

The 10 Toughest Job Interview Questions

By Paul A. Greenberg

On the day of your big job interview you're set and ready to go: Conservative, tailored suit? Check. Concisely written resume and separate list of references? Check. Positive attitude? Check.

But have you given any thought to what you will be asked? If you have not, you may be overlooking the most critical step in your preparation. Here are 10 of the most challenging questions you may be asked, with some suggestions on how to respond:

1. *Why are you seeking new employment?*

What not to say: "I hate my job." Keep the tone of your meeting positive, and talk about your career goals, your desire to advance in your industry or your specific wish to work for this company. Employers are most impressed by growth-oriented individuals with an eye on the future. Your answer should accentuate your focus on the position for which you are applying. Any discussion of your dissatisfaction with your current job is a negative.

2. *Where do you see yourself in 5 (or 10) years?*

Employers love to ask this question. Your response should demonstrate that you have a career plan. The employer's interest is strictly professional. Give some real thought to this prior to your job search. Where do you see yourself in a few years? Be honest with the interviewer, and reasonably express your ambitions and your specific short term and long-term goals. ("I would like to learn everything possible about my job type so that within a few years I can advance to a supervisory or management position" is a reasonable response).

3. *Why should we hire you?*

This is your shot to truly sell yourself. Remember — this is all about marketing your favorite product — you. Every product (including you) has a unique selling proposition (USP). What is yours? Your USP is what distinguishes you from the competition. If you have specialized training, a hard-earned certification or experience from the ground level in your industry, now is the time to emphasize any or all of it. If you streamlined operations in your last position, or decreased labor cost, say it now.

4. *What are your weaknesses?*

In this case, "weakness" is a relative term. Choose your words carefully. Something that might be a weakness in one situation can be strength in another. If you are a person who sweats the small stuff, professionally you might be considered "detail-oriented." If you are somewhat intolerant of uncooperative people, you may be considered a "team player" occupationally. Think through this before the interview, and you should be able to answer in a way that positively gets the interviewer's attention.

5. *What are your salary expectations?*

This is tricky territory, but step one is knowing in advance what a position of this type generally pays. Always approach your interview from a position of strength; in this case, the more information you have the stronger you are. Do not be evasive, but do not knock yourself out of the game. “I’m looking for compensation that is competitive for my skills and experience,” is a decent answer, albeit vague. If pressed for specifics, offer a reasonable range as your answer, such as, “I would like to earn between \$30 and 35,000 per year.”

6. *How did you get along with your last boss?*

Never badmouth your last employer. It accomplishes nothing. Even if your last boss was the worst ever, everyone has his or her positive points. Be diplomatic: “Our relationship was strictly professional, but I recognized his expertise in customer service and learned a great deal,” is a typical example of a smart answer.

7. *Why do you want this job?*

It is best to be as decisive and specific as possible here: “I want this job because it is the next logical step in my career plan,” or “This is the type of job I have been preparing for years.” The employer wants to know that you are looking for more than a steady paycheck. Give him or her solid reason to want you in this position. Avoid saying you just “need a change,” or are tired of your current job. This question is another opportunity for you to aggressively sell yourself.

8. *What are your strengths?*

Here the interviewer is trying to determine what you bring to the position. If you are applying to be a researcher, saying you are a real “people person” will not go very far. Specific information about your familiarity with appropriate software programs and research techniques makes more sense. Tailor your answer to the job.

9. *Tell me something about yourself.*

Use this question for all that it is worth. The interviewer does not need to know how many siblings you have or that you are a great bowler. Talk about characteristics that count in the workplace, such as diligence, the fact that you are a quick study or that you are self-motivated. Or, use your time here to talk about specific skills you have that lend themselves to the position. Make your answer substantive and appropriate. Avoid tangents about personal issues.

10. *Do you have any questions?*

Without exception, the answer is always “yes.” Have your questions prepared before the interview. Ask about things such as the company’s expansion plans, opportunities for career growth within the organization, available training or work-related educational programs. Demonstrate to the interviewer that you have done your homework about the company and show sincere interest in the specifics of the job.

Insider’s tip: Anticipate as many questions as possible and have your responses planned. You do not want to appear over-rehearsed, but solid preparation will give you a competitive edge.