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Interview Questions & Answers

For anyone preparing for that all-important job interview, here are some questions to anticipate, and the responses that managers are looking for.

Question: "Tell me about yourself."

HINT: Talk about personal characteristics and skills that translate into career strengths.

Answer: "I love to jump into projects with both feet. I like sitting in front of a computer or at my desk for hours at a time thinking about a problem, plotting out the solution, making the presentation."

Question: "What books and/or magazines do you read?"

HINT: Obviously, a technical or trade journal is one answer they are looking for. The books you've read tells the manager something about your personality.

Answer: Whatever you do, don't say, "I don't like to read."

Question: "What are your greatest strengths?"

HINT: Discuss specific assets the employer desires.

Answer: "Pleasant personality/politeness, loyalty, willingness to work hard, motivation, persistence, tenacity."

Question: "What were your favorite subjects in school and why?"

HINT: Of course, if your major is Computer Science you want to mention some of your computer science classes. You might mention other related subjects. For example, if you're interviewing at a financial services firm, you might discuss why you liked your accounting or finance classes. If you did any unusual or special projects in that area, you would bring that up now. Mention anything that shows a keen interest this employer's particular kind of work.

Somewhere during the interview you might also want to mention that you truly enjoy working with people. To illustrate this point, mention any volunteer work or part-time jobs you might have held anytime in your life that involved interacting with people. For example, "I volunteered at a homeless shelter during the holidays giving out food." This shows that you genuinely care about others and like giving back to the community, and that you would go out of your way for a boss or a coworker.

Question: "How do you let off steam after you've completed a tough project? What do you like to do in your spare time?"

HINT: Managers like well-rounded employees; your answer to this question illustrates some of your personal qualities. If you can mention pastimes that would be an asset to the job you are seeking, so much the better. For example, a bridge player must possess valuable analytical skills. Whatever your favorite hobby is, strong outside interests round out your character.

Answer: "For relaxation I like to read a mystery novel, go swimming, go skiing, make pottery . . ."

Question: "Where do you plan to be in five years?"

HINT: Everyone hates this question, but everyone asks it. The traditional answer is "management." Employers like goal-oriented workers, so saying you don't know will turn a manager off.

Answer: The generic answer would be, "I would like to try the technical career track," or, "I want to follow the management career path."

Question: "What are your weaknesses?"

HINT: There are a couple of approaches you can take with the "weakness" question. Whatever you do, do not mention any true weakness, such as, "I have a hard time getting to work on time." The ability to answer the question properly is half of what the manager is looking for. One strategy is to give a personal weakness that is considered a professional strength.

Answer: "I'm so compulsive about my work that I can't stop until the job is perfect." Another approach is to turn the question into a discussion of your current professional goals. Example: "I plan to improve myself this year by taking a class in public speaking." Choose a peripheral weakness -- one that you may really need to work on, but not one that would disqualify you for the position in question.

Question: "Why do you want to work here at XYZ Company?"

HINT: Be very careful with this one. If you've researched this company then you can say something specific, like "object-oriented relational database technology really turns me on." By showing that you have done some research about the company marks you as a self-starter with a solid grasp of the big picture.

Answer: "I've been following XYZ's growth and I want a company that I can grow with. Your company is solid and stable, with a growth rate of X percent last year and a great competitive position" Or, "I like a start-up environment where I can really make a difference."

Question: "Why should we hire you?"

Answer: "Because I would be an asset to your organization. I'm loyal, tenacious, motivated, and I learn fast. I'm someone who could be very productive very quickly."

Question: "What motivates you?"

HINT: Whatever you do, do not say lots of money. We all know that money, power and recognition are all basic motivators. But you do not want to appear selfish. You want to appear intelligent and hard-working and interested in doing a good job, interested in giving rather than receiving. If you've held jobs while in college or during the summers, be sure to reach from those specific examples to illustrate the above.

Answer: "A job well done." "A challenge." "Interesting work/technology." Any or all of these answers work.

Question: "Tell me about a conflict you encountered and how you handled it."

HINT: This is one of the toughest interview questions of all. It's sort of a trick question, as a matter of fact. Never speak negatively about anyone. The ability to successfully resolve conflicts is important for all members of any company. It may be *the* most important factor if you're working in a service environment, such as a large consulting firm that deals with outside clients. The answer you give here could go a long way toward getting you a job offer. Managers want to see that you are mature and unselfish. The answer should involve proof of your maturity level. They are looking for your ability to handle conflict. Compromise and working it out without external intervention are the keys. A disgruntled person is not going to be productive, and tends to bring down coworkers' morale as well.

Answer: "I sat down with the other person and asked what his issues were. Then I outlined my issues. We talked about which were the most important ones and which we could compromise on. We looked for the common aspects of our goals and placed those first. Then we decided together what to give up and what to keep, so that both parties felt they were winning something. Both parties were satisfied."

Question: "What changes have you made in your life that you are most proud of?"

HINT: This tells the manager more about your ability to take control of your life. It illustrates your leadership potential, and suggests just how promotable you might be. After all, if he produces a star, he looks good.

Question: "What are your salary requirements?"

HINT: The use of the word "offer" is critical. It's a subliminal message that an actual job offer is what you are discussing, not just your salary needs in general.

Answer: "Salary is not my primary consideration. Of course, I have to pay the bills. I'd be open to any reasonable offer." Pause and maintain direct eye contact, even if it seems like forever. Do not be the first one to flinch. Do not over-talk. Be prepared for a long silence. Let the manager be the first to present a figure. It will give you power and control.

If forced to give a specific number, never give a broad range -- you will usually be offered the low end. Instead, be as precise as possible: "I'd be open to something in the low-fifties (or mid-forties, high-seventies, whatever)." Giving such a specific number presumes you've researched the local job market and know what entry-level people with your skills are making.

Question: "Are you interviewing at any other companies?"

HINT: You want the manager to know that you're extremely interested in his opportunity, but are keeping your options open.

Answer: "Yes, Mr. X, but at this point XYZ is my first choice."

Remember, all of these interview questions have more than one appropriate answer. If you are feeling nervous about an upcoming interview, keep in mind that the hiring manager gets just as excited about a potentially strong candidate as the candidate does about him or her. Strong, qualified, motivated technical people are very hard to find. Be direct, but think before you speak, and you will surely get an offer.