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How to answer 8 tough job-interview questions without lying

Jacquelyn Smith Oct 10, 2016, 2:40 PM



Mike Nudelman/Business Insider

When it comes to job interviewing, honesty is always the best policy.

Chances are, if you're not caught in your lies now, the truth will come out *eventually* — and if you have to fib to land a job, do you

really think you're the right person for it anyway?

But, desperate job seekers who are trying to paint a certain picture sometimes panic when they're asked tough questions — or questions to which their answers could kill their chances — and just flat out lie to get around it.

"There are certain questions that, if not answered with some advance planning, could sabotage an otherwise great interview," says Lynn Taylor, a national workplace expert and the author of "Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant: How to Manage Childish Boss Behavior and Thrive in Your Job." "For example, many tough interviewers put a negative spin on some key questions to observe how you perform under pressure. When you're really in the hot seat, you're more apt to say something you later regret; and many hiring managers are looking for holes or inconsistencies in your story. They also know that if you can emerge unscathed, you'll likely overcome many challenges on the job."

In most cases, she says, you're best served to be direct and answer the question — but the trick is to "quickly reframe and take control of the discussion."

"Remember, there's a difference between offering a response that puts you in the best light and dodging a question. You never want to choose the latter. Taking the discussion into a positive realm is the best route and is very empowering," Taylor explains.

Here's how to handle a few of the toughest job-interview questions (to which your honest answer may very well hurt your chances), without lying:

1. 'Have you ever had conflict with a prior bosses?' or, 'Describe the worst boss you've had, and how you resolved matters.'

"Questions like these can be the most challenging because many people leave jobs due to conflicts with their boss," says Taylor. "The hiring manager wants to make sure you're a team player, and not insubordinate."

The question may be worded in various ways, but they're trying to imagine you at your worst and gain insight into just how bad that might be, she says. "Your best option is to diffuse the idea that you had a contentious relationship and instead answer more factually and non-emotionally. Be concise and end it on a positive note."

For example, "I'm fortunate in that I've had very positive relationships with my managers. In my last position, my manager and I once disagreed on the best launch date for a project. He was open to hearing more about my recommendation, and after I returned with alternatives, we came to a mutually agreeable solution."

Or, your add-on to the direct answer might be: "I feel that I can usually avert conflict by establishing open communications early on, and by making an extra effort to understanding expectations. I realize that my manager will always make the final call, so my role is to help facilitate the best solution in whatever way I can."

2. 'What didn't you like about your last job?'

"Like other negative questions, your best approach is to downplay the negative and play up the positive," suggests Taylor. "Your

candor is being evaluated with such questions, too. So you're better off addressing them briefly than dodging them with an unrealistic, dishonest response like: 'I loved every aspect of my job!'"

A possible answer to this would be: "I liked most of my responsibilities, especially X, Y and Z. Perhaps my least favorite aspect was administrative functions, but I eventually found a way to make it more appealing by"

3. 'How would your adversaries describe you?'

"In your zeal to be transparent, still remember not to sabotage yourself with a long or regretful, self-effacing tirade," she says. "The hiring manager is most interested in a short answer that illustrates your self-awareness, but also your level of confidence – and there's a fine line to walk."

When the going gets tough, you can also use humor to tamp down the intensity, Taylor says.

An example of this would be: "I really make an effort to be cooperative and friendly, so fortunately I don't have many that I know of. But if any of them are lurking around, I'd imagine they might say I'm very determined to get the job done when others might give up."

"Yes, you're putting a positive spin on the answer, but that's better than saying, 'My adversaries would say I'm stubborn and easily irritated,'" says Taylor.

4. 'What happened at your last job? Were you terminated or did you resign, and why?'

The hiring manager wants to see how honest you'll be about why you're no longer at a company, thinking of leaving one, or why you have a gap in employment. "They want to uncover anything that might suggest you weren't meeting expectations or better understand your work ethic," Taylor explains.

If you were terminated, your best approach might be to explain that you and your employer came to the conclusion that it was not a good match because of X, Y or Z ... if that's true.

But if your interviewer presses further, you may have to shed more light on the subject. Something like this might work: "I was terminated, but my manager and I *both* felt that we were moving in different directions."

"In either case, this is your opportunity to quickly move the conversation to what you're looking for going *forward* and why the position at hand is a great match," Taylor says.

5. 'Can you explain these gaps on your résumé?'

"If you're asked about protracted gaps in your history, the hiring manager wants to be sure no employers were omitted from your résumé, and is also examining your work ethic," she says.

You want to convey that your career is a priority, however you respond. Maybe you had a family matter to handle or took courses — but in that time period, the hiring manager wants to know you were making strides at some level to reenter the workforce.

You certainly don't want say, "I needed a six month break to de-

stress from my last tyrant of a boss," or, "It took me six months to decide what I wanted to do."

If it's true, you might want to try something like: "I have been active but also selective in my search. I have taken on project work and have managed some charitable projects, so I have definitely been busy."

6. 'Describe a time when you failed and how you handled the setback.'

"They want to get an inside track of how you perceive setbacks and recover from them," Taylor says.

Here, you want to choose a setback that was relatively minor, not one that highlights a major error in judgment, one that would directly affect your ability to do this particular job well, or one that will raise a red flag.

"The interviewer also wants to know that you can learn from mistakes," she says.

She suggests something like: "I always have viewed setbacks as learning opportunities. In my last job, I once found that I relied too heavily on an employee to deliver on a deadline. Since that time, I've always made an extra effort to check in more frequently."

7. 'What is your biggest concern about this position?'

Some hiring managers will put you on the spot with random questions in order to see how you respond to pressure, or get to the

"raw you," says Taylor.

"A question like this one is highly subjective," she adds. "Depending on your rapport with the interviewer, you may have greater latitude to express your concerns. For instance, if you think an offer is very likely, but you're concerned about the salary range, and that's a deal breaker, this is your chance to address that. But if you're early on in the process and have no issues, a possible response is: 'I'm actually very excited about this opportunity and have little concern. I'd just want to make sure I answer any questions you may have that we haven't yet covered.'"

8. 'What's your greatest weakness?'

This is perhaps the most common interview question, and your answer may determine the outcome.

So many people lie or dodge the question by giving a cliché answer like, "I am a perfectionist," or "I work too hard."

Personal finance author and speaker Ramit Sethi said in an episode of "The Tim Ferriss Show" podcast that when he asks this question, he wants to know "whether you're knowledgeable enough to acknowledge that you have a weakness," reports Business Insider's Rich Feloni.

The trick is to mention a smaller weakness that isn't directly related to the job at hand, writes Bernard Marr, a global enterprise performance expert and best-selling business author, in a LinkedIn post.

For example, if you are applying for a job as a medical transcriber,

you might say that you struggle with public speaking — *not* that you can't meet deadlines.

And then you'll want to focus on what you're doing to improve or eliminate the problem.

What the interviewer is looking for, Sethi said, is "that you are self-aware enough to be working on them to improve it."

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