

## Practice Interview Questions

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When preparing for an interview, there are three main things you'll want to do:

**1) Research the organization and your interviewers.** You'll want to know about the organization and the interviewers so you can be sure to craft responses during the interview that are relevant and that resonate with the interviewer.

**2) Make a list of your significant experiences.** By creating a list of significant experiences, you will have an easier time stating specific examples during an interview when asked those familiar behavioral interview questions that begin, "Tell me about a time when..."

**3) Practice, practice, practice!** You'll want to practice so that you become comfortable speaking about yourself, your experiences, and your accomplishments. Practicing will ensure that your answers are an appropriate length and that you've thought about how to answer the questions that are likely to arise. What you don't want to do, however, is memorize your answers, since that can seem less genuine and can come across as off-putting.

### **PRACTICE QUESTIONS: YOU AND YOUR "FIT"**

#### ***Tell me about yourself.***

This question may also be asked with the statement, "Walk me through your resume" or the question "Who are you?," or some other version of inquiry. Essentially, the employer wants to know why you are a good fit for the job. Your answer should be brief, but focused. Aim for approximately 90 seconds. Highlight the skills, education and experiences that best qualify you for the job. Try to avoid simply outlining the chronology of your work life, but instead attempt to target your experiences to the job qualifications. This question, or some version of it, will be asked in nearly every interview, often in the beginning. While it seems simple, many people become flustered when answering it. If you were going to practice only a few questions, this one should be on the list!

#### ***Why did you choose a career in \_\_\_\_\_?***

Be honest, but brief. There's no need to give excessive details about your personal life. Try to let your passion for your career shine through.

#### ***Why are you interested in our organization?***

Do your homework. Know the organization's mission, philosophy and approach. Be up-to-date on current news related to the company. With this information, you can craft a genuine, targeted answer that explains why that specific organization – not just the overall professional field – is where you want to work.

***In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?***

Be sure to emphasize how your skills and experience contribute to the organization rather than focusing on what you can learn from them or why you are interested in the organization. By framing your answer in a way that highlights how you can help the organization, you will be a more attractive candidate.

***What two or three things would be most important to you in your job?***

Be honest, but tailor your answer to what you have learned about the organization's work and culture. Take some time to consider what is most important to you in a job. Is it your co-workers? Mentors? Professional development? Ability to make a difference? Your belief in the organizational mission? Challenging work? The ability to think creatively? Working in groups? Working independently? International travel? Decide what rings true for you, and find the fit with the organization.

***What experience do you have that has prepared you for this position?***

All experiences are fair game here, including paid, unpaid, internship and volunteer work. Your educational degrees are also relevant.

***Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?***

The employer wants to see that you've thought about your career path, are committed to this field, and that you have ambition and drive. If you know precisely where you want your career to be in the future, express your plans in such a way that they relate to the job at hand. If you are unsure of where you envision yourself, it is okay to keep your answer vague as long as you are still emphasizing the overall field in which you are interviewing. In such a case, you may want to explain that you anticipate the next few years on the job opening your eyes a bit more to the future possibilities, but that you know you want to be in this field, for example.

**PRACTICE QUESTIONS: YOUR PERSONALITY & CHARACTER*****What are three of your strengths?***

This is an easy answer to prepare ahead of time, but be sure that you do. That way, you'll know that the answer you're delivering will be relevant for the position. Think about all your strengths. You may want to make a list. Anything is fair game, from "creativity" or "organized" to "works well with others." Once you make a list, pick the three that you believe, based on the job description, are most applicable to the job. Then, think of a very brief example for each to illustrate that strength. During the interview, be sure to clearly identify each strength ("First... Second... Third..."), followed by a 1-2 sentence example for each. You may also want to highlight in a sentence how each strength is useful for the job.

***What are three of your weaknesses?***

This is a tough one, which is why it is so important to consider this ahead of time. It is very difficult to come up with weaknesses on the spot! Try to focus on weaknesses that are not “character flaws” and try to pick ones out that you have actually taken steps to improve. But be sure they are weaknesses and not strengths that you are trying to fit into the weakness category.

When sharing your weakness, you want to focus only 10-20% of your answer on the actual weakness, and the remaining 80-90% on how you are overcoming it. For example, “I am not inherently technical, and I therefore do not just pick up software on-the-spot but instead need to spend some time with the new technology. Because I know this about myself, I make sure that each time I need to use a new technology that I set aside some of my own extra time so I can feel comfortable with the technology. In fact, in my recent library position, I learned four new databases in just a month and became so good with them that I was asked to teach others to use them.”

***How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?***

With this question, you get to focus on your strengths! Use this opportunity to highlight an excellent attribute you have that is relevant for the job.

***What do you consider your most important accomplishment in your last job?***

Again, with this question, you are being given an opportunity to highlight good things about you. Be sure to think about all your accomplishments in your role, and pick the one that you firmly believe matters most. Ideally, you’d be able to then relate this accomplishment to the job for which you are interviewing.

**PRACTICE QUESTIONS: YOUR WORKING STYLE*****Describe your working style.***

Some people get confused by this answer, but just be honest about how you work while also showing that you are the type to take initiative and solve problems. Be sure to frame your answer in the context of what you know about the organization and culture. For example, if the organization is one where teamwork is a big part of the job, you’ll want to emphasize how you work with others. Give a specific example or two to illustrate your point.

***In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?***

With this question, you’ll definitely want to have done your homework to understand the culture of the organization within which you’d be working. If the organization is one where each person works completely independently and only checks in once in a while with others, you’ll want to know that. If it is a team-type of environment, you’ll want to know that. Similarly, some organizations are rigidly hierarchical, while others are flat structures without much regard for titles. Some organizations have strict rules to follow; others are more lax. Some organizations encourage creativity; other organizations

encourage working within a process that already exists. Some organizations are start-up cultures; others are traditional and bureaucratic. Be sure that you answer the question in a way that fits the organization's work environment as best you can. At the same time, be honest with yourself. If the organization's culture is not aligned with what you seek, maybe this job is not the one for you.

***What qualities do you seek in a manager?***

This question can seem tricky. Since you don't really know the way your prospective manager works, you will want to express an interest in supporting the manager and working with the manager to achieve organizational and personal professional goals. You may want to ask the manager as a follow-up question how she/he likes to work with subordinates.

**PRACTICE QUESTIONS: BEHAVIORAL EXPERIENCES**

Behavioral interviewing questions are ones that ask for you to describe an experience from the past. The idea behind them is that past behavior is indicative of future behavior. The key to answering these questions is to give a **SPECIFIC** example. Since you want to avoid answering in generalities, it is crucial to consider these questions ahead of time. In essence, you'll want to develop a list of experiences that you can mold to work as answers to various questions. Once you have a list of a few, you'll want to practice ways of using them for the different questions. This way, when you go to an interview and are asked, "Tell me about a time when..." you will have a mental shortlist of experiences to draw upon so that you can provide the specificity the employer seeks.

A common format for answering behavioral questions is a technique known as "STAR":

**S=** Situation (What was the overall specific situation?)

**T=** Task (What was the specific challenge?)

**A =** Action (What did you specifically do? What actions did you take? Even if part of a group, focus on what you did!)

**R=** Results (What was the outcome? Results? Accomplishments? What did you learn?)

You'll want to focus mostly on the "A" or action. A common mistake people make is focusing too much on the "S" or situation. Remember that you are not talking to a friend; the interviewer does not need every little detail of the situation, just the relevant parts. Another common mistake people make is forgetting to include the "R" or results. Be sure to share the outcome of your experience!

One other tip: Be mindful of the length of your answer. You want to give enough detail to highlight the important stuff, but you do not want to go on and on and, in turn, lose the interest of the interviewer. When you practice, you might want to time yourself so you get a feeling of how long you are speaking. A good guideline is 1-3 minutes, at most. Practicing with another person will allow that person to provide crucial feedback regarding the length, too.

Common behavioral questions that you can answer using the above format include the following:

***Tell me about your experience leading or being part of a team.***

***Tell me about a time when you worked effectively under pressure.***

***Give an example of a time you showed leadership and initiative.***

***Tell me about a time when you failed.***

***Tell me about a time when you solved a problem.***

***This position requires XYZ. Tell me about a time when you've done XYZ.***

***Give an example of a time you showed leadership and initiative.***

***Tell me about a time you set a goal and how you accomplished it.***

***Tell me about a time when you had to work with a difficult person (another student, co-worker, customer, supervisor, etc.). How did you handle the situation? Is there anything you would have done differently in hindsight?***

### **QUESTIONS FOR THE EMPLOYER**

At the conclusion of the interview, you likely will be asked if you have any questions for the interviewer. Be sure to ask 2-3 thoughtful questions. Without questions, you will not appear to be very interested in the position. Your questions should not ask anything that has already been answered during the course of the interview. Similarly, you should avoid discussions about salary and benefits until you have a job offer. Remember that the interview is also a time for you to learn about the company to make sure that you want to work there. Some questions you may want to ask include the following:

***How would you describe the ideal candidate?***

***What would be the important immediate objective for the person coming into this position?***

***What would you say is the biggest challenge facing this position?***

***Why is this position open now? Is it a new role, or did someone leave the job?***

***What are the organization's primary initiatives (most important projects/clients) right now?***

***What would you like the person in this position to have accomplished in one year?***

***How would you describe the culture of the organization?***

***What do you enjoy most about working here?***