worth being more verbose here. When I ask this question, I say quite a lot; my script looks something like this:

*Now, I want to ask you about one of your weaknesses. Let me clarify: people mean different things when they ask this question, and I mean something quite specific.*

*I don't want you to compare yourself to other candidates, or to engineers in general. Instead, I want you to think about all your skills – all of the things you do at work.*

*We all have a bunch of skills, and some of them are stronger than others. For example, I'm a lot better at starting projects than I am finishing them. I can do both, but starting projects is something I'm better at, relative to all my other skills; finishing them is something I'm a lot worse at, again relative to all my other skills. So if I were answering this question, I might talk about that.*

*So, if you think about all your skills, and mentally rank them from strongest to weakest, I want you to pick one that's below average and tell me about that. It doesn't have to be weakest; just one that's below average for you.*

Follow-ups:

- How does that affect you at work?
- What strategies do you have for working around or through this weakness?
- What have you done to improve over time?
- What might you do in the future to continue to improve?
- If you joined, what sort of support would you want from us to help here?

Behaviors to look for

- Some discomfort is normal, but they should be able to address areas where they struggle
- Are they honest and self-aware about their own relative strengths and weaknesses?

- Do they have strategies for improvement? Are they clear about *how* improvements were achieved?

### Positive signs

- 👍 Candor: describes a real weakness, with real consequences
- 👍 Self-awareness: knows the effects this behavior has, and can explain how they think about improvement and workarounds
- 👍 Explains effective strategies for working around/through the weakness
- 👍 Has made improvements over time
- 👍 Understands how those improvements were achieved
- 👍 Knows how they'd tackle further improvements, including what kind of support they'd need

### Red Flags

- 🚩 Picks a “disguised strength”, e.g. “sometimes I work *too* hard...” ([see below](#))
- 🚩 Describes a needed strength for the role, or a deal-breaker weakness ([see below](#))
- 🚩 Dodges or avoids addressing the question directly ([see below](#))
- 🚩 The weakness has had real impact for them at work and they haven't been able to improve ([see below](#))
- 🚩 Can't explain how improvements were achieved, or what they'd need to do to strengthen the weakness

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## Discussion

You should be able to see that there's a pretty specific way I ask this question – probably different from what you've seen before. It's not just “what is your greatest weakness” (ugh). There's a lot to explain here:

- What is this question measuring?
- Why the specific framing of this question is so important
- The reasoning behind the red flags, and how to spot them

Let's unpack:

## What asking about a weakness measures

First, it's important to understand that this question isn't really about the specific skill the candidate chooses (except for sometimes in the negative sense, see below). Instead, it's all about measuring emotional intelligence, specifically candor, self-awareness, and ability to improve. These are all terrifically important skills at any level, and this question measures all of them:

### Candor

The value of candor at work should be obvious: lack of candor is poison.

This question measures candor by looking at what the candidate chooses to talk about, and how they talk about it. Candidates who dodge or avoid either lack candor or self-awareness; either is bad. On the other hand, it's a very strong sign when candidates are open about a real weakness, talk bluntly about how it's affected them at work, and are transparent about the work they've put in to improve.

### Self-awareness

Self-aware people understand how their own mind works, and have an accurate self-image. This has all sorts of benefits at work:

- they can accurately predict what tasks they'll be best at;
- they are generally better at predicting how long tasks will take;
- they know what they need to get motivated and get work done;
- they know when to put their head down and work, and when they need to ask for help;

- ... and more.

This question measures self-awareness in much the same way it measures candor: it's in the choice of weakness the candidate makes, and in how they talk about it. Highly self-aware candidates will be able to explain the weakness and its effects clearly, and they'll be able to talk in detail about what's going on internally for them. They'll often talk about emotion – for example, “I get stuck when I'm feeling uncertain”, “I'm afraid of choosing the wrong option so I'll avoid making a choice”, etc.

### Ability to improve

Companies and roles change, and within roles, the specific skills needed for success change. So, people who have learned *how to learn* are terrifically valuable, because you can trust that they'll be able to adapt. Indeed, I'd probably say that **ability to improve is the single most important skill I select for when hiring**. I may know skills we need for the job today, but it's pretty hard to predict what the role might look like a year or three from now.

I've frequently chosen to hire people who are missing a couple of fairly key skills because I trust – from asking this question, along with a few others – they'll be able to quickly pick it up. I've yet to be disappointed in one of these hires. On the other hand, I *have* been burned by hiring people who know the specific skills we need today, but prove unable to grow into the new things we need down the line.

And, I'm always hiring with an eye towards future leaders – even at the most junior levels – and someone who demonstrates an ability to improve is someone more likely to develop into a future leader.

When using this question to measure ability to improve, I'm looking for two things:

1. Have they made improvements in the past, or at least figured out strategies for blunting the impact of their weakness? I want to know that once the candidate became aware of an area they needed to improve, they were capable of doing something about it.
2. Do they know *how they improved*, what specific tactics they took, and what support they might need to improve further? I'm looking for candidates who understand what they need to do when they need to adapt. I don't much care about the specifics – some people

learn well from taking classes, others read books, others need hands-on practice and coaching, etc. – but I want to know that the candidate knows what they need to learn.

## Framing the weakness question

Now, let's turn to why the question needs to be framed in this specific way. It's critical to ask about a *relative* weakness in this way ("think about all your skills... and pick one that's below average"). This framing is precisely what makes space for the candidate to talk with candor and self-awareness. The internal focus makes it safer for a candidate to answer honestly because the very construction implies the existence of (lots) of strengths. The "relative" framing, and asking for "something below average" makes it clear that the weakness in question won't be a deal-breaker, just an area of improvement.

Other common forms of this question aren't effective. If you hate this interview question, it's probably because you're thinking of a dangerously similar version that doesn't work:

- Asking for a candidate's "greatest" weakness – a common version – simply invites candidates to lie. There's just *no way* I'm going to tell you, when I *need a job* about my *greatest* weakness. I have trouble talking about that with my therapist; I'm sure as hell not bringing it up in a job interview. If you ask the question in this way, you'll almost certainly get avoidance or a lie.
- Asking candidates about their weaknesses in relation to others – i.e, "compared to other Python developers, where are you weakest?" – isn't *bad*, per se, just useless. It's likely to be a complete guess because nobody really knows what the "average" skill profile looks like. And, worse, it doesn't require the same level of candor and self-reflection as the "relative weakness" version does.

This leads to an important point: generally, you should push candidates to talk about professional skills (communication, collaboration, conflict resolution, etc.) over domain skills (Python, SQL, design). For more junior IC roles, talking about technical skills can be fine, but as candidates get more senior talking about domain-knowledge-weaknesses becomes less and less valuable:

- As a role becomes more senior, professional skills become more and more important.

- With more experienced folks, they usually have a long track record of learning new domains skills that's easily verified in other parts of the interview process.
- And, once again, asking about professional skills gives more of an opportunity for the self-reflection and candor this question is looking for.

If a candidate *does* choose a domain skill, or chooses something that isn't a weakness (more on this [below](#)): you should push back. Don't be afraid of interrupting and asking a candidate to refocus. You may need to push, or ask the question several times in a few different ways, to get them on the right track. That's normal, and you should be prepared to do so.

## Unpacking red flags

Finally, let's look at some of the major red flags. Some are subtle, and worth understanding in detail.

### Dodging and avoidance

Like yesterday's question, this is one that candidates [sometimes try to dodge](#). There's some notes in that post about what to do about outright avoidance, but in this case dodging can be a bit subtle. It usually takes the form of choosing a strength and disguising it as a weakness. The most blatant example is: "sometimes I'm *too good at my job* and other people resent me" (I've heard this. Really!). But more subtle versions can be:

- "Sometimes I work *too hard* and don't know when to stop"
- "I'm a perfectionist, I have to get all the details right"
- "I have really high standards"
- Or something completely unrelated to the job, e.g. public speaking for a role where the job doesn't require that at all

Sometimes, these are real weaknesses: poor work/life balance leading to burnout really is a problem, so is holding others to unrealistically-high standards. But much of the time, answers like this are a way to try to brag about strengths while avoiding the question. (It doesn't help that a *lot* of advice on the internet and in career help books tell people to do this).

If you get a response like this, the follow-up is to ask, “how does that impact you or others at work?” If there isn’t a real negative impact, then it’s not a real weakness. Push back, and try to get them to talk about something else.

### A needed strength

Sometimes, candidates will choose a weakness that’s actually an area that’s required for the job. For example, I had an engineering candidate tell me that he struggles to communicate with people who aren’t software developers. That’s a critical skill for most of my engineering roles, and so a major red flag. If it’s not an area where the candidate has made real improvement, and one where they demonstrate an ability to continue to improve, it might be enough to turn them down.

### Lack of development or inability to learn

Finally, if a candidate can’t demonstrate that they’ve made progress – or, at minimum, know what they’d need to do to make progress – that’s a bad sign. It indicates that they’re *aware* of the issue, but either can’t change or haven’t put in the work. (I’m a pretty firm believer that people can change if they’re willing to put in the work.)

That may not be a complete deal-breaker, but it’s definitely not great. Remember that one of the main skills this question measures is ability to improve; if a candidate can’t demonstrate that, they may not be a great hire.

## Other versions of this question

As I explained (at length) above, most other variants of this question don’t work. As you get more comfortable asking it, your script may evolve somewhat, but **always remember to focus on relative weaknesses**.

Sometimes, interviews will ask about relative strengths, too (“pick one of the skills that’s *above average*...”). This is a OK question, and can get at some of the same things the weakness question covers. It’s also much easier to ask and answer, much less uncomfortable! Ultimately, it doesn’t make my list: while it’s fine, it’s not good enough to warrant the time asking it would take away from another, better question.



## See also

- The Manager Tools podcast covered the weakness question in a series of episodes: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#). I listened to this podcast a few years ago, and don't 100% remember all the details, but I think we mostly agree. Finding where we disagree and parsing out the differences might be an interesting exercise...
- Manager Tools also covered [how to answer the question](#), from a candidate's point of view.

## Questions

That's it for the series! Remember, [you can see all five articles in this series here](#).

Next week, I'll publish a series wrap-up, summarizing the series as a whole and addressing a few big-picture topics. If you have questions about anything covered all week, [tweet at me](#) (DMs are fine too). I'll address common questions in the wrap-up.

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