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Job Seekers

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Stupid Interview Questions

This may be your only crack at the job, so don't get waylaid by some of the oldest and most useless gambits around

By Business Week's Liz Ryan

It isn't much fun being a corporate human resources person, but the job offers one treat: You get to dream up outlandish interview questions to throw at job candidates, then watch them squirm. Some of these goofy questions are time-honored -- they may not be useful, but they've become an HR tradition. Others are hot off the press. Here's a tour through the world of wacky queries -- so you'll be prepared the next time you're hit with one in an interview:

Where do you see yourself in five years?

This is the great-granddaddy of goofy questions, and I give you permission, if you have any misgivings about a job opportunity, to walk out the door when you hear it. It's such a time-waster that only the most hidebound interviewers will utter it, but it lives on.

Here's why it's dumb. No company will guarantee you a job for five years, much less a career path. And in any case, why is it so all-fired important to have a dang career plan in mind? Every successful entrepreneur and many top corporate people will tell you their key to success: I did what I felt driven to do at the moment.

So when you get asked this question, you can say: "I intend to be happy and productive five years from now, working at a job I love in a company that values my talents" and leave it at that. Or you can give the expected answer and say: "I hope to be three levels up the ladder, here at Happy Corp." Or you can say: "I hope to own this company," just to shake things up.

If you were an animal/a can of soup/some other random object, which one would you be?

This is a question typically asked of new grads, because it's considered cute. It's supposed to test how people think. But it's asinine. You can pretend to think about your answer for a moment (eyes to the ceiling, chin resting on hand) and then come up with something. Or stare blankly at the interviewer and say, deadpan: "Are you serious?" Or try one of these answers:

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"No company will guarantee you a job for five years, much less a career path."

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(Animal) "Oh, any crepuscular animal would do well for me -- a rabbit or a bat, perhaps." (Crepuscular means most active during dawn and dusk, so you'll get to show off your extensive vocab.)

(Soup) "Probably the low-sodium chicken broth." Fix the interviewer with a penetrating gaze -- she won't know whether you're mocking her imbecilic question or are deadly serious.

What are your weaknesses?

By now, such a large percentage of the job-seeking public has gotten clued in on the politically correct answer to this one -- which is, "I'm a hopeless workaholic" -- that the question's utility is limited. But it's also offensive.

This is a job interview, not a psychological exam. It's one thing for an interviewer to ask you what you do particularly well. It's another thing to ask what you don't do well and expect to get a forthright answer -- in a context where it's clear to both parties that you're being weeded in or out. The most honest answer might be this: "That's for me to know and you to find out." But that won't help your chances.

So if you can't bear to repeat the "workaholic" line, I'd say something that is true of yourself but also terribly common -- like the fact that you get bored easily, or prefer numbers to people or vice versa. None of these is actually a weakness, but that's O.K.

What in particular interested you about our company?

Now, on one level this is a reasonable question. If you say: "I'm interested in this job because it's three blocks from my apartment," you might not be the world's best candidate. But the disingenuous, and therefore offensive, aspect of this question is that it assumes that you have unlimited job opportunities and have pinpointed this one because of some dazzling aspect of the role or the company.

I mean, please. Most of the job-seeking population is living on the lower two-thirds of Maslow's pyramid, where the most appealing thing about any job is that you got the darned interview. Why am I interested? Because you guys called me back. But you can't say that, so you have to rhapsodize about the company's wonderful products and services and the world-class management team and so on.

Now, it's important to show that you know a lot about the company. But you have lots of ways to demonstrate that in an interview (and lots of ways for the interviewer to ask you to do so) without pretending that the company had to fight every employer in town to get an audience with you. Everybody involved knows the company is shredding 10 times the number of résumés it's reading, so let's not pretend it was your breathtaking credentials that got you the interview. It was the fact that the company responded to your overture, unlike 90% of the employers you contacted.

Below the director level or so, where it might be reasonable to assume you sought out the company for particular job-hunting attention, it's not necessary to pretend that you carefully chose it from a raft of others pursuing you. So unless you approached the outfit in the absence of a posted job opportunity, it's just silly to ask: "Why us?"

Rather, the interviewer can say: "When you saw our ad on Monster.com, what made you respond?" And, of course, the logical answer is: "Because I know I can do the job that was posted." Duh. No one said job-hunting was easy.



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Six Common Job-Interview Questions

Try These Sample Questions to Help Get Ready

By Tom Musbach

One of the easiest ways to build confidence before a job interview is to prepare answers to questions you might be asked. Whether you're applying for a position as a web programmer, accountant, or legal secretary, interviewers often use some general questions to assess candidates, so you'll increase your chances for success if you prepare for them in advance.

Six common questions are listed below, along with insights from several recruitment professionals about how to answer. As part of your interview preparation, take the time to formulate answers to each question, focusing on specific tasks and accomplishments.

"What are your strengths and weaknesses?"

This is one of the most well-known interview questions, and interviewers often ask it indirectly, as in, "What did your most recent boss suggest as areas for improvement in your last performance review?"

Lindsay Olson, founder of Paradigm Staffing Solutions, a firm specializing in hiring public relations professionals, suggests tailoring your "strengths" answer to skills that will benefit the prospective employer. Though you may have a knack for building gingerbread houses, it might be of little value for the job at hand.

When it comes to weaknesses, or areas of growth, Olson recommends building on your answer to include "how you have improved, and specifics on what you have done to improve yourself in those areas."

"Why did you leave your last position?"

"Interviewers will always want to know your reasoning behind leaving a company ? particularly short stints," says Olson. "Be prepared to tell the truth, without speaking negatively about past employment."

"Can you describe a previous work situation in which you ... ?"

This question comes in many forms, but what the interviewer is looking for is your behavior on the job. Your answer could focus on resolving a crisis, overcoming a negotiation deadlock, handling a problem coworker, or juggling multiple tasks on a project.

The theory behind this type of question is that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, according to Yves Lermusi, CEO of Checkster, a company that offers career and talent checkup tools. "The key to responding well is preparing real job examples, describing your behavior in specific situations that demonstrate important skills that the job requires."



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What is your ideal work environment?"

This question is not about whether you prefer a cubicle or an office, so think broadly to include ideas about supervision, management styles, and your workday routine.

Bob Hancock, senior recruiter for video game publisher Electronic Arts, says that he uses this question with candidates because it can give "a sense of their work habits, how flexible they are with their schedules, and how creative they are."

"How do you handle mistakes?"

The best strategy for this general question is to focus on one or two specific examples in the past and, if possible, highlight resolutions or actions that might have relevance to the job you're interviewing for.

"Employers want to know they're hiring someone with the maturity to accept responsibility and the wherewithal to remedy their own mistakes," says Debra Davenport, a master professional mentor and columnist for the Business Journal in Phoenix.

"What is your most notable accomplishment?"

Paradigm Staffing's Olson suggests that candidates think of three or four accomplishments and quantify what their actions meant in terms of increasing revenues, saving resources, or improving resources.

"Being able to quantify your achievements in your career will launch you ahead of the rest," she says, "and demonstrate your ability to do the same as a future employee."

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What would your past managers say about you?

This is a fine question, but it's not a true interview question. It's an intelligence question. It's like the question on one of those "honesty" tests that are becoming more and more popular in the hiring process (to add insult to injury, they're often called Personality Profiles): "Do you think it's O.K. to steal from your employer?"

These are intelligence questions because you have to have the intelligence to know the answer in order to be smart enough to go and get a job.

The trick here is to say something sufficiently witty or pithy to make you stand out from the crowd, because the standard answers are so tired: My managers would say that I'm hard-working, loyal, reliable, and a great team player. Snoozeville.

Why not try: My past managers would say that I was an outstanding individual contributor who also supported the team 100%. Or: My managers would say that I came up with breakthrough solutions while never losing track of the bottom line. You can probably dream up something better.

The point is, this is a softball: Don't think too much about it. It says more about the interviewer (who lacks the moxie to think up unique or penetrating questions) than it ever will about you.

The secret of good job interviewers is that they never ask traditional, dorky interview questions. They don't need to. They jump into a business conversation that does three powerful things in a one-hour chat:

- a) Gets you excited about this opportunity (or, as valuably, makes it clear that you and this job are not a good fit)
- b) Reveals to the interviewer how you'll fit into the role and the company, based on your background, perspective, temperament, and ideas
- c) Gives you a ton of new information about the job, the management, the goals, the culture, and what life at this joint would be like.

If any of this doesn't happen, it's a problem. If you're lukewarm on the job when you leave the interview, or if you don't feel you've had a chance to show what you know and how you think, or -- worst of all -- if the interviewer used your time together to satisfy his need for more information about you while sharing almost nothing about the job, that's an enormous red flag.

And if you get called back for a second interview while you're still information-deprived, say so. "I'm interested in learning more about the opportunity before a second interview," you can say. "Would a phone call with the hiring manager be an effective way to help me get up to speed?" That kind of suggestion respects the hiring manager's time and won't waste yours on a second, no-new-data interview.

Try it. You might save yourself some aggravation -- along with some extra time you can use to work on your five-year career plan and on tackling those pesky weaknesses of yours before the next interview.