

Complete Interview Prep Pack

Introduction

The main focus of any organization's search to fill a position is naturally to onboard a highly qualified, motivated, confident, positive, focused, and skilled candidate. With that, the main question the HR department will need you to answer is: "why should we hire you?". Through the application process, which includes your resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profile, and the in-person round of interviews, your job is to provide answers to the all-important "why should we hire you?" question, giving the hiring committee every reason to move forward with you as a candidate, and avoiding any reason for the committee to look elsewhere.

Understanding what the hiring committee is looking for—putting yourself in their shoes so-to-speak—provides a useful context in which to approach the application process. There are four key areas that the HR department will want to evaluate during the in-person interview:

- 1) **Qualifications** in greater depth than what you may have shared in the resume, cover letter, or LinkedIn
- 2) **Contributions** you can make to, or results you can deliver for the company/organization
- 3) **Reasons** you chose to apply to the company/organization
- 4) **Fit**, in terms of how well you will work and grow within the organization and with respect to the overall culture of the organization. This portion includes how well you show that you can communicate, how you demonstrate your level of professionalism, and other soft skills.

Common Interview Questions

Perhaps the most nerve-racking aspect of the interview phase is preparing for, or at least trying to anticipate, the myriad questions you may be asked. To help frame your approach, I've included fifteen of the most common interview questions hiring managers like to ask. It also helps to understand why hiring managers are asking these questions, and so please remember the four main points of evaluation mentioned above: Qualifications, Contributions, Reasons, Fit.

Tip:

When sitting for the in-person interview, it is easy to ramble or get sidetracked, especially as a by-product of being nervous, or trying too hard to make a great impression. Keep in mind that the hiring committee would like to get through several key questions with you, and so it is in your best interest to keep your responses short, relevant, and impactful. Be succinct in your answers, but make your responses resonate by answering the questions directly, especially in

framing the answers in a way that markets you as a professional, and shows how you can be useful to the company.

The 15 common interview questions:

1. Why Should We Hire You?

This question provides an excellent opportunity for you to sell yourself and to show why you are the best candidate for the job. But approaching this question means first putting yourself in the hiring manager's shoes in understanding what HR is looking for. They want focused, organized, motivated, results-driven applicants who understand the company and the work that the company is doing. They want to be sure that you fully understand the job requirements, and they want to be sure you are going to be a team player and a key contributor. While of course you are applying to a job because of what the job can give you (salary, benefits, purpose, etc...), the interview stage is all about what you can give to the job. Understanding what HR wants to see, will help you focus your response to this question, as you can sell yourself in the context of the points above: you can do the work > you can deliver results > you will be a great fit with your specific cohort and within the company culture.

2. Can You Tell Me About Yourself?

This question often catches applicants off guard given how open-ended it is. The trick here is not to fall back on the easy method of reciting your resume or what you've already shared in your application documents, but rather to have a kind of sound bite prepared—a quick elevator pitch—that will hold the interviewers' interest and get the point across that you're going to be a great fit for the organization (yes, all from the one quick answer). In other words, keep it succinct and interesting. You can briefly mention the work that your most recent professional experience (your current or most recent job) entails, focus on a key accomplishment or two, and parlay this into a kind of contributive statement about how you feel that the experience/accomplishments will transfer into the new role.

2. Why Do You Want to Work Here?

It's important to be ultra-specific with this answer—tailor your response exactly to the company/organization you are applying to, to avoid any suspicion that your response is in anyway canned. This is where doing research on the company is useful (see the research

section later in this document). Citing the company's mission is a move that is slightly overplayed, although if the mission speaks to you on a deep level and you have specific examples to support your claim, then by all means, feel free to mention the mission. The better approach is to identify an aspect or two about the company that stands out to you—something unique about a particular company initiative that you are passionate about, or how attractive the company's growth and changes are to you (and why), or how excited you are about opportunities for growth within the organization and how you can play a part in that growth—remember, be specific.

4. What Are Your Strengths?

This question provides a stage for you to dive deeper into explaining 'what' and 'how' you can contribute to driving the company forward through the lens of what makes you a great professional. Avoid generalizations and focus on a few key qualities that will speak directly to the position and to the company culture (this will play to 'fit' as well). Telling a story that intertwines your strengths/uniqueness/star power, and examples where you applied those strengths is a great way to help frame your response, and a way to keep things interesting. Certain general qualities that employers like to see can include: critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, teamwork, communication, innovation—in addition to any specific strengths or value that you can present.

5. What Are Your Weaknesses?

Nobody is perfect, and so answering "nothing" to this question is not the right approach. Being flippant to add humor is also not a great idea, as this can seem like you are trying to avoid the question, or it may come off that you are too nervous. Furthermore, explaining a weakness that may be integral to the job function is also not recommended (it is best not to say that your orthography skills are lacking while applying to an editor position for example). Instead, focus on an area or two where you struggle, and be honest about it. Again, putting yourself in the interviewers' shoes helps to understand why this question is being asked, and how you can frame your response: this question assesses your honesty and ability to improve yourself. Therefore, in focusing on a certain area of weakness, be sure to also talk about what you've done/are doing to improve. For example: "I find that I generally thrive while working independently, and therefore, I've shied away from teamwork. I do understand the importance of teamwork, and so I have taken a team-building workshop, which has resulted in greater communication among the cohort, greater trust in the team, and ability to delegate easily. It's been a work-in-progress, but I've made great strides, and look forward to developing further in this area".

6. How Have You Handled Conflict in the Past?

This question follows a similar format to the previous question (what are your weaknesses?). Again, be honest, but be succinct and professional as you are not chatting with a friend or a spouse over a drink, but rather to a hiring manager who really just wants to know how you handle adversity in the workplace. The best answers follow a recipe: you are confronted with an unpleasant situation > you remained calm and professional > you made a genuine attempt to resolve the situation amicably, no matter how difficult it might have been. And much like question #5 above regarding weaknesses, this challenge/conflict question is a great opportunity to bring up any learning moments regarding how you would handle a situation differently next time based on what you learned from x-difficult issue in the past. Where there is struggle, there is room for growth.

8. Can You Explain the Gaps in Your Resume?

If you are worried about gaps in your employment history, you are absolutely not alone as gaps are more common than you might think. The more common reasons for taking a break from the workforce include (and in no particular order): caring for elderly family members, raising children, taking a sabbatical, traveling, re-evaluating professional choices, getting a new degree, and dealing with personal issues. No matter what the reason is, simply discuss it honestly, and succinctly when asked by the hiring committee. There is no need to dive deep into your reason for taking a break, especially if your health is concerned, but touching on your reasons so that the hiring committee has a place to hang their hat so-to-speak, will satisfy their inquiry. A way to put a positive spin on the gap is to discuss any new skills, new perspectives, new qualifications that you may have garnered during your time off. In other words, couch your response on the gap as if it were a time of development, a time to regain clarity, etc... **"Why were you fired?"** is another example of a question that is best answered with honesty. Explaining that you and management perhaps had different ideas on what methods worked best, or that you felt it was best that you and the company went in different directions over x or y differences, is perfectly fine to explain.

9. Are You Able to Deal With Stress?

Much like the "weakness" and "conflict" question above, the best approach is to answer this "stress" question head-on, and have one or two key examples at the ready to discuss as examples. The hiring committee does not expect you to fluff this question off to present you as a kind of super human who doesn't get perturbed—everyone gets stressed, perhaps too often. With your one or two examples, talk about what caused stress, and methods you use to

manage and/or mitigate stress in a healthy way, perhaps through exercise, yoga, meditation, listening to music, taking a short break, structuring your time in a certain way, etc...etc...

10. What Are Your Interests?

You may have included an interests section on your resume—this is a great idea. The interests section is not necessary, but it can help you look more human (rather than words on a page) to the hiring committee. And you never know what interests from your resume might serve as a nice talking point during the in-person interview. As always, be succinct in your response, but by all means, talk about what you are passionate about outside of work—this only helps to add more dimensions to you as a person, and helps the committee to get to know you better. There really is no ‘right or wrong’ interest to talk about, especially if you can extract some qualities or skills from that interest that will parlay nicely into supporting your work as a professional.

11. Can You Tell Us How You Like to Be Managed?

This question speaks directly to the “Fit” category of evaluation mentioned at the beginning of this document, and can help frame how the employer sees you within the organization. This is your opportunity to give the hiring committee a window into what works best for you, day-to-day, to let you thrive as a professional. Did you have a manager who was overbearing, resulting in your productivity decreasing? Did you have a manager who was perhaps too hands-off, leading to your productivity decreasing? Or did your productivity increase? Did a manager call too many meetings, or were all the collaborative sessions useful? This is all about what works for your ‘brand’ in terms of how best you work in an organizational structure, based on past evidence—positive or negative. As mentioned previously: be succinct, focus on a few key examples, and talk about how they shaped your method of working under a manager in a positive way, even if the experience itself may have been less than desirable. And if a given example about working with a former manager was glowingly positive, absolutely talk about it. Additionally, it is important to be ultra-honest here. Why? As mentioned in the prior questions/explanations, it is tempting to ‘give the HR department what they want to hear’ to ensure you secure a job offer. However, doing that here—or with any kind of ‘fit’ topic—could potentially lead to you landing a job that is not a good fit for you, and this means taking a job that you resent going to or doing every day.

12. What is Your 5-Year Plan

Here, the hiring committee wants to gauge your ambitions, but your realistic ambitions within this 5-year time frame. Using hyperbole, shooting for the moon, or being highly imaginative may have a less-than-desirable impact on the people hiring you as they may not take such lofty goals seriously. And so, as always (notice the theme throughout all these questions), be honest about the goals you are excited about achieving—realistically. We all seek advancement, but advancement-within-reach is the key. An important note here is to rope the current position into your answer by saying that you view X-job (that you are applying for) as an important, career-building/career-defining/career-shaping opportunity that will help you achieve your 5-year plan.

13. Who Else Are You Applying With?

This question is more of a 'Goldilocks' situation. You do not necessarily want to come right out with an answer of "oh, nowhere else—X-company is my only focus", which of course you may mean to say to show how devoted and excited you are about X-company. This may have the unintended effect of giving the hiring committee too much leverage. If they are interested in you, and they know that you will surely take the offer, their offer may not be as good as it would have been if they felt that they needed to compete for you. With that said, it is perfectly acceptable, and expected, to mention the other companies you are applying to as this will affirm to the hiring committee that you are serious about working in a given position, and may make them work harder for you. On the other end of this 'Goldilocks' situation, you do not want to make it seem that you have so many pokers in so many fires that you couldn't care less which job you go with. In any event, always make sure to let the hiring committee or manager know how excited you are about THIS position, among the others, to show your passion, but to let them know that your passion is not accompanied by an 'all my eggs are in one basket' approach.

14. What Makes You Unique?

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, be straightforward and impactful with your answer, as the hiring committee will really want to hear from you on what makes you the diamond in the rough. But, as always, stay on point, and give an answer that makes you unique for the job you are being interviewed for. The fact that you can yodel, or that you won a chili cook-off probably won't matter much. Take this example though: a retired finance executive was looking to apply for a Ferry Captain position with a casino on the water in Boston. He had had experience on ocean-going vessels all his life, but never professionally, and this was raised during the interview. The executive replied: "let me ask you this: do you have any Harvard

MBA graduates applying for this position? Do you have anyone how has had 40+ years of maritime experience? Have any of your applicants been managers at the executive level?" While this specific position may not be incredibly relatable, nor am I advocating taking a bold approach like this, the point is made here in that the finance executive made very valid points about his unique experience, that made the committee think—and think of him in relation to the other candidates. Not only did he get the job—he was made overseer of all ferry pilots.

15. Do You Have Any Questions for Us?

Short answer: don't say 'no'! Doing so may make it seem that you were not totally invested in the interview itself, or that you may not be fully thrilled about the position you are applying for. Instead, be prepared with some questions to ask at this final stage of the interview before you even walk through the door to begin with. The best questions engage the hiring committee sitting in front of you, because—let's face it—everyone likes a little of the spotlight. Ask your interviewers what they love about working at X-company, or what they are excited about in terms of projects the company might be working on, or what they know now that they wished they had known when they were interviewing. And then of course, you can ask a final "what might I expect for next steps?", as this information will be particularly useful to you.

* Questions You Should Not Be Asked

Any question regarding the following topics should never be asked by an interviewer:

- Race
- Religion
- Ethnicity
- Gender identity
- Sexual Orientation
- Age
- Disabilities
- Medications and/or Therapies
- Planning for a Family/Planning to get Pregnant

If a question does come up that touches on one of the subjects above, chances are, the interviewer will not have a nefarious agenda, and simply is making small talk, or may not be 100% aware of what lines they are crossing. If any topic above is presented to you in the form of a question—or if any question at all makes you uncomfortable—you can politely respond that you would rather focus on job-specific questions at this time.

Personal Presentation

You've submitted a perfect resume and cover letter, your LinkedIn looks fantastic, and you've gotten a call for an interview. Just as you made efforts to ensure your documents and online presence were fully polished, so too should your physical appearance be fully polished going in to the in-person (or video) interview round.

What Should I Wear?

An excellent question, and one that does not have a single answer. If you do not already know what exactly is best to wear for the interview, do a little research on the company first to get an idea of what other employees are wearing. If you have a contact in the company, feel free to ask them what attire may be best for the interview. If you are located close to the company's building, take a walk by and notice what employees are wearing who are coming in and out of the main entrance. Check out the company's social media profiles as you may get glimpses of what kinds of clothing people are wearing day-to-day.

In general, what you wear to your first interview will fall into either the formal category, or the business casual category. In either case, it is best to wear pressed, washed, well-fitting clothing, and avoid anything loud in terms of odd patterns, strong perfume/cologne, busy jewelry, etc... If you are wearing something formal such as a suit, darker colors are best. And for those applying to tech start-ups for example, where you may notice that the dress code is very lax, still play it safe by going somewhat business casual with a clean, organized appearance to ensure that your physical presentation gives a great impression.

Personal Grooming

Looking clean and put together is important not only to help ensure a great first impression upon meeting the hiring committee, but also to support you in feeling more confident throughout a process that is constantly evaluating for confidence. Consider making an appointment for a haircut, a beard trim, a hair coloring, a manicure, a pedicure, etc...this can never hurt.

Physical Stance

Body language is important, and worth your consideration as part of your interview preparation. Slouching, sitting too relaxed (or too rigid), crossing arms, etc...can all have a negative effect on the hiring committee. I recommend doing some research on this, just to be cognizant of avoiding any stances that you may be inclined to be comfortable with, that will inadvertently rub the hiring committee the wrong way.

Miscellaneous Tips

What Should I Bring to the Interview?

- 1) Always bring extra copies of your printed resume—five copies will usually suffice, as you can hand this out to anyone you may meet who may not have had access to your resume to begin with. This may be someone who is not interviewing you at all, or perhaps a last-minute addition to the hiring committee.
- 2) A pen and notepad to take any pertinent notes.
- 3) Anything that the HR department required of you to bring, such as a portfolio, samples of work, etc...
- 4) A printed out reference list (bring a few copies) so that the committee has a path forward in doing their further due diligence on you as a candidate. HR may ask for this separately after the interview, but best to have a few copies ready to go at the interview.
- 5) Take a note of the weather for the interview day. Should you need an umbrella for example, it will be good to have one ready to go by the door or your purse or briefcase, and one in working order that looks nice.
- 6) Breath mints are always useful.

Final Thoughts

- 1) Keep a positive, confident attitude, and remain in 'sell myself' mode.
- 2) Get a good night's sleep. This may be harder than it sounds, especially if you are not used to going on interviews, but being well-rested only helps to support #1 above.
- 3) And please: turn off your phone or put it in airplane mode before stepping in to the interview, whether in person or on video.