

# The Insider's Guide to Interview Questions

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## Types of Interview Questions

### EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS:

- *EXAMPLE: "I noticed you know about web design, so can you tell me more about it?"*

### BEHAVIOURAL QUESTIONS:

- *EXAMPLE: "Tell me about an issue you had with a co-worker?"* (See pages 17 and 18 for a list of behavioural questions.)

### TECHNICAL QUESTIONS:

These questions are "technical", "job specific" or "competency-based" questions that are directly related to some technical or practical aspect of the job you are applying for.

### CREATIVE OR UNUSUAL QUESTIONS:

- You can expect to encounter a "creative" or an "unusual" question, like *"Why are manhole covers round?"* The purpose of a question such as this is to assess your ability to handle the unexpected, solve problems, and think under pressure. Prepare a thirty-second speech on the benefits and advantages of just about any common office object, from a paper clip to a fax machine, particularly if you are interviewing for a sales position.

### SHOCKER QUESTIONS:

- You may also encounter a "shocker", like for example, *"I do not think you are right for this job. What do you think?"* Questions such as this are posed to see if you will lose your composure, if your mood will turn negative, or if you become defensive when answering it. If you are asked a question like this, stay calm and positive, and respond with something like, *"I certainly think I am, however what regarding this interview have you found lacking so I can improve in that area?"*

### NEGATIVE QUESTIONS:

- Negative questions, such as *"What's your greatest weakness?"*, are a favorite among interviewers because they are effective in uncovering problems or weaknesses. Never say you do not have a weakness. Better to say you once struggled with "xyz", but you have taken a class/workshop, or sought some outside help, and now find it really isn't an issue any more. In short, get across the fact that you no longer struggle with whatever weakness you once had, or at least that you are coping a lot better with it.

**"TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF":** See page 3.

## ILLEGAL QUESTIONS:

The Ontario Human Rights Code entitles all individuals to equal employment opportunities without regard to:

- Race or colour
- National or ethnic origin
- Religion
- Age, family or marital status
- Sex (including pregnancy and childbirth)
- Pardoned conviction
- Disability
- Citizenship or place of origin
- Sexual orientation

The following questions are considered to be unlawful

- "How old are you?"
- "Are you a Canadian citizen?"
- "What social organizations do you belong to?"
- "Do you have any disabilities?"
- "Do you have a criminal record?"
- "How many children do you have?"
- "What religious holidays do you observe?"
- "How old are you?"
- "Do you plan to have children?"
- "Do you own a house/car?"
- "Were you ever arrested?"
- "What is your social insurance number?"
- "Are you a member of any political organizations?"
- "Do you attend church regularly?"
- "What is your native language?"
- "Do you have a boyfriend/girlfriend?"
- "How are you planning to vote in the next election?"
- "Are you religious? Which denomination?"
- "What do you do in your spare time?"

If you still want to be considered for this position, you can either:

**Option 1:** Answer the illegal question

**Option 2:** Refuse to answer the illegal question

**Option 3:** Examine the intent behind it and respond with an answer that is relevant to the job

**Option 4:** Ask "Can you tell me how this relates to my ability to fill the position?"

Tips for Option 1:

- Understand what's really being asked. What does the employer fear?
- Address the employer's concern by presenting your strengths
- Answer briefly & in a non-damaging way

## Typical Interview Questions and How to Answer Them

### "Why should I hire you?"

- Point out your related skills and experiences clearly and prove you are hardworking and dependable by relating a story that illustrates that. Say you want the job and you have thoroughly researched both the company and the position. Mention any education, training, hobbies or community activities that would be in any way related to the position or the skills necessarily to do the work.

### "Tell me about a time when you had to deal with an irate customer. How did you handle the situation?"

- This question is most common when interviewing for positions in service industries. Your reaction to others losing their temper or become upset is critical: the interviewer will be looking for proof of your capacity for work that involves a great deal of contact with the general public. Make sure your answer illustrates your maturity, diplomacy, and that you acknowledge the needs and position of others.

### "Why do you want to work here?"

- Talk about some positive things learned about the company, its products or services, or its personnel. This is the perfect time to show the interviewer you have researched the company, the job, and that you are really enthusiastic about working there. Also, be sure to let them know you can do the job and that you'd fit in well.

### "Tell me about your salary expectations."

- If you are well-prepared, you can effectively respond to this question. Ask for the company's salary range first. Then answer in general terms based on your qualifications in relation to the job requirements. Make sure you research the salaries of positions similar to the one you are applying for if you do not already know exactly how much the company is prepared to offer.

### "Why did you leave your last job?"

- It is usually best to be truthful here. Keep your answers brief, positive and to the point. Whatever you do, do not say anything negative about any past employers, supervisors or company policies. If you had issues with co-workers, take responsibility for your behavior and focus more on what you learned and why your behaviour would be very different today.

### "What skill or work habit have you struggled to improve?"

- If asked this question, discuss an improvement from your earliest career days or from your relatively distant past. Convince the interviewer that this particular work habit is no longer an obstacle using one or two key examples.

### "Who's the toughest employer you have ever had, and why?"

- Again, avoid making any negative statements about previous employers, no matter what. Turn the question around with a positive, upbeat response instead, like *"Mrs. Taylor was really a really tough Supervisor, but a fair one, and set the bar really high in the office. The good news is, I grew a lot in my position and am truly grateful to have been able to work under her Supervision."*

### "Tell me about your least-favorite manager or professor."

- This question is meant to show the hiring manager how you talk about former superiors. Giving in and saying something negative will make them think you are a blame shifter or do not get along easily with others, even if your claim is justified. The best way to deal with this question is to choose an example that is not too negative, but focus your answer on what you learned from the experience.

### "How would your past supervisor describe you?"

- If it is true, talk about yourself the way your best friend would. An interview is no time for modesty. Talk about positive traits and give specific examples that back up your claims. For example, you could say, *"I am very dependable. In my last job, I missed only two days of work in three years. I was never late and was always willing to work overtime."*

### "What's your biggest strength?"

- Talk about two or three skills you have that are most relevant to the job you are applying for. Do not speak in generalities; offer specific evidence. Describe ways your skills could be of value to the employer tell them what makes

you unique and sets you apart from other job candidates. If you have to talk about weaknesses, be honest. But do not point out a weakness that could mean you not landing the job. If a hiring manager can't figure it out, maybe you are being overly critical of yourself. Keep in mind, there is a fine line between being confident and coming across too strong. Wait for the employer to ask about your high points and skills. Then use two or three of your practiced responses.

#### **"What's your biggest weakness?"**

- This is a negative question designed to uncover something negative about you. The trick to answering them is to give them a positive spin. It is best to admit to a weakness that isn't a tragic flaw, insurmountable, catastrophic, inconsistent, or currently disruptive to your career. Briefly touch on it. Then emphasize how you have overcome or at least, minimized the problem. Whatever you do, do not say you really do not have any major weaknesses. That will likely eliminate you from contention. Another way to deal with this question is to talk about a weakness that is outside of your profession, like mentioning that you are terrible at accounting (assuming there's no accounting involved in the job you are applying for!), or that you have a tendency to take on too many responsibilities, but are learning how to delegate more now with great success.

#### **"What do you see yourself doing in five years?"**

- This open question is asked to ascertain your level of maturity and whether or not you are someone who likes to grow and learn. In general, employers favour job candidates who what they want to do and are focused on specific professional goals. If you lack goals, you will have difficulty answering this question. Avoid mentioning you would like to be the "Manager" unless you are positive that would be the career path it would suit the company to have you follow.
- Remember, you are probably being interviewed by that supervisor and they may perceive you as a threat to their own job security. For that reason, it is better to be more general in your approach, and answer with an employer-centered response: assure the interviewer you would like to be with that company in five years, growing professionally, contributing and adding value to the organization. Always be consistent with the objective on your Résumé and the skills and accomplishments you are communicating to the interviewer.

#### **"Have you ever been fired or asked to leave a job?"**

- If you have been fired or asked to leave a job, this information is likely to be uncovered during reference checks with former employers, so be certain it is you who tells the interviewer. Be as positive as possible and never blame the former employer. Focus on how you learned from the experience and how you can apply what you learned from the experience and how you can apply what you learned to the job you are applying for.

#### **"When would you be willing to start work?"**

- Usually, the right answer is *"as soon as possible"*. This suits most employers. However, if you are currently employed and need to give a fair notice of termination to your present employer, most employers will make arrangements to give you that time. If you are unemployed, it is best not to say you need two weeks to "get ready" or "make child care arrangements" before you start working in your new position. Remember, you want to make a great initial impression that shows you to be hardworking, motivated and cooperative.

#### **"Can we call all of your references?"**

- If you are asked this question, realize it is for your protection. If you are currently employed, your employer probably doesn't know you are looking for a new job (as is most often the case). Invite the hiring manager to call your references after they've made you a firm offer of employment, and you have had a chance to tell your employer you are leaving. Make sure your references know they'll likely be contacted regarding a reference for you so they are prepared for the phone call.

#### **"Do you have any questions you would like to ask?"**

- It is usually a good idea to ask one or two relevant questions of the interviewer. Asking, *"What do you consider to be the most important aspect of this position?"* or *"Would I be working closely with other staff?"* shows a real interest in the position. Avoid asking trivial questions just for the sake of saying something. Never put the interviewer on the spot by saying, *"When do I start?"* This type of question is usually seen as pushy and tactless and can be very uncomfortable for everyone involved. Rather, ask something like, *"By when do you expect to make a hiring decision?"* Incidentally, most interviewers say they prefer an applicant who asks five to six questions during the interview as a natural course of

the conversation. Remember that an interview should be a dialogue –two people sharing thoughts and ideas – rather than an interrogation. The interviewer will want to hire someone with whom he or she feels comfortable – someone who will “fit in” with the staff. That someone can be you!

### **"You lack Canadian experience..."**

- If you hear this in an interview, it could just be a euphemism that refers to you having a strong accent, perhaps, or that you made some sort of cultural “faux pas” in your interview. Because the onus is on you, the jobseeker, to actively ‘market/sell’ yourself to potential employers, your qualification or degrees alone won't be enough to get a you a job. You may have mentioned "how it was back home" too many times, or the interviewer is lacking in awareness of what positive things new immigrants bring to the table. Keep the focus on your abilities and your willingness to learn.
- Language skills play a huge part, so if English (and/or French) is not your first language, use all the resources available to learn the language well. If this is an issue for you, The Career Foundation's A-LINC Centre will assess your English language skills and refer you to the most suitable LINC service providing agency in York Region. LINC classes are free and range from basic literacy to advanced levels of study. With program flexibility, classes are available full time, part time, during the day or evening. For more information, go to the main page of The Career Foundation's website and under "Services" click on Language Assessment/A-LINC.

### **"Your education is unrelated..."**

- If you hear this in an interview, be honest about the qualifications or type of degree you have, then immediately ask if that is a concern. Point out to the potential employer that you enjoy learning and are more than capable of it. Tell the interviewer that you are looking for an employer that encourages people to further their studies, and tell them that you would enjoy studying or taking courses that relate to the position you are seeking, and are confident that with the advantage of your experience and all the specialized training you have taken, you will do quite well.
- If you do not have a degree but have supervised people with degrees, point out to the interviewer that you are more than capable of dealing effectively with people at that level. And make sure that the potential employer understands your lack of, or failure to earn a degree more closely related to the position, does not show that you lack ambition, but rather the fact that you have a practical approach getting the education/training that would allow you to make the biggest contributions to your current job.
- Let the interviewer know that you have written a paper that addresses major trends and issues in the industry you are targeting, and intend to follow through with your education plans.

### **"You have a sporadic work history... or gaps in your employment..."**

- If you hear one of these objections in an interview, you can still overturn it's negative impact. It depends, however, on the reasons you have employment gaps. Many of us have taken time off from work for one reason or another. Sometimes by choice, and sometimes because finding a new job can take some time.
- If you took time off for "personal reasons", do not just say so and leave it at that. It is open to all sorts of misinterpretation and leaves the interviewer thinking you may be hiding something. If you took time out to care for an ill family member emphasize how you had evaluated the situation and concluded that you would be unable to give the commitment you wanted to your position as well as look after the family member. You can end the discussion by assuring the interviewer that the reason has now resolved itself and you are able to recommit yourself completely to your career. *"I stayed home to look after my sick mother. I knew I would be unable to devote myself properly to my job and to being the care-taker, so I resigned. The situation has now changed and I am ready to re-enter the work force. I am excited about making a positive contribution to your company."*
- If you took time out to recover from an illness such as depression this can be addressed in the job interview if the employment gap is queried. Prepare a short but straightforward explanation that you feel comfortable with. Highlight how you have met the challenge and overcome your problems. In your interview answer refer to the skills you gained in your previous jobs and how they make you the right job candidate. Impress upon the interviewer your readiness and eagerness to assume new responsibilities and challenges.
- Here's an example: *"I went through a difficult time emotionally following the ....., and I took some time out to deal with this. It was a difficult period for me but I worked hard and succeeded in overcoming it. I am a stronger person for it*

*and now I am a hundred percent ready to tackle a new job. I feel that the experience I gained at my previous company can really benefit this position in the following ways .....*"

- Avoid sounding defensive. Acknowledge the interviewer's concern.
- *"I fully understand that you need to know what I was doing during that time, and I would like to discuss this with you."*
- Appear composed and unapologetic, this will reassure the interviewer that you are comfortable with your reasons and that they should be too.
- If you have been looking for a job for a long time and this is queried during the interview, you can discuss how you are looking for a long term prospect and not just a paycheck. Use your interview answer to explain that you want to be sure that the job is right and go on to describe why you feel this is the right position and company for you.
- Focus on the efforts you have made while you have been unemployed. Discuss any classes you have taken or any volunteer work you got involved in. Even attempts to improve your fitness or cooking skills can be viewed in a positive light! Taking on part-time and temporary work at whatever level during your job search shows a strong work ethic and flexibility. Show how you have kept up to date in your industry and job knowledge.
- Taking time out to travel contributes to personal development. *"I was fortunate enough to be able to take a year out to travel extensively. I was presented with a number of challenges that taught me a great deal about myself and helped develop my abilities. I am really excited about putting these to good use in my new job."*

## Typical Behavioural Interview Questions

### Skills/Abilities:

- "How have you developed and applied your programming or problem solving abilities?"
- "When have you demonstrated initiative to learn a new skill?"  
(Employers will also screen for "soft" skills such as your ability to communicate effectively, to work as part of a team, or to organize a project and meet deadlines.)
- "Can you tell me a time when you demonstrated effective communication skills?"
- "How do you plan your day?"

### Experience:

- "What were your main duties in your previous job? What did you learn?"
- "What was the most challenging aspect of your volunteer activities?"
- "How did you get along with your manager? Other co-workers?"
- Company Fit: "Tell me about activities you were involved in that required teamwork."
- "Under what conditions do you work most and least effectively?"

### Personal Qualities:

- "Do you have some clear goals?"
- "Are you dedicated and honest?"

### Interest:

- "What are your career goals? How does this job fit with them?"
- "Why did you apply for this job?"

## More Behavioural Interview Questions:

- *"Describe a situation where you were able to successfully persuade someone to see things your way."*
- *"Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem."*
- *"Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it."*

- *"Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion."*
- *"Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree."*
- *"Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete."*
- *"Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks."*
- *"Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision."*
- *"What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example."*
- *"Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa)."*
- *"Tell me about a difficult decision you have made in the last year."*
- *"Give me an example of a time when something you tried to accomplish ended in failure."*
- *"Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead."*
- *"Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker."*
- *"Give me an example of a time when you motivated others."*
- *"Tell me about a time when you delegated a project effectively".*
- *"Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem."*
- *"Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem."*
- *"Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures."*
- *"Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision."*
- *"Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low)."*
- *"Give an example of an occasion when you used logic to solve a problem."*
- *"Give an example of a goal you reached and tell me how you achieved it."*
- *"Describe a decision you made that was unpopular and how you handled implementing it."*
- *"Have you gone above and beyond the call of duty? If so, how?"*
- *"What do you do when your schedule is interrupted? Give an example of how you handle it."*
- *"Have you had to convince a team to work on a project they weren't thrilled about? How did you do it?"*
- *"Have you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker? How?"*
- *"Tell me about how you worked effectively under pressure."*

## Questions to Ask During an Interview

Asking the **right questions** during an interview is a **key component to interview success**.

Choose the appropriate ones from the list below to ask during your interview:

- *"Describe a typical workday /work week."*
- *"What are the day-to-day responsibilities of this job? "*
- *"Is this a new opening?"*
- *"What are you looking for in the ideal candidate for this position?"*
- *"Can you describe an ideal employee?"*
- *"What are some of the skills and abilities necessary for someone to succeed in this job?"*
- *"Is there anything further I can tell you about myself?"*
- *"When will you finish interviewing for this position?"*
- *"What is the next step in the interview process?"*
- *"When may I check back with you?"*
- *"Are there any other positions available?"*
- *"How would you describe the ideal candidate for this position?"*
- *"How soon do you see someone actually starting this position?"*

- *"What are the potential growth opportunities within this company?"*
- *"Where do you see this company headed in the next five years?"*
- *"What are the particular challenges the person hired for this position will face?"*
- *"Will you be conducting a second set of interviews?"*
- *"When do you think you will be making the hiring decision?"*
- *"Could you describe for me the management style and atmosphere in the company?"*
- *"What are the major concerns that need to be immediately addressed in this job?"*
- *"What's your company's policy on providing workshops and training so employees can develop their skills?"*
- *"What particular computer equipment and software do you use here? When was your last upgrade?"*
- *"Have any areas for improvement been identified in this department?"*
- *"Can you give me an idea of the typical workload?"*
- *"How has the latest economic downturn impacted your organization?"*
- *"Can you tell me about the boss's management style?"*
- *"Are there any pressing issues that would have to be immediately addressed?"*
- *"Can you tell me about the morale of the department?"*
- *"When are you hoping to have the new person in the position?"*
- *"What is the makeup of the team as far as experience? Am I going to be a mentor or will I be mentored?"*
- *"What does this company value the most and how do you think my work for you will further these values?"*
- *"What kinds of processes are in place to help me work collaboratively?"*
- *"What can I bring Company XYZ to round out the team?"*
- *"Do team members typically eat lunch together or do they typically eat at their desk?"*
- *"What is the most important thing I can do to help within the first 90 days of my employment?"*
- *"Do you have any questions or concerns about my ability to perform this job?"*
- *"When top performers leave the company why do they leave and where do they usually go?"*
- *"What do you see in me? What are my strongest assets and possible weaknesses?"*
- *"Do you have any concerns that I need to clear up in order to be the top candidate?"*
- *"Who are the coolest people on my team? What makes him or her cool? Can I meet them?"*

- ▶ **Ask your questions clearly and without hesitation**
- ▶ **Accept the interviewer's answer and do not insist on a more thorough explanation**
- ▶ **Watch for the signs that the interviewer is ready to close the interview**
- ▶ **Prepare answers for more questions than you think you will need**
- ▶ **Tell them you want the job!**



**From all of us at The Career Foundation, thank you for the opportunity  
to assist you in developing your human potential!**