

RECOMMENDED ANSWERS TO USUAL QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself

Cover four areas in your life: your early years, education, work experience, and your current situation. Keep your complete answer to about 2 minutes; don't ramble or elaborate. This is your 2-minute self-introduction and you will be very accomplished at giving it by the time you are in job interviews. Because this question usually comes early in the interview, you will gain confidence by knowing you can answer it well.

2. What can you offer us that other candidates can't?

If this question is asked early in the interview, you might respond by discussing generally how your skills and experience would benefit the company. To get more specific, you will need to know something about the job situation they have in mind and that subject is not usually discussed until the end of the interview. Resist the temptation to frame an answer based on your assumptions about the position. If the question is asked after the interviewer has described the position, only then can you relate any of your accomplishments to the problems of your prospective employer. This is an opportune time to discuss your problem-solving abilities.

3. What are your strengths?

You should be able to list 3 or 4 of your key strengths that are relevant to their needs, based on the research and other data you have gathered about their company.

4. How successful have you been so far?

Be prepared to define success for yourself and then respond. Try to choose accomplishments that relate to the company's needs and values.

5. What are your limitations?

Respond with a strength which, if overdone, can be a detriment and become a weakness. For example, you might say, "My desire to get the job done sometimes causes me to be overzealous and demanding of my organization. But I am aware of this problem and believe that I have it under control." Or deal with your need for further training in some aspect of your profession. Do not claim to be faultless, but limit your answer to one specific issue.

6. How much are you worth?

Try to delay answering this until you have learned more about the job and can estimate, based on previous research, the salary range this company endorses for similar positions. If you feel obliged to answer, you might reply in this way. "You are aware of what I have been earning at Ajax, and I would hope that coming to Acme would be a progressive step. Perhaps, we can go into this question in more depth when have a better idea of what the job responsibilities and scope would be."

7. What are your ambitions for the future?

Indicate your desire to concentrate on doing the immediate job well - and your confidence that the future will then be promising. You do not want to convey that you have no desire to progress, but you need to avoid statements that are unrealistic, or that might threaten present incumbents.

8. What do you know about our company?

You've done your homework, and have studied all that is publicly available about Acme and are thus aware of many published facts. However, you might state that you would like to know more; then be prepared to ask intelligent questions. Avoid a recitation of the facts, incorporate personal remarks and specific questions to facilitate a lively exchange of information.

9. Why are you seeking a position with our company?

Indicate that from your study of the company, many of the activities and problems are the sort that would give you a chance to contribute to the company through your experience and skills. If you honestly can, express your admiration for the company and what it is that appeals to you.

10. What qualifications do you have that you feel would make you successful here?

If this question is asked after you have sufficient information about the position, talk about two or three of your major skills (supported by accomplishments) which you believe will be useful in the position. If the question is asked earlier talk about two or three of your major skills and relate them to the extent that you can to the company. Gauge the amount of detail for this and other answers by the time frame set by the interviewer for your meeting and by his or her signals as to how much information is enough.

11. What things are most important to you in a job?

Use information developed in your knowledge of the company and relate it to the position, if you know the details of the position. If not, use a corporate "answer": "to be challenged," "part of the team," etc.

12. How would you describe your personality?

Mention only 2 or 3 of your most useful traits. Remember that the interviewer is trying to determine your "fit" in the company. Your ability to accurately identify their corporate values will enable you to frame your response appropriately

13. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our firm?

Be realistic and speak in terms of 6 months to a year. Again, the timing of the question is important. Do you know enough about the specific position to give a cogent response? (If it's a new, undefined job, even 6 months to a year may be overly optimistic.)

14. Don't you feel you might be over-qualified or too experienced for the position we have in mind?

Most of the time this question really means: I am afraid you are willing to take this job because you need a job and you will leave as soon as you get a better job offer. Your answer must address this concern.

Example: "You could be right, but having taken a voluntary early retirement from XYZ Company, I am in the fortunate position of being able to do what gives me the greatest satisfaction; and what I enjoy doing most is - (describe the contents of the job). The additional advantage to you if you hire me is that extra qualification and experience will be available for you to use when necessary."

15. What is your management style?

No doubt you defined your management style as part of your assessment and have talked about it with your consultant. You might want to talk about how you set goals and then get your people involved in them. Also, describe the techniques that you like to use to bring out the best in people, using the most appropriate style to fit the situation. Your research may have given you a sense of whether the company believes in a highly participative style, or is more authoritarian in its approach. If you don't know the company's style, keep your answer "soft" and situational.

16. Describe a situation in which you had a difficult management problem and how you solved it.

Relate one of your accomplishments, which had to do with this kind of situation. Depending on the organization's culture and needs, highlight conflict management, team building, or staffing.

17. As a manager, what do you look for when you hire people?

Their skills, initiative, adaptability - whether their chemistry fits with that of the organization." Responding in this way mirrors the interviewer's need to determine what you can do, will do, and how you fit into their organization.

18. As a manager, have you ever had to fire anyone? If so, what were the circumstances and how did you handle it?

If you have, answer in brief that you have indeed had experience with this problem and that it worked out to the benefit of both the individual and the organization. You followed the company's disciplinary procedures carefully before proceeding to termination. (The company may be concerned about discrimination and legal issues.) Don't go into the details unless the interviewer asks for more information. If you have never fired anyone, say so, but talk about how you would utilize progressive discipline before resorting to termination to protect the company's best interests.

19. What do you see as the most difficult task in being a manager?

Your answer might address getting things done through others; getting things planned and done on time; within the budget; or other management issues. Since budget management is a valuable transferable skill, you might wish to work your abilities in this area into the discussion if appropriate. Be guided by the

interviewer's I-Speak style and the needs and culture of the organization in determining what to stress in your answer.

20. Describe some situations in which you've worked under pressure or met deadlines.

Refer to your accomplishments. Discuss one or two in which you were especially effective in meeting deadlines or dealing with high-pressure situations.

21. Tell me about a work situation that irritated you.

Talk about this type of situation in terms of the skills you used to manage and improve it. Avoid describing a work situation you know exists in your target company unless you want to emphasize that you can improve or eliminate it. Stress your ability to "stay cool" under pressure.

22. Tell me about an objective in your last job which you failed to meet and why.

This question assumes that you failed to meet some of your objectives. If you can honestly state that you met all your established objectives, say so. If there was an objective, which you were unable to meet for legitimate reasons, discuss it with an explanation of the obstacles over which you had no control. Even better, discuss an objective which you "renegotiated" when you realized it could not be met because of obstacles beyond your control.

23. Would you describe a few situations in which your work was criticized?

Describe only one, and tell how you have corrected or plan to correct the issue. Do not go into detail. If the interviewer wants more detail let them ask for it.

24. What have you learned from your mistakes?

Discuss one or two situations where you successfully transformed a mistake or error in judgment into a learning experience. Emphasize the positive result, with the error as the learning catalyst.

25. What important trends do you see coming in our industry?

Choose two or three important developments to discuss. This is your chance to show that you have thought about the future, the economics, the markets, and the technology of the industry.

26. Why are you leaving your present job?

If you had the opportunity to cover this in your 2-minute self-introduction, there's a good chance the question will not be asked. Regardless of when it is asked, it must be answered briefly. If it was a force reduction due to economic circumstances, make that clear. If possible, explain how your termination was part of a larger movement. When you have finished answering, let it go. Refrain from analyzing any friction points with your boss.

27. Describe what you feel would be an ideal working environment.

This is a place where you can bring in some of your own values and personal experiences. But don't make it sound too sublime or impractical. Downplay the negative.

28. Looking back. How do you perceive your past employer? Be positive.

Refer to the valuable experience you have gained. "It is an excellent company which has given me a lot of good experience and opportunities to perform."

29. What have you done that helped increase sales or profit? How did you go about it?

This is your chance to describe in some detail a business accomplishment that is relevant to the proposed new job. Feel free to dwell on this.

30. How much financial responsibility have you had to account for?

You can answer this in terms of your budget or head-count or the size of the project or sales that you directed

31. How many people have you managed on your recent jobs?

Be specific - and feel free to refer to those over whom you had influence, such as a task force or a matrix organization.

32. Give examples of times when you were a leader.

Draw examples from accomplishments, which demonstrate your leadership skills.

33. How do you think your subordinates perceive you?

Be as positive as you can, referring to your strengths, skills and traits, remember to be honest. References are easily checked.

34. In your last position, what were the things that you liked most? And liked least?

Respond with care to this question. You'll have the information from your satisfiers/dissatisfiers, but you'll want to emphasize the positive and not talk at length about the negatives.

35. In your recent position, what were some of your most significant accomplishments?

Since you have already selected the specific accomplishments you want to talk about, this question will be easy for you. Be ready to describe three or four of them in detail. When possible, try to relate your answer to the nature of the new challenges you might be facing.

36. Why haven't you found a new position after so many months?

You may find this question offensive, but do not take it personally. Simply give a brief answer, "Finding just any job is not too difficult, but finding the right job takes care and time," and move on.

37. What do you think of your previous boss?

Be as positive as you can, and avoid becoming embroiled in this issue. This is a loaded question because most bosses avoid a contentious or difficult subordinate. If you like the individual, say so and tell why. If you don't, think of something positive to say.

38. If I spoke with your previous boss, what would he or she say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Be consistent with what you think he or she would say. Position any weakness in a positive way. Your old boss will probably want to give you a good reference, so recount some of the good things you did for him or her.

39. In your most recent position, what problems did you identify that had previously been overlooked?

Refer to accomplishments listed on your resume. Keep answers brief and include how the accomplishment was obtained.

40. If you had your choice of jobs or companies, where would you land?

Talk about the target job and what is attractive in the company that is interviewing you.

41. What do you feel you should earn in the proposed position?

You may want to answer this with a question, such as, "What is the typical salary range for similar jobs in your company?" Or, "I consider myself to be a better than average, so I would expect to receive an offer that would be better than the midpoint of the salary range for the position." If there is no range in the company, give the range that you had in mind. But qualify it by saying you hope to learn more about the job responsibilities and scope.

42. If we were to offer you this position, what changes would you make in your organization?

The timing of this question is critical, since you can't give any specific answer without knowing some details about the position, organization and culture. Even if you do, be careful about describing sweeping changes you might want to make. Unless the interviewer has specified critical problem areas that you feel comfortable addressing, limit your answer to explaining the need to study the current organization, talk with staff, and fully assess the implications before recommending any changes.

43. Do you have any objections to taking our battery of psychological tests?

"No, none at all." (This is an indication that you are a serious candidate.)

44. What other types of jobs or companies are you considering at this time?

Don't feel obliged to reveal details of your other negotiations. If you are interviewing elsewhere refer to your campaign in a general way. But concentrate mainly on the specific job for which you are interviewing.

45. What sort of outside reading do you do?

Be honest. If possible, mention some of the things you read in order to keep yourself up-to-date in your professional field. However, it is okay to show balanced interests by mentioning your recreational reading as well.

46. What motivates you the most?

Use the results of your career anchors and career assessment, but keep your answer fairly general: the satisfaction of meeting the challenges of the position, developing teams and individuals, meeting organizational goals. (Only if you are in sales would you mention money as a motivator.)

47. Give one or two examples of your creativity.

Refer to accomplishments that relate to the company and the position, if possible.

48. What are your long-range goals?

Relate your answer to the company you are interviewing with, rather than give a very broad, general answer. Keep your ambitions realistic. Talk first about doing the job for which you are applying, then talk about longer-range goals.

49. What sort of relationships do you have with your associates, both at the same level and above and below you?

This is a very important question, so you will want to take the time to answer it in logical steps. When talking about your relationships with subordinates, be prepared to state your management philosophy, particularly with regard to performance issues. When speaking of bosses, indicate your keen interest in understanding your

boss's expectations, so that you and your organization can build your goals in a way that will support his/her goals. You may also want to talk about how you would keep your boss informed. Stress your team-building, mutually cooperative approach with peers.

50. What are some of your outside activities or recreations?

Hopefully, your answer can show that you lead a balanced life. But avoid mentioning so many activities that it casts some doubt on how much time you will have for the job. Remember that your hobbies and recreation activities can be quite revealing as to your own personality and values.

THE INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS AND POSSIBLE RESPONSES

1. What was your maiden name?

This is a discriminatory question, since the response can indicate ancestry and simultaneously confirm current or past marital status. Whether or not to answer is your choice, since there are only discriminatory questions; not answers. You can avoid answering it by gently reminding the interviewer that your maiden name really has nothing to do with your ability to do the job. Or you might cleverly ask the interviewer, "Is that for security purposes?"

2. Do you plan to have a family?

Because this question is only asked of females, usually those of childbearing age, it is also discriminatory and you can refuse to answer. A non-disclosing response, however, might be: "I don't have any plans."

3. What year did you get your bachelor's degree?

While this question may seem innocuous on its face, the answer can easily be used to calculate age, since most people go on to college directly from high school. Or, if your resume does not reference a degree, it may be a subtle means to determining whether you have one. You can skirt a direct answer by focusing on a related fact, such as, "You know, I'm very proud of the fact that I finished my undergraduate work in only 3 years. ", Or, "Actually, I continued right on after college into graduate school." Or, if you don't have a degree, "I enjoyed my engineering courses so much, I've continued taking them ever since College." Then smile, and let the silence alert the interviewer that you don't plan to volunteer anything further.

4. We have a lot of social activities here at XYZ? Do you and your wife enjoy going to company functions?

This question is a double-edged sword! The interviewer is asking for confirmation that you are married - and your marital status is off-limits and asking about how you spend your leisure time. If you are married, you and your wife very much enjoy company functions, and the question does not bother you, feel free to answer with a simple "Yes, very much" and move on. If not, however, you can respond along these lines: "Oh, how interesting! What kinds of activities do you provide? ." - and let the interviewer expand on the subject without revealing your own position.

5. How is your credit rating?

Obviously, your credit rating is not the interviewer's business. But if you choose, you can simply respond "Fine." If you choose not to answer, you could turn the question back to the interviewer with "Why would you ask that?"

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEW

1. Why is this position open?
2. How often has it been filled in the past 5 to 10 years?
3. What have been the primary reasons for persons leaving?
4. Why did the person who held this position most recently leave?
5. What would you like done differently by the next person who fills this job?
6. What are some of the objectives you would like accomplished in this job?
7. What is most pressing? What would you like to have done within the next 2 or 3 months?
8. What are some of your longer-term objectives?
9. What freedom would I have in determining my work objectives, deadlines, and methods of measurement?
10. What kind of support does this position receive in terms of people and finances?
11. What are the more difficult problems facing someone in this position? How do you think these could best be handled?
12. Where could a person go who is successful in this position and within what time frame?
13. In what ways has this organization been most successful in terms of products and services over the years?
14. What significant changes do you foresee in the near future?
15. How is one judged? . What accounts for successes?
16. What are the most critical factors for success in your business? . (Note whether or not he or she mentions that people matter.)
17. Where do you see the company (or function) going in the next few years?

18. How do you win support from top management?
19. How would you describe your own management style?
20. What are the most important traits you look for in a subordinate?
21. How do you like your people to communicate with you? . (Orally, in writing, informally, in meetings, only when necessary?)

ANATOMY OF THE JOB INTERVIEW

Managing Your Own Image

This is a good time to plan how you want to be perceived in those all-important first impressions. Some of the critical factors are discussed below.

1. Physical presence. Dress appropriately for the culture you are entering. Be sure your grooming and hygiene are immaculate. Assume a posture that is neither too relaxed or sloppy, nor too tense or forward. Express your energy and fitness. Avoid awkward hand poses or seating positions. Avoid smoking or gum. Leave your protective outer clothing and/or luggage outside.
2. Movements and mannerisms. Use your natural gestures; don't close your hands. Avoid fidgeting, scratching, or fussing with objects such as a pen or glasses. Move around naturally-avoid looking stiff or awkward.
3. Manner of speaking. Make sure you can be heard; be aware of the interviewer's reaction to your voice. Do not mumble or drop your voice to a whisper toward the end of your sentences. Avoid sing-song or monotone recitations, which will give the impression that you are over-rehearsed. Also, avoid slang and colloquialisms like "Ya know," as well as grunts, hems and haws, and other verbal tics.
4. Demeanor. Convey the appropriate amount of enthusiasm, warmth, and sincerity to suit the dynamics of your interviewer. Be positive; avoid negative topics, and don't vent hostility. Smile!
5. Listening skills. Listen with full concentration and maintain eye contact 90 percent of the time (without staring). Indicate attention and acceptance with nods and smiles. Avoid interrupting; allow silence when thought is needed.
6. Communication skills. Mirror the style and pace of your interviewer. Answer forthrightly and credibly, and stop when you have answered the question; don't over-elaborate with details and anecdote; don't ramble. **DON'T INTERRUPT.** Organize your thoughts with a logical structure. If you don't know something, say so. Clarify a question if you don't understand it. Listen before you talk.

7. Interview techniques. Get names and exact titles; exchange business cards. Elicit company or departmental needs early in the interview using open-ended questions. Weave in your strengths and accomplishments as responses to those needs. Respond to doubts or objections positively without being defensive. Keep to your allotted time frames; redirect the interview as needed. Show your knowledge of the interviewer's company without sounding arrogant. Try to get a commitment for a follow-up interview or a visit to the work scene. Learn if other people might need to see you. Evaluate the impact of the interview when you are leaving. Re-affirm your interest and enthusiasm without sounding desperate.

Many of these pointers can be used as valid guidelines for all types of interactions, not just the job interview.

A Few Basic Tenets

The range of possible dynamics is very wide and no one single behavior will be right for every situation; but there are some basic principles.

Explore their needs. Remember that all successful selling starts with identifying the needs of the buyer, whether a company or a boss. Therefore, before you launch into "your story," which you have carefully prepared, try to get your interviewer talking a bit about the position and the problems facing his or her company or department. Listen actively' This will give you something to relate to.

Show acceptance. Remember that your interviewer has non-business needs, such as being liked and supported in his or her career. A future boss will be considering what it would be like to be around you for a few years.

Be inquisitive. You are there not only to answer, but to ask questions, as well. Don't be too passive in your responses; show an alert interest. You need to find out enough about the job, company, boss, and environment to be able to carry your campaign forward another step. Remember that a job decision is a mutual commitment; you owe it to yourself and the potential employer to explore how the organization and the position meet your needs. You can use them to evaluate the companies and environments in which you're interviewing.

Wrap things up. When you sense your time is running short, try to get closure and a reading on how you both feel about your candidacy, what should happen next, and how you are leaving things. Try to establish a reason for further contact (unless it was an obvious misfit).

Follow-Up and Post-Analysis

Interview follow-up is vital. And in order to follow up, you need to get closure, as best you can, on where you both stand as to your candidacy. Are they favorably impressed? Are you? Are there other candidates to see? Other people you should meet? What would constitute a logical next step? What can you do?

If you feel positive, be sure to communicate your enthusiasm. People need to know that you like them and their company.

Try to arrange for some further contact, e.g., the next interview, a visit to the work scene, a day spent in the field - whatever you can invent. Offer to send or bring something to the interviewer that is related either to your candidacy or to the interviewer's personal interests.

It is important that you not display over-eagerness or desperation in any of these areas.

It is mandatory that you write a thank-you note immediately, expressing your pleasure and interest. Weave in something job related: another idea you had about their situation, or enclose an article you clipped about the industry. As in marketing any product, you want to keep your name favorably impressed on their minds.