

Interview Skills

The top 10 interview questions and how to handle them confidently

We know that you can never be prepared for all types of questions you may be asked in an interview. Many authors have devoted entire books to this subject and I am not going to attempt to cover all angles of the possible questions you may face. The following are the most common questions interviewers ask and you will recognise a clear pattern as to how you should answer these and other questions. I don't think you must try to memorise the possible answers to these questions, except the 'So, tell me about yourself' question (see below). Rather listen carefully, try to understand the 'fear' behind the interviewer's question and answer it in a manner that will tame that fear.

1

'So, tell me about yourself.'

This is the mother of all interview questions. Most interviewers start off the interview with this question and most applicants make a complete mess of the answer. The best way to cope with this question is to break your answers up into the following four components:

- 'Human' introduction
- Four key accomplishments in your life
- Four main qualities that best describe you as an employee.
- How you can contribute specifically to this company

'Human' introduction

Most people find it difficult to describe themselves and South Africans in particular are not good at blowing their own trumpet! To prepare yourself for this section, ask three friends who know you very well how they would describe you to a stranger. Ask them to write it down for you. Once you have gathered these descriptions, read through them carefully and come up with a 'human' introduction that best describes you. For example, 'I see myself as a caring and loyal person, always willing to go the extra mile and a very good listener. I enjoy a diversity of interests and always try to create balance in my life. I am goal-driven and determined to finish what I start.'

Four key accomplishments in your life

What are the things you are most proud of? You can include both professional and personal achievements here. For example, you may mention that you saved previous company a great deal of money or that you initiated and completed an important project or you can mention your academic achievements and promotions. On a personal level, you could mention that you completed the Comrades Marathon or that you were chosen to represent your country in a sport.

Key Qualities and skills

We all have strengths and skills. For some reason, job seekers all choose the same three qualities and repeat them at every interview. These are usually 'I am honest, hardworking and loyal.' Firstly, I am paying you to be honest, hardworking and loyal, and if you are not, you will be fired. But more importantly, you are not creating the 'Michael Jordan' image that will make you stand out from the other candidates applying for the job. Since you have already done your skills inventory (see page 73), this should not be a difficult exercise.

Choose your skills the way you would bake a cake. If you are being interviewed for a sales position, think of the critical skills an employer would be looking for, just like the ingredients for a recipe. For example, in a sales position, the interviewer would be looking for a self-starter, excellent communications skills, the ability to deal with customers and strong sales track record.

A word of warning: do not mislead the interviewer by telling them you can do something when you cannot. This may well sway the interviewer to employ you, but it will just get you fired three weeks later when they find out you cannot deliver on your promises.

Contribution to the company

When it comes to this section, the content is less important than the fact that you have actually given it some thought. Do not come up with some grandiose plan that you could not achieve in a million years. I once interviewed a receptionist who thought she could contribute to the company by increasing turnover by a million rand. When I questioned her as to how exactly she was to go about doing this, she merely giggled and blushed, and said she wasn't sure yet. Be realistic and remember in this case it is the thought that counts. Once you have researched the company, you could mention one specific problem that they are facing and come up with a

practical solution. What you can achieve from this one statement is quite significant. In the first eight minutes, you get the interviewer to visualise you in this position. Don't be surprised if they pick up from where you've left off and ask you for more specifics about your planned contribution.

Your entire reply needs to be about two hundred words and should last about five to eight minutes. You should know it off by heart, but make sure you deliver it in a warm, conversational style. You should have ready a general 'tell me about yourself', which you can use for recruitment agents or unscheduled interviews. However, once you have researched the company, you will need to make slight adjustments to your response to suit the company. As we have said before, it is only when you know the challenges that face the company that you best market yourself to become the 'Michael Jordan' for that particular company.

2 'I have many candidates lined up for this position, why should I give you the job?'

Avoid ...

- Putting the other candidates down.
- Begging for the job and using your family and their desperate financial situation as emotional blackmail.
- Saying you are honest, hardworking and loyal. This will only irritate the interviewer, as everyone says that and it should be a given in any case!

Instead ...

Systematically match up the key qualifications for the job that you have highlighted in the newspaper advertisement or job specification with your experience and qualifications, for example, 'Your advertisement mentioned that the position requires a B. degree and two years. I obtained my degree in 1999 from Wits University and I have worked at the X and Y companies where I have gained the necessary experience.' Conclude with your interest in the organisation and express your confidence at being able to deliver solutions to some of the challenges that face the company. In short, prove that you are qualified for the job.

3

'Where do you see yourself in five years' time?'

Avoid ...

- Saying 'Um ... I really don't know!'
- Coming across unprepared for this one. This will give the impression that you are someone who does not 'create' your own life, but rather just reacts to it. You will be seen as someone who is not a planner and who does not set goals and challenges for themselves. This is easily transferable to how you will work.

Instead ...

Take time to come up with four to five goals you plan on working towards in the medium and long term. These should be mostly career driven but you can add one or two personal goals if appropriate. For example, 'I have set myself five major goals that I aim to achieve by 2003. In the medium term I want to complete my MBA and establish a sound career path in a dynamic organisation where I will make an effective contribution. I plan to complete the Comrade Marathon in 2001. I want to continue living a healthy lifestyle and balance my life for success, both personally and within my career.'

Do be realistic and avoid saying things like 'I want to be the CEO in two years' time'. Even if this is possible, the person interviewing you may be threatened by your ambition. Do not say that you see yourself in your own business in two years' time. You will not be employed if you are perceived as seeing this job as a short-term option.

4

What do you know about my company?

Avoid ...

- Saying 'Nothing' and sitting there with a mouth full of teeth.
- Mentioning negative things about the company or being too critical about the way the company is run.

Instead ...

Use this opportunity to demonstrate that you are the type of employee that goes the extra mile. As discussed previously, it is not difficult to research a company. Being prepared for this question will definitely put you ahead of your competitors. Being unprepared will lose you the job. If I were doing the hiring I would not want to employ anyone who hadn't even bothered to find out the basic facts about my company.

Focus on talking about the positive facts about the company and finish with an intelligent question to put the ball back into the interviewer's court. Give a brief synopsis of the information you have gleaned about the company, as discussed in the section on research (see page 98). For example, 'When researching your company from the website, I was amazed at the human resource policies your company supports. Do you find your staff respond positively to all the training that you offer?'

5 Tell me about your work experience, beginning with your job as a **** and leading up to your present job.

Avoid ...

- Giving a boring, verbose account punctuated with resentful and negative experiences.
- Coming across as a 'victim' who has just allowed life to take its course with your career.
- Giving incorrect information and not knowing the exact dates you worked at various companies.

Instead ...

Prepare a succinct, accurate account of your work experience, bearing in mind the research you have done about this position. Focus on matching the skills required with your previous experience. Demonstrate the synergy between your skills and what the company is looking for. Talk about your achievements and mention the highlights from previous positions.

6 ‘What aspects of the job I’ve described appeals to you the least?’

Avoid ...

- Having a field day with this question. The last thing you want to demonstrate is how quick you are to look at what is not working in a situation.

Instead ...

Take a problem- solving approach. Make it clear that you are aware that in all jobs there are aspects that we prefer less, but as you have not done this job, you could not really comment as to what those would be for you. Explain that as long as there are supervisors to consult with you feel confident that you can turn these tasks into learning opportunities.

7 ‘Take me through a typical day in your job.’

Avoid ...

Starting with your morning shower and personal preparations for the day. Mentioning how bad you are with time management, and how you end up only doing your work at five o’ clock in the afternoon or that you have personal appointments and arrangements to take care of during the day.

Instead ...

Demonstrate how your planning starts the day before, when you leave the office. Explain that it is your habit to make a list of priorities for the next day and to plan your time accordingly. I am not suggesting that you lie: if you have not already done so, this is a habit that you should establish with immediate effect.

Your goal in answering this question is to show that you can manage your time effectively. You also want to create the impression that your life is balanced, so it is not always a positive thing to say that you can start work at 6a.m. and only go home at 10 p.m. As your employer, I would like to know that, if the need arose, you would be prepared to put in overtime, but that

under normal circumstances you are able to complete your work during business hours.



'What kind of managements do you function best under?'

Avoid ...

Being negative and going into a long story about all the bad managers you've had, mentioning their names and personal differences you might have had with them.

Instead ...

Be flexible and keep your options open. Make it clear that you can adapt to most situations and mention the style of management you feel motivates you most. For most people this is the democratic leader who knows when to lead and when to stand back. Demonstrate that you get on with most people and that you tend to focus on the job and delivering results rather than 'personalities'. Don't be too emphatic about the type of manager you work best under, because you may lose the job if the interviewer knows that your potential manager is the opposite.



'In your last performance appraisal, what did your manager highlight as needing to be improved or developed?'

Avoid ...

Denying that a manager has ever given you negative feedback.

Giving the most serious or negative feedback a manager has ever given you.

Instead ...

Answer the question truthfully but choose an example of something that you have already improved on, for example 'faster decision making'. State what you learned from the feedback, how you went about rectifying it, and how it has improved since the feedback. Where possible, discuss how the manager has noticed the improvement.

If you have never had a performance appraisal, use your initiative and use an example that is appropriate to the question.



'Are there any people you have trouble getting along with and how do you handle them?'

Avoid ...

Getting personal, mentioning names and coming across as intolerant.
Demonstrating a recurring pattern of conflicts in the workplace.

Instead ...

Take into account the position you are being interviewed for. If you are asked this question, there is a good chance that they are looking for someone with good interpersonal skills. You need to demonstrate how you find it a challenge to be adaptable and flexible when working with colleagues you wouldn't normally choose to mix with. It is helpful to emphasise your ability to deal with conflict should it arise. Try to give an example of a situation where you developed a strong relationship with a colleague that most people in the company found difficult to get along with. It is beneficial to acknowledge, however that there will always be people in any given work environment that will be more difficult to get along with.

Reference

Coleen McIntock-Rudnick: *The Business of becoming employed: A guide for South African job seekers*, New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd, 2006