1. Tell me about yourself

What the employer wants to know

This is probably the most common interview question. It’s often the first to be asked and, because it’s an open question, it’s a tough one to answer.

An employer will have developed an impression of you from your CV and cover letter. Your answer to this question quickly helps them determine the accuracy of that impression. It also gives them an opportunity to observe your levels of confidence and composure, through your voice and body language.

“What I generally look for is someone who is at ease with themselves,” says  business leader and star of *The Apprentice*. Littner believes if you’re calm and confident at the interview, you’ll probably be a good person to work with.

How to answer

A lot of candidates struggle with this question, says Margaret Buj, interview coach and author of *Land That Job*.

Her advice is: “Answer this question in terms of the skills and experience required for the position. Start with a brief summary of your career history. Then give them a short overview of how your career has developed, focusing more on what you’ve learnt or achieved.

“You might want to prepare by writing down a few key points you want to cover, which you can practise before the interview.”

James Shaikh, a recruitment manager of experienced hires at agrees. He says this question is an opportunity to introduce yourself, and explain how your strengths will enable you to do the job well.

Kathleen McLeary, HR manager for Blue Logic Computers and says keep things at a high level at this point in the interview. “Talk about your employment history, with timescales and a top-level reasoning as to why you are here.”

To make sure you’ve given the employer all the information they need, end your answer by asking them if there’s anything they’d like you to cover in more detail.

Remember to project your voice, because it’ll give the impression you’re confident and composed. Even if you’re a bag of nerves inside.

How not to answer

Candidates often make the mistake of saying too much when answering this question. “Don’t ramble, be brief,” says Buj. A one- to two-minute summary is the right length.

According to McLeary, there’s no need to go into detail at this early point in the interview, as the employer will dig deeper into specifics later on.

Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero, says: “Often the biggest turn off in a candidate is when they say what they think interviewers want to hear and it just doesn’t ring true.”

Finally, as with all interview questions, don’t give a generic answer. Ensure your points are tailored to the position you’re applying for.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

2. What do you know about the organisation?

What the employer wants to know

You can’t know everything about an employer from the outside, but it’s important to know the basics.

“We don’t want or expect a candidate to memorise reams of information from the website, but we do expect them to have an understanding of who we are, what we do, our products and services, and what they can do to enhance the company,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

The employer will expect you to know about their:

* Industry/sector.
* Goals.
* Key challenges.
* Major competitors.
* Culture and values.

They also want to find out if you’re enthusiastic about the prospect of working for them. Make sure you demonstrate your enthusiasm through your answer.

As Jamie Betts, a solutions consultant at recruitment and outsourcing company Ochre House, says: “If a candidate’s knowledge extends little beyond the homepage of the employer’s website, it suggests they can’t really be bothered.”

Claude Littner, star of *The Apprentice*, says: “Researching every facet of your job interview is crucial. Too often I have had candidates who have claimed significant levels of enthusiasm for a role yet have no significant knowledge of the business.”

The question often leads into [3. Why do you want to work for us?](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#why-do-you-want-to-work-for-us)

How to answer

The key to an excellent answer is thorough research.

As Littner says, you need to go beyond expectations.

“It’s important to do your research and make it clear you really want to join this company and not that this is one of 100 jobs you’ve applied for.”

There are many tools you can use to research any company, explains James Shaikh, recruitment manager at EY. They include:

* The company’s own site or careers website.
* Job boards like totaljobs.
* Press releases from the company and their competitors.
* Industry-specific publications to learn more about the sector.

But don’t stop there. “Researching the company, its structure, values and ambitions will demonstrate that you have thought about the move more holistically,” adds Shaikh.

Don’t be afraid to get creative in your research. For example, if you’re going for a sales assistant job at a retailer, visit one of its high street stores to get a firsthand impression of the role.

How not to answer

Don’t simply repeat the contents of the business’s website, or the company description in the job advert.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

3. Why do you want to work for us?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to uncover your motivations for the job.

Jemma Rawlins, associate director for home counties at Hudson HR Recruitment, says: “Is it salary, location, brand, team fit, or job title that is most important to you? This can vary hugely between people. What might be a great brand for one person might not appeal to someone else.”

Employers also use this question to screen bogus candidates who’ve only applied because they want to test the market or to negotiate a better salary with their current employer.

How to answer

To answer this question successfully, focus on the employer’s needs, not what you want.

It helps to demonstrate that you’re a good fit for the role, says Margaret Buj, author of *Land That Job*.

Show your knowledge of the company by mentioning something specific about the job that really interests you.

“It can be their new lines of business or technology they use – make sure you’ve done your research,” adds Buj.

You could also talk about the company culture or management structure.

Don’t forget to show enthusiasm, too. “When we ask this question, we are looking for genuine excitement for the role and company,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

You can’t be overly prepared for this question, advises Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero. “It’s glaringly obvious if you ask a candidate this question and they’ve done zero research or preparation. It shows they aren’t right for us. It’s not that we are self-important. We want people who want to work with us, and candidates who want to have always done their homework.”

Although you should focus on the employer’s needs, they may ask you about your personal motivations. One approach is to talk about your long-term career prospects with them.

If they infer that you’re overqualified, talk about the challenges you can find in the role. If they’re inferring you’re underqualified, mention you’re a fast learner and that growing with them is one of your major motivations.

How not to answer

A big mistake is to answer this question by saying negative things about your present employer, says Buj.

“You can talk about wanting progression, without saying your boss is blocking your progress at your current company,” says McLeary.

Don’t frame your answer in the past or present. Instead, focus on the future.

This is not the time to bring up salary or benefits, or relatively minor incentives such as free parking space.

And avoid sounding desperate for the job. Be clear that you don’t just want *any* job, but that you want *this* job.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

4. What can you bring to the company?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to compare your skills with those required for the role.

They’re also looking for your unique selling point (USP).

It’s a roundabout way of asking why they should offer you the job.

How to answer

Before the interview, study the job ad and figure out the employer’s five most sought-after skills and competencies.

Think critically about your work history (and education if applicable). For each skill, come up with a brief example that explains how you acquired or developed that skill, and how your possession of it benefited your employer at the time.

If you know someone who already works for the employer, ask them if they need a related skill or service that hasn’t been stated in the job ad. If you can demonstrate experience with something they’re looking for, your answer will be particularly strong.

According to Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital, you should also describe:

* How you work.
* Your passion for the industry.
* Your motivation to deliver results.
* Ways you can bring a fresh perspective to the business.

“Always ensure you tie these into the role you’re applying for,” says McLeary.appre

Don’t worry if you can’t fill every checkbox. The perfect candidate rarely exists, and interviewers and recruiters are well aware of this.

“It may be that on paper your experience is not immediately relevant, but the best candidates create angles that show you why all experience is good experience for the job,” says Claude Littner, star of *The Apprentice*.

How not to answer

Candidates often make the mistake of not using examples to back up their answers.

“Anyone can say that they have good organisational skills, for example, but if you say something specific such as: ‘I have excellent organisational skills. In the past 12 months I have supervised 10 corporate events with up to 300 participants each’, you are going to make a better impression,” says Margaret Buj, author of *Land That Job*.

This question is also phrased as…

* Why do you think you’re suitable for this role?
* Why should we hire you?
* What would you bring to the team?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

5. What are your weaknesses?

What the employer wants to know

An employer will ask this to see if you’re aware of your weaknesses, and whether or not you have strategies in place to tackle them.

“We’ve all got weaknesses. It’s recognising them that’s important. The interviewer is looking for you to be self-aware,” says Alison Clay, careers advisor, University of Sheffield.

“If a candidate can’t think of anything they want to improve, then that will set alarm bells ringing for the interviewer, making them a bit mistrustful. Nobody is flawless. I’m 12 years into the HR industry and I still have things I want to improve,” explains Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero.

Preparing for this question can be tough. Think carefully about a suitable weakness, *and* come up with a realistic and achievable approach for overcoming it.

Some employers also use the question to see how you perform under pressure. “It’s as much about your body language, as it is the answers,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

How to answer

It can be difficult to think of a weakness.

One trick is to ask your close friends and family what professional traits they think you need to work on. Even better, someone at your current job who you *trust completely*. They’re more likely to give relevant feedback. The obvious risk is that your employer might find out you’re looking for another job.

Don’t mention any faults that would directly impair your ability to do the job.

“Talk about an area of development – something you’re working on at the moment,” suggests John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*.

Examples include sharpening up skills in a particular area, such as taking an online course, or showing how you control your own learning agenda. Make sure you:

1. Describe your weakness.
2. Explain how you’re working to overcome it.

Here are some things you could say:

* “Previously, when managing multiple projects at the same time, I wasn’t able to remember and prioritise my tasks. To counter this, each day I created a prioritised to-do list.”
* “I used to spend too much time on tasks that weren’t the highest priority. Now I’m better at allocating my time to things that deliver value to the business.”
* “I used to get nervous giving presentations, so I enrolled on a course to improve my public speaking.”

Another tactic is to pick a weakness that isn’t vital to the role, says Claire Jenkins, job interview expert and founder of 121 Interview Coaching. She says that even though it’s not vital to the role, you still need to make sure “you have a plan to deal with it and can explain how you are already on the way to fixing it”.

How not to answer

Lees says don’t pick a weakness that’s really a strength in disguise. He says the interviewer will see through your answer, and it’ll come across as a bluff.

“Gimmicky answers are also unsafe territory as it could make you seem unprofessional,” he adds.

A classic, overused example is “I’m a perfectionist”. Interviewees are often advised to use it. Don’t. The advice is outdated.

McLeary says don’t get too personal. “We don’t want to know if you never get your washing done in time or have a few too many drinks at the office parties. Talk about something that relates to work. Being able to identify an area for improvement is a positive trait, it shows you are willing to learn and progress.”

“Don’t highlight something that’s a key skill of the job. Give another example that isn’t on the list of essentials,” says Katie Casserly, careers advisor at the University of Sheffield.

And don’t say that you don’t have any weaknesses.

This question is also phrased as…

* What is your greatest weakness?
* Tell me about your weaknesses.
* What are your strengths and weaknesses?
* Tell me about your main development areas.
* What areas do you need to develop the most?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

6. What are your strengths?

What the employer wants to know

Employers are interested in how your skills, competencies and experiences match what they need for the role. They want to know if you have the relevant capabilities and experience for the job. If you do, they’ll want to hire you.

Perfect your answer to this question, and you’ll improve your chances of landing the job greatly.

Another way they might ask the question is What can you bring to the company? (question 4).

How to answer

Analyse the job advert and pick out the key skills and competencies needed for the role. When researching the company, also keep a lookout for any information that shows what skills and competencies it’s looking for.

Claire Jenkins, founder of 121 Interview Coaching, advises memorising three top competencies the hiring manager will be looking for in their ideal candidate. “Then work out how you can sell your transferable skills and experience,” she adds.

Especially consider how your strengths could set you apart from other candidates. “Describe a genuine strength, which you can demonstrate, is needed by the role, and you will enjoy using,” says Alison Clay, careers advisor at the University of Sheffield.

Make it clear how your current employer has benefited from your strengths. For example, say: “I have met or exceeded targets every quarter, which I feel is due to my strengths in tenacity and persuasiveness.”

How not to answer

Don’t list strengths that aren’t relevant to the job you’re applying for. And don’t be shy about your accomplishments.

“One mistake people make is to think of this as bragging. The best thing to do is to match your top three strengths with what they’re looking for – that’s much more effective,” says John Lees, author of Knockout Interview.

You must avoid generic buzzwords and clichés, says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital. “Phrases such as ‘I work well independently as well as in a team’, doesn’t tell us much about you.”

Mention real, tangible strengths that you’ll bring to the role.

Most of all, don’t be dishonest. It’s not only unethical, but there’s also a high chance you’ll get caught out.

This question is also phrased as…

* What are the key strengths that you’ll bring to this role?
* What are your key skills?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

7. Why is there a gap in your work history?

What the employer wants to know

To avoid this question, don’t leave a gap in your employment history on your job application or in your CV.

From an employer’s perspective, a gap is a red flag. It could put doubt in their mind, when there should be none. You can counter this by having a reasonable explanation for it.

The most common reasons for a gap on the CV are:

* Redundancy.
* Dismissal.
* Travelling/gap year.
* Personal/health issues.
* Being a carer.
* Being a parent.

The employer will consider whether you put the time to good use. For example, did you take a course to develop your skill set, or travel to broaden your horizons. Or, on the flipside, did you waste your time, by not actively job seeking.

How to answer

“Don’t panic. We aren’t here to catch you out. It’s our job to collect the facts. Be honest,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

According to Margaret Buj, author of *Land That Job*, your approach to this question will depend on many factors:

* How much time you’ve had off.
* What you did during the time you were off.
* Your track record in your previous jobs.

“If possible, talk about anything constructive you did during your time off, like preparing for an important exam, volunteering or completing an MBA. Mention skills or knowledge you cultivated during this time,” adds Buj.

McLeary adds: “If you went travelling, tell us why you went, what you learned. Tell us about what you did with your time; was it spent productively?”

If there’s a noticeable gap in your employment and you were going through a personal issue, you’re well within your rights to say: “I was dealing with something personal and decided to take a break from the workplace to allow me to focus on getting that resolved as quickly as possible. This enabled me to move on,” says Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs.

Another approach, says Buj, is to describe the issue as a past problem that will not interfere with your future productivity.

Although it may feel counterintuitive, bringing up the gap yourself can be a good tactic. “If you’ve got missing time in your CV or have experienced redundancy, you’ll need to rehearse a short, upbeat statement, that gets you out of danger, usually linking past to present,” says John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*.

Always be honest, says James Shaikh, recruitment manager at EY. He says: “If you have taken time out of the traditional career framework to care for a relative, to pursue a business idea or due to illness, then the first piece of advice is to be honest and open about it. As an employer, understanding why that experience was important to you is informative. As a candidate, working for a company that respects your decisions and values is vitally important. I would also advise any candidate that all experiences are learning experiences. There will be lessons learned and skills developed even in the most arduous of situations that, when properly articulated, will contribute to your ability to present yourself as the right person for the role.”

How not to answer

Larsen says you mustn’t lie. Be careful about how much you reveal, and try to put a positive spin on the situation. “You can take something positive from every experience. If a job didn’t work out, communicate how you grew from it.”

Don’t be negative or defensive when you explain the gap. “As long as a candidate can explain a gap in their work history, this isn’t seen as a negative. However, when a gap in a CV is not constructive – for example, when someone leaves a job because they say they don’t like it – it doesn’t show resilience,” says Claire Keith, resourcing manager at Mamas & Papas.

Don’t say: “It’s none of your business” or “I don’t want to talk about that.”

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

8. What challenges are you looking for in a position?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to gauge how you approach challenges on the job and what challenges you expect to face, says Margaret Buj, author of *Land That Job*.

“What we’re trying to understand through these questions is how motivated the candidate is to perform both in the job, and within the company,” says Jamie Betts, a solutions consultant at recruitment and outsourcing company Ochre House.

The employer will be looking for a candidate whose ambitions match well with the opportunities they can provide. If you give the impression you don’t have any ambitions, you’ll come across as not wanting to deliver results. If you describe ambitions that the company could never realistically fulfil, the employer will be concerned you’ll want to leave too soon after being hired.

How to answer

Frame your response in terms of the employer’s key challenges and how you can help resolve them. This is where your research in the company is vital, because it allows you to highlight the skills you have that are most relevant to that company.

Describe challenges that fit the role you’re applying for, and your own skill set. They should be the right balance between stretching and achievable.

For example, if you’re interviewing for a position as director of human resources in a company where employee relations are a problem, you could say: “I am looking to focus on resolving employee relations issues.” If the company is interested in talent development, you could say: “I want to help an organisation grow through talent development.”

If you couldn’t find the key challenges facing the employer, answer in terms of your own career. “A career is a challenge. It is not easy pushing a team, product or service higher to achieve success. Talk about skills you want to improve, what career progression you want and what you need to get there,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

How not to answer

Don’t suggest challenges that would either hinder your ability to do the work or be impossible to overcome.

At the other end of the scale, don’t suggest challenges that would be too easy or too quick to complete, as this won’t allow you to show room for growth.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

9. What would an excellent performance look like in this role?

What the employer wants to know

The employer is trying to determine three things:

* How committed you’d be to this role.
* Your general work ethic.
* What impact you might make.

You also need to ask yourself What challenges are you looking for in a position? (question 8).

How to answer

Think how the employer defines success, says Claire Jenkins, founder of 121 Interview Coaching. It’s not easy, but see if you can unearth the key performance indicators (KPIs) and other targets the employer considers as measures of excellence and success. “These may be broader than tangible numbers. They could be about reputation management or avoiding criticism, winning awards, market recognition, extended or renewed contracts.”

Your answer should then describe the actions you’ll take to help the employer achieve those measures. Where possible, describe relevant examples from your current role.

Prepare for this question alongside question 13. What would you do in the first month in the job?, which is essentially the same question, but set within a timeframe.

If you flip things around, and you pose this question to the employer, you have a good opportunity to learn more about the job. “Candidates should always remember that a job interview is a conversation and asking good questions is crucial,” says Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero.

How not to answer

Many candidates make the mistake of overpromising, which can damage your credibility.

As with question What would you do in the first month in the job? (question 13), don’t suggest metrics that are too easy or impossible to achieve.

Likewise, don’t focus only on your previous role. Instead, describe how everything you have learned throughout your career will enable you to deliver results in the role you’re applying for.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

10. Tell me an achievement you are proud of

What the employer wants to know

Alan Andrews, HR manager for KIS Finance, says an employer asks this question to find out what you consider as important, and what your priorities are. He says these show whether you’d fit in and how well you’d perform.

Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital, adds: “This question is designed to find out more about you and what makes you tick.”

Clare Keith, resourcing manager at Mamas & Papas, agrees: “As a business you’re not just recruiting someone to do that role, you’re looking for a personality. You want a rounded individual. If someone describes a challenge that shows resilience, such as completing an enduring fitness challenge or a charitable accomplishment that demonstrates a strong social and ethical conscience, this stands them in good stead.”

How to answer

“Reciting academic or obvious work achievements are not the best answers – they won’t distinguish you from the crowd,” says Claire Croft, who works in HR for Asos. “Say something that speaks about your aspirations and values. Organising a sport or fundraising event, taking part in a race, or learning and using a new language or musical instrument are good examples.”

Again, try to marry your selected achievement with skills and behaviours that are pertinent for the job, advises James Shaikh, hiring manager at EY. “This is a great opportunity to highlight the strengths that you will bring to the role on your own terms.”

Work-based achievements are rarely recognised with an award or celebration, so it’s easy to lose track of them or forget them entirely. If you don’t keep a record of your work achievements, you might recall some by:

Looking at your last appraisal.  
Asking colleagues for feedback.  
Reviewing your work emails to find examples of recognition from your line manager or clients.  
You’ll strengthen your answer by spelling out how your achievement benefited your employer.

How not to answer

Don’t pick anything that isn’t relevant to the role – or something that isn’t a big achievement, says Claire Jenkins, founder of 121 Interview Coach.

Do not be dishonest. Your claims will likely be fact-checked as part of the reference process.

“Don’t be afraid to be proud of something you’ve done. Confidence is achievable without being cocky,” says Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero.

This question is also phrased as…

* What is your greatest achievement?
* What is your greatest accomplishment?
* Tell me about your biggest achievement.
* What are you most proud of?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

11. Why should we hire you?

What the employer wants to know

The important part of this question is ‘you’. That’s who the employer is interested in.

“What makes you valuable to the business? What are you motivated by?” says Claire Keith, resourcing manager at Mamas & Papas.

See also: 4. What can you bring to the company?, 6. What are your strengths? and 12. What can you for us that other candidates can’t?

How to answer

Answering a question like this means explaining your unique selling points (USPs) in particular, says Lisa LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx.

Typical USPs include:

* You’re trained in using a particular tool, application or service.
* Your current employer has put you on management training.
* You’re certified or possess a renowned qualification.
* You’re trained in health and safety or first aid.

“Use questions like this to go beyond simply listing your skills and really demonstrate the research you’ve done on the company and the role requirements. Talk about how your specific skills can make a difference to the company and the challenges it faces,” says Kim Whitfield, head of resourcing at M&S.

Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs, says this question gives you the opportunity to deliver your elevator pitch. “Have this snappy summary up your sleeve. Imagine you are stuck in an elevator with the hiring manager – you should be able to easily pitch yourself with the key points you’d want to make.”

How not to answer

Whatever you do, don’t say “I don’t know.”

Although you need to sell yourself, avoid answers that sound arrogant. Lay out the facts rather than bragging about your skills and experience.

Avoid clichés, too. “Don’t say you are passionate about the job. It’s a very overused term that doesn’t really tell me anything. Try not to use generalist terms that could refer to anything in life, not just this role,” advises Alison Clay, careers advisor at the University of Sheffield.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

12. What can you do for us that other candidates can’t?

What the employer wants to know

According to Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital, employers ask this question to:

* Understand your character.
* See if you’re negative about others.
* See if you focus on yourself.
* Find out whether or not you can cope under the pressure the question puts you under.

See also: 4. What can you bring to the company?, 6. What are your strengths? and 11. Why should we hire you?

How to answer

The employer is interviewing people who they believe could do the job, so make sure you stand out, says John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*. “It could be you have combination of skills, or have done a similar role.”

Ask yourself: “What do I have to offer that others don’t?” says Claire Jenkins, founder of 121 Interview Coaching. “Make a list of your strengths and take a note of them into the interview with you.”

These can be technical or behavioural skills, suggests Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs. “You might be someone who excels at leading a team, or has impact and influence at an executive level. Focus on these and come to the interview armed with examples of the way you have applied these and the measurable result.”

Where possible, provide numbers to illustrate the outcomes of your actions.

If you’re struggling to come up with an example, try to think of a time at a previous job where you exceeded your manager’s expectations.

How not to answer

Don’t make flimsy promises like “I’ve got loads of potential” or “I’ll give this job 110%.”

Provide tangible examples of your skills or experiences. For example, don’t say: “I go above and beyond what’s required.” Do say: “On project X, I went above and beyond what was required in Y and Z ways.”’

Don’t be negative about the employer you’re interviewing for, such as pointing out lots of their flaws. Avoid being negative about your current employer, too.

This question is also phrased as…

* Why are you suitable for the job?
* Why should we hire you?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

13. What would you do in the first month in the job?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to know if you’ve considered what you’d like to achieve in the role.

They’ll want to establish whether you understand what would be required of you, and how you’d contribute to the organisation.

Employers also use this question to weed out candidates who aren’t serious about getting the job.

See also 9. What would an excellent performance look like in this role?

How to answer

“The key is to show you understand the scope and nature of the role and industry and to reassure the interviewer that you’re up for the challenge,” says Lisa LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx.

Prepare some example goals, each with a timescale for completion. Ensure both the goals and the timescales are realistic.

Goals could be personal, for your team, the business function or for the business as a whole.

“When you outline your vision, demonstrate the experience and knowledge you will bring but also ensure that you are open minded enough to learn from, and react positively to, the team that you are about to join,” says James Shaikh, recruitment manager at EY. “As professionals we often wish to make our mark as quickly as we can. However, it’s important to respect the established working practice of your new team enough to learn the history and evolution first.”

Don’t claim you’ll make an immediate impact. Savvy employers recognise new hires can only begin to have a meaningful impact in their second or third months in the role. The first month is often spent getting up to speed.

Make your answer specific to the job you’ve applied for.

If you’re applying for a project management role, your first main goal might be to complete your first project within the first three months.

For an office manager, your goal in the first week could be to learn the department’s main systems and processes.

Maximise your research on the employer. For example, if they’re about to bring a new product to market, relate your goals to the launch.

Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs, says using a presentation is one of the best ways of communicating your planned impact. “If you can say you have a presentation prepared that you would like to take them through, it would definitely make you stand out.”

Those applying for managerial and senior roles should include their goals for the second year in the role. Such foresight signals your your commitment and loyalty, and underscores your strategic thinking.

How not to answer

Don’t make up something on the spot. Prepare examples in advance.

Don’t make overly ambitious claims, such as ‘I can turnaround this poorly performing department in two weeks.’

Finally, as with all questions, don’t say “I don’t know.” You won’t get the job with that kind of answer, because it indicates to the employer that you don’t care or that you’re not capable.

This question is also phrased as…

* What would you do in the first week in the job?
* What would you do in the first year in the job?

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

14. What kind of environment do you like best?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to know if you would fit with their organisational culture and working conditions. That includes:

* Fitting in with the team.
* Demographics and personalities of existing employees.
* Working hours.
* Work ethic.
* The style of the workplace (especially relevant for office jobs).

The employer isn’t looking for a perfect match – just a good one. They’re mindful of offering the job to someone who wouldn’t enjoy working with them.

Equally, you shouldn’t accept a job somewhere you know you won’t be happy.

Do your research before the interview to get a good grasp of the employer’s culture and environment. Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero, says you shouldn’t hesitate to ask the employer about it during interview: “Candidates should always remember it’s a two-way conversation. It’s important to make sure the company’s culture fits them as much as they fit the company. That will make for a successful and happy candidate.”

How to answer

Be honest about who you are, and what you want.

“Candidates should not take a position where they know they will be unhappy, so it is not a terrible thing to be completely honest. If they don’t want to hire you then they won’t – and it means you’re not a good fit,” says Katherine Burik, founder of The Interview Doctor.

As Claude Littner, star of *The Apprentice*, says: “It’s very important to do your research and to try and understand a bit more about the culture of the company. It’s one thing to know about the facts of the company but another to know what the culture is like. Is it made up of very relaxed, young trendy people? Is it a bit more formal, a bit more old fashioned? You’ve got to try and make sure that in the same way they’re trying to offer you a job, you’re comfortable working in that environment.”

When you research a potential employer, be sure to consider what it’s like to work there (see also 2. What do you know about the organisation? And 3. Why do you want to work for us?).

Gain an insight into its culture by visiting the company’s website, social media pages, and LinkedIn profiles of its current employees. It’s also a good idea to search online for videos of the offices. If you know any current employees, see if you can speak to them.

If you think you’d be a good fit, spell out in your answer how your personality matches with the employer’s culture.

How not to answer

Don’t lie to yourself or to the employer. If at interview the employer tells you about their work environment, and you know straight away that it wouldn’t suit you, say so. The interview might very well end there, so politely thank the interviewer for their time. They’ll be grateful for your honesty.

It’s a mistake to repeat the employer’s website description of their work environment. Word-for-word repetition will be obvious to the interviewer and they’ll be left with the impression that you’re not being honest.

Don’t focus on any negatives about the employer’s environment, for example the dated design of the building or lack of meeting rooms. In all likelihood these are things that frustrate your interviewers, and they don’t want to hear about it.

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

15. What’s your dream job?

What the employer wants to know

This is one of the hardest common interview questions to answer.

Not only do you need to answer the question that’s explicitly asked, but you’ve also got to answer any implied questions such as ‘What’s your career path?’

Claire Keith, resourcing manager at Mamas & Papas, says: “I need to understand, has the candidate logically thought about the steps they take to get to their end career goal.”

Other implied questions include:

* What are your aspirations?
* Do your aspirations align with the opportunities this employer can provide?
* Would you fit in with the employer’s culture?
* How motivated are you for this job?
* How happy would you be in this job?

Employers like this question because it tests candidates by putting them under pressure. It often reveals candidates who are unlikely to be loyal in the short to medium term. It’s not about trying to trip candidates up. It’s about getting beyond prepared and rehearsed answers, to really find out what candidates want.

How to answer

Talk about:

* The skills you possess, and how they meet the needs of the employer.
* Those skills you want to develop, and how this role will enable you to develop them.
* The ideals and ideas that motivate you, and how the employer is striving for them.
* Your areas of passion or interest, and how this role will help you engage with them.
* Your values and how well they align with those of the employer.

One trick is to talk about the nature of your dream job, rather than a specific job title. “For example, perhaps it’s working as part of a high-performing team or with a progressive company. Think about what’s important to you and describe how your dream job aligns with this,” says Lisa LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx.

Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs, says that it’s ok to have high aspirations at an early stage in your career, as long as you can show you’re considering your career path. “You could say: ‘This job that I’m currently interviewing for is absolutely perfect in regards to giving me the skills and experience required for the career path I’m on’.”

In this case, spell out how the role you’re applying for will help you grow in ways that’ll support your chosen career path.

“It’s important to have some kind of relevance for jobs in the industry that you’re interviewing for. Whether it be in the technology or finance field, it’s important to link that dream job to the industry that you’re applying for,” adds Larsen.

How not to answer

Avoid picking a dream job that doesn’t exist.

You should avoid straying too far from the role you’re applying for. “Don’t create a picture so far removed from the job you’re applying for that it is unrealistic. List some key areas instead that your dream job would involve that marry up well with the job you are applying for,” says Katie Casserly, careers advisor at the University of Sheffield.

Don’t mention anything that could compromise your position if offered the job, such as working for a competitor, setting up your own business or travelling the world.

Don’t describe the job you’re applying for, because it’ll sound like you lack drive. The same applies to your current job, as apart from sounding weird, it’ll give the impression that you won’t settle in the role you’re applying for.

[**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#table-of-contents)

16. What motivates you?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to know if you’ll be driven to do a good job.

“This is an important question because it allows a prospective employer to understand you, and also gauge if your motivations fit the culture of the organisation,” says Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs.

Abby Blackmore, head of operations at Impero, feels strongly about this question: “This is a question I think every employer should ask in every interview. It’s a core element to people… Employers should continue to ask this question of their staff no matter how long they’ve been with the company. If the motivation isn’t there, the job performance will begin to flag and the candidate’s enthusiasm will dwindle. We want to keep employees happy and motivated, so they continue to learn and grow in their job roles for years to come, creating a good relationship with longevity and trust between the two parties.”

How to answer

“By the interview stage, you should have a good understanding of the role you have applied for and be able to identify what it is the employer is looking for,” explains Lisa LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx.

It’s important to get across that your skills, experience and personality match the role.

If you’ve done your research and you have a good grasp of the employer’s mission, then you’ll find it easier to match your motivations with the role.

“Consider the role that you are applying for and which areas genuinely provide you with job satisfaction. This should help you understand and craft the best answer,” says Larsen.

“For example, if the employer is seeking a ‘self-starter who thrives in a target-driven environment’ it’s essential you talk about how you are motivated by targets and love the freedom of being able to use your initiative to deliver results,” adds LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx.

Prepare some examples that centre around how you derive job satisfaction.

“Prepare high-energy stories, which capture roles that have motivated you in the past. If your style is naturally quiet and downbeat, rehearse replies that have more uplift,” says John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*.

“If you have a passion for meeting new people and you’re going for a customer-facing role, we will see that as a positive as this is something that is required to be a good candidate,” says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital.

A good approach is to describe the goals you’d target in the role you’re interviewing for. The same goes for questions 9. What would an excellent performance look like in this role? and [13. What would you do in the first month in the job?](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#what-would-you-do-in-the-first-month-in-the-job)

How not to answer

Avoid mentioning financial motivations like salary or other perks of the job. They’re a given, no matter the job (see also 19. What are your salary expectations?).

Don’t describe anything that could be interpreted as being counter-productive to the team, or overly competitive against others in the company. An obvious exception is competition within a sales team.

This question is also phrased as…

* What are your career aspirations or goals?
* Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years’ time?

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

17. If you were an animal what would you be?

What the employer wants to know

“If you are asked an odd question that feels unrelated to the role, just remember it is more likely that they want to gauge how you respond rather than what the answer is – approach it with honesty and a light touch,” says Kim Whitfield, head of resourcing at M&S.

Offbeat interview questions such as this can often be difficult to answer. They’re typically used to assess how a candidate handles pressure, their levels of initiative, and how they respond to being put outside their comfort zone.

Other examples of wacky interview questions include:

* Which three items would you take with you to Mars?
* Sell me this pen.

How to answer

You might wonder ‘how on earth do I prepare for a question that?’. However according to John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*, it is possible. “Strangely enough there are ways. It’s almost like the way comedians prepare for hecklers – having internal lines memorised that can get you out of difficulty.”

Part of good interview preparation is learning how to tell good stories aloud, particularly ones the interviewer doesn’t already know.

“It’s just as good to say ‘that’s a really interesting question, I’m sure you get a lot of interesting answers. Off the top of my head I could probably think of…’ That’s a simple construct that buys you 10 seconds of thinking time, and flatters the interviewer, as well as showing that you’re not completely like a rabbit in the headlights,” says Lees.

Once you’ve bought yourself some thinking time, you should be able to pick an animal that reflects some of your key strengths or traits. Here’s an example: “I’m a bit like a sheepdog, I focus on rounding up the team to meet a particular goal. I’m a quick learner, as well as being friendly and adaptable.”

Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital, says: “We want to see how you would react to an odd question. We are looking at your thought process and creativity. It doesn’t really matter which animal you choose, but it is how you explain the qualities and how it fits into the role.”

A perfect answer would explicitly reference your professional strengths (see also 6. What are your strengths?)

How not to answer

The worst response is to say nothing or fail to take the question seriously.

The interviewer is looking for you to think on your feet. So, whatever animal you pick, you need to justify your answer by tying it back to the skills needed for the job.

Claire Keith, resourcing manager at Mamas & Papas, says: “For me, candidates should also avoid the cute stuff. Think about the characteristics of an animal and the synergies between the behaviours you exhibit within the workplace environment. Are you like a lion – strategic and patient?”

Don’t give an answer that suggests you have negative personality traits.

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

18. Describe your character in under 30 words

What the employer wants to know

An employer uses this question to find out if you’re self-aware.

Self-awareness is a positive professional trait. Self-aware people are typically open to feedback and professional development.

The question also tests your ability to summarise a large volume of complex information in a very limited amount of words.

As with all challenging interview questions, an employer will observe your voice and body language, since they’ll indicate how well you cope under pressure.

How to answer

Describe the skills and competencies that make you a perfect fit for the role, advises Kim Whitfield, head of resourcing at M&S.

You could mention: punctuality, work ethic, team-working skills, interpersonal skills.

John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*, provides this example of a good answer:

‘From what I can see, you need a combination of an analytical thinker and someone who is good at handling clients. That’s how I was described in my last appraisal.’

In your response, stick to two or three traits at the most. To make your answer credible, back up each trait with an example of a situation where you called upon it, and the end result, advises Stefan Larsen, senior HR business partner at totaljobs.

The short word count makes it important to use every word effectively, says Marissa Sanders, graduate recruitment manager at law firm Irwin Mitchell. “Be creative, but use full sentences rather than a list of attributes.”

Think about all the skills and competencies you’ll bring to the role (see [6. What are your strengths?](https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/most-common-interview-questions/#what-are-your-strengths)).

Consider adding a weakness, but be sure to include how you plan to address it, as in question

5. What are your weaknesses?

How not to answer

Don’t mention negative traits that would impair your ability to do the job.

“This question delves into how you are perceived within the team and by your peers and manager,” says Jemma Rawlins, associate director at Hudson HR Recruitment. “It can sometimes uncover other issues that might not have come to light previously about the relationship with your manager, or your reasons for leaving.”

This question is also phrased as…

* How would your friends describe you?
* What would your colleagues or friends say are your best qualities?
* What would your boss say about you?

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

19. What are your salary expectations?

What the employer wants to know

The employer wants to find out if your salary expectations match the salary they have in mind for this role.

If your expectation is too high for the budget available for the role, this could put you out of the running.

If your expectation is too low, this could leave the interviewer questioning your suitably for the role, in regards to your level of experience.

How to answer

Unless the interviewer brings it up, you should avoid getting into salary negotiations in the interview, as it’s best discussed at the point of a job offer.

However, some employers feel the need to address the subject at interview says Kathleen McLeary, HR manager at Blue Digital. “We understand this can be a sensitive question, but we need to understand if we are both on the same page.”

To cover this scenario, ensure you have a salary number in mind.

To determine the right number, research the average rate for this type of role within the particular industry.

The totaljobs Salary Checker is a useful tool that allows you to easily compare the average salary for a role, across UK locations, disciplines and industries. By entering your location and job title, the tool reveals the average salary, and the highest and lowest rates based on recent totaljobs job advertisements.

When figuring out the average rate for your chosen role, be sure to take into account how salaries vary across regions, and how some salaries are complemented by strong benefits packages (for example, a company phone, gym membership, pension schemes and bonus compensation).

In some cases, it’s worth pushing the question back to the employer; ‘What value would the company put on this role and responsibilities?’.

Lisa LaRue, career coach and founder of CareerWorx, adds that you should be clear on your salary expectations. “If, for example, you are happy with a salary equal to or greater than your current one, let them know. If landing the job is more important that the salary, don’t be afraid to let them know.”

How not to answer

Don’t under or overestimate what you’re worth, says Alison Clay, careers advisor at the University of Sheffield.

Don’t give away more than you need to about your current or desired salary, or ask others in the room about their remuneration.

If the employer steers the conversation to salary negotiation, and there’s no way of avoiding it, never use your personal finances as reasoning for your salary expectations. That includes credit card debt, student loan payments and child maintenance payments.

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

20. Do you have any questions for us?

What the employer wants to know

Many employers ask this question because they simply want to give you fair opportunity to find out more about them. Others ask because their HR department requires them to do so.

This question also gives employers one final opportunity to gauge your interest in the role and to assess your critical thinking skills.

How to answer

This question is a great way to open up a discussion, says Renu Gundala, recruitment team lead at Oxfam UK.

“You could ask about the industry in general, such as ‘what are the biggest challenges you’re experiencing?’ or ask for more information about the potential role. Good questions will explore not just how the company operates, but also give a flavour of whether you are a good fit for that environment.”

Many candidates wonder ‘what questions should I ask in an interview?’ Open-ended questions are better than ones that require yes or no answers. You could ask questions around:

* The company or department.
* Organisational culture.
* The team you’d be joining.
* The challenges you may face in the first month.
* The future direction of the company.
* What the company is doing to beat competitors.
* What a typical day would be like.
* Why the role has become available.

John Lees, author of *Knockout Interview*, suggests you also prepare three to five key points based on the role and your skills.

“If you have outstand*ing points that you’*d like to convey, ask ‘before I ask my questions to you, may I tell you about this one thing we haven’t discussed yet?’”

This ensures that your key skills and strengths are given the airtime you need.

Examples of good interview questions to ask

* What would you expect me to achieve in the first several months?
* What is the department’s biggest challenge at this time?
* In your opinion, what do you see as the greatest challenge to this organisation’s future growth?
* How would you describe the ideal employee?
* What type of training does the company provide?
* What are the current goals of the department?
* How soon are you looking for someone to start?
* I’m really interested in this job. When can I expect to hear back from you?

How not to answer

The most important thing is that you’ve prepared a shortlist of questions, as not preparing any shows a lack of enthusiasm for the role and company.

“Don’t ask questions you could discover yourself, or ones that sound as if you‘re being sniffy about the role. For example, ask how the role will develop or how quickly you can progress,” explains Lees.

Don’t stick rigidly to your list of pre-prepared questions. If one has already been answered earlier in the interview, don’t ask it.

And make sure you don’t take up the interviewer’s time by asking too many!

Also, don’t discuss pay until they’ve shown you a job offer, say Lees. “You can say ‘I’m applying for jobs in X pay range’, but don’t get into the nitty gritty of salary negotiations.”

Questions to avoid include:

* Asking about lunch breaks, holiday allowance, etc.
* Basic questions which should have already been covered in your research, job description or person specification.
* Irrelevant or silly questions, such as where the bathroom is or the company’s policy on office pets.
* Questions that are too personal or gossipy.

**^^^ Ranga Reddy ^^^**

Common interview questions do’s and don’ts

1. Prepare, prepare, prepare. Preparation is key to landing the job. “My tip is to do an analysis of yourself before the interview,” says Renu Gundala, recruitment team lead at Oxfam UK. “Sit down and identify your strengths and weaknesses specified in the job description. A good job advert will give you a starting point.
2. This will tell you a lot about your capability and how strong a candidate you are for the role.”
3. Be honest. Any lies are likely to be caught out when the employer contacts your references.
4. Wherever possible, match your skills with those the employer is looking for.
5. Whenever you say you have a skill, describe a situation in your work history that demonstrates you possess it or how you developed it.
6. Make a good first impression with positive and confident body language.
7. Do your homework on the people you will meet, the company, culture and the role, to confirm your interest to the potential employer and better tailor your answers.
8. Have a list of five key points you’d like to convey during the interview. If you don’t get an opportunity to raise them during the main part of the interview, cover them at the end.
9. Have a selection of pre-prepared strengths and weaknesses. Make sure your strengths are relevant to the role, and the weaknesses include competencies that you are working to improve. Avoid clichés.
10. Be prepared to be tested with difficult interview questions and pushed on areas you would rather avoid on your CV. Have answers memorised in advance.
11. Think about what you want to achieve in this role and to what timelines.
12. Use the right amount of detail in your responses – about two minutes’ worth of speaking for each answer.
13. Make sure you have some well-planned questions for the interviewer, so you don’t fall down at this important final hurdle.