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Top 20 Common Interview Questions and Answers

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First and foremost congratulations if you have an interview! That in itself is commendable, so now you just want to make sure you come across in the best possible light. I have been asked numerous times what to do in preparation for interviews. Whilst there is no way of predicting exactly what you will be asked, here are 20 common questions that tend to come up. This is by no means an exhaustive list. The purpose is to illustrate the importance of preparation and refreshing your memory regarding specific projects and situations.

1- Tell me about yourself.

This is probably the most asked question in an interview. It breaks the ice and gets you to talk about something you should be fairly comfortable with. Have something prepared that doesn't sound rehearsed. It's not about you telling your life story and quite frankly the interviewer just isn't interested. Unless asked to do so, stick to your education, career and current situation. Work through it chronologically from the furthest back to the present.

2- Why are you looking for another job (or why did you leave your previous job)?

On the surface this appears to be a simple question, yet it is easy to slip. I would suggest not mentioning money at this stage as you may come across as totally mercenary. If you are currently in employment you can say it's about developing your career and yourself as an individual. If you are in the unfortunate position of having been downsized stay positive and keep it brief. If you were fired you should have a solid explanation. Whatever your circumstances do not go into the drama and detail and stay positive.

3- What do you know about this organisation?

Do your homework prior to the interview. Doing the background work will help you stand out. Find out who the main players are, have they been in the news recently? You're not expected to know every date and individual yet you need to have a solid understanding of the company as a whole.

4- Why do you want this job?

This questions typically follows on from the previous one. Here is where your research will come in handy. You may want to say that you want to work for a company that is x, y, z, (market leader, innovator, provides a vital service, whatever it may be). Put some thought into this beforehand, be specific and link the company's values and mission statement to your own goals and career plans.

5- Who are our main competitors?

This shows you really understand the industry and the main players. Think about a few and say how you think they compare; similarities, differences. This is a good opportunity to highlight what you think are the company's key strengths.

6- What would your previous co-workers say about you?

This is not the arena for full disclosure. You want to stay positive and add a few specific statements or paraphrase. Something like "Joe Blogs always mentioned how reliable and hard working I was" is enough.

7- How do you handle stressful situations and working under pressure?

There are several ways of addressing this one. You may be the sort of person that works well under pressure; you may even thrive under pressure. Whatever the case may be just make sure you don't say you panic. You want to give specific examples of stressful situations and how well you dealt with them. You may also want to list a few tools you use to help you, such as to do lists etc. It is alright to say that if you feel you are way over your head you will ask for assistance. It is equally acceptable to say that you work best under pressure if this is indeed the case and relevant to the particular role.

8- Are you applying for other jobs?

If you are serious about changing jobs then it is likely that you are applying to other positions. It is also a way of showing that you are in demand. Be honest but don't go into too much detail, you don't want to spend a great deal of time on this. If asked about names of who you have spoken to it is absolutely legitimate to say you prefer not to disclose that information at this stage.

9- What are you like working in a team?

Your answer is of course that you are an excellent team player; there really is no other valid answer here as you will not function in an organisation as a loner. You may want to mention what type of role you tend to adopt in a team, especially if you want to emphasis key skills such as leadership. Be prepared to give specific examples in a very matter of fact sort of way.

10- What sort of person do you not like to work with?

This is not an easy one as you have no idea whom you would be working with. Even if you can immediately think of a long list of people you don't like to work with, you could take some time to think and say that it's a difficult question as you have always gotten on fine with your colleagues.

11- What is your greatest strength?

This is your time to shine. Just remember the interviewer is looking for work related strengths. Mention a number of them such as being a good motivator, problem solver, performing well under pressure, loyal, positive attitude, eager to learn, taking the initiative, attention to detail. Whichever you go for, be prepared to give examples that illustrate this particular skill.

12- What is your biggest weakness?

A challenging one, as if you so you have no weaknesses you are obviously lying! Be realistic and mention a small work related flaw. Many people will suggest answering this using a positive trait disguised as a flaw such as “I’m a perfectionist” or “I expect others to be as committed as I am”. I would advocate a certain degree of honesty and list a true weakness. Emphasize what you’ve done to overcome it and improve. This question is all about how you perceive and evaluate yourself.

13- What has been your biggest professional disappointment/achievement so far?

If asked about disappointments mention something that was beyond your control. Stay positive by showing how you accepted the situation and have no lingering negative feelings. If asked about your greatest achievement chose an example that was important to you as well as the company. Specify what you did, how you did it and what the results were. Ideally pick an example that can relate to the positions you are applying for.

14- What kind of decisions do you find most difficult to take?

There is no right or wrong here. The logic behind this type of question is that your past behaviour is likely to predict what you will do in the future. What the interviewer is looking for is to understand what you find difficult.

15- Tell me about a suggestion that you have made that has been successfully implemented.

Here the emphasis is on the implemented. You may have had many brilliant ideas, but what the interview is looking for is something that has actually materialised. Be prepared to briefly describe how it went from an idea to implementation stage.

16- Have you ever had to bend the rules in order to achieve a goal?

Beware of this type of question! Under no circumstances is it necessary to break company policy to achieve something. Resist the temptation to answer and give examples, as what the interviewer is looking for is to determine how ethical you are and if you will remain true to company policy.

17- Are you willing to travel or relocate if necessary?

This is something you need to have very clear in your mind prior to the meeting, if you think there is any chance this may come up. There is no point in saying yes just to get the job if the real answer is actually no. Just be honest as this can save you problems arising in the future.

18- Why should we hire you?

This is an important question that you will need to answer carefully. It is your chance to stand out and draw attention to your skills, especially those that haven’t already been addressed. Saying “because I need a job” or “I’m really good” just won’t cut it. Don’t speculate about other candidates and their possible strengths or flaws. Make sure you focus on you. Explain why you make a good employee, why you are a good fit for the job and the company and what you can offer. Keep it succinct and highlight your achievements.

19- Regarding salary, what are your expectations?

Always a tricky one and a dangerous game to play in an interview. It is a common mistake to discuss salary before you have sold yourself and like in any negotiation knowledge is power. Do your homework and make sure you have an idea of what this job is offering. You can try asking them what the salary range. If you want to avoid the question altogether you could say that at the moment you are looking to advance in your career and money isn't your main motivator. If you do have a specific figure in mind and you are confident you can get it, then it may be worth going for it.

20- Do you have any questions for us?

This one tends to come up every time. Have some questions prepared. This will show you have done some research and are eager to know and learn as much as possible. You probably don't want to ask more than 3 or 4 questions. Try and use questions that focus on you becoming an asset to the company. A generic one might be "how soon can I start if I were to get the job". Another idea is to ask what you would be working on and how quickly they expect you to be able to be productive. Remember to ask about next steps and when you can expect to hear back.

Bare in mind that the interview starts from the minute you walk into the building until you leave and are out of sight. Don't think that just because you have left the meeting room, you are "off the hook". You need to maintain an image of confidence, enthusiasm, competence, reliability and professionalism throughout.