

5 Interview Pitfalls

Recruiters reveal how to respond to the most complicated questions.

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By Kerri Hatt

You check the clock, smoothing your best suit with your sweaty palms, as the recruiter calls your name. It's time. Interviewing can ruffle the feathers of even the most qualified candidate. And while it sometimes seems recruiters are out to get you with their tricky questions, they really just want to see how you communicate and work under pressure, noted Executive Recruiter and Career Consultant Bruce A. Hurwitz, Hurwitz Strategic Staffing. Can you maintain composure or do you become defensive?

While many of the questions you face during an interview can seem difficult, they are usually predictable Hurwitz noted.

The most important thing you can do before an interview is to prepare for these landmines, Cathleen Faerber, managing director, The Wellesley Group Inc. (www.wellesleygroup.com) stated. "Preparing for an interview is more than just researching the company. It's thinking about these types of questions and being prepared to successfully answer them."

To help you prepare, *ADVANCE* polled recruitment leaders on the most common difficult interview questions, and how to answer them.

1. Why did you leave your last position?

First off, why are you here? Recruiters aren't just being nosy when they inquire about why you're looking for a job. Unless you're a new grad looking for your first position, you're leaving another one behind. Essentially, recruiters want to know what went wrong. Was it the job . or was it you?

They key to answering this one is to be truthful . to a degree. Even if you hate your boss's ever-loving guts, this is better off kept to yourself. Never say anything disparaging about your prior employer, boss or a coworker in an interview, advised Linda Konstan, Sensible Human Resources Consulting, LLC, www.lindakonstan.com. "It will lose you the job."

The reasons you're leaving should be professional and growth based, Jeff Gordon, recruiter, blogger, educator and marketing consultant, IWantAnEducation.com, agreed. Cater your answers to the type of employer you're interviewing with.

Rather than saying your previous environment wasn't conducive to personal growth, put a positive spin on the situation, Sharon Blaivas, www.shakeupmyresume.com, suggested. "Explain you are looking for experience in 'X Y or Z,' or an environment like 'X, Y or Z,' and believe you can find that here."

2. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

The standard question regarding your foreseeable future is not just an open-ended inquiry. This is not a good time to spout off half-hatched fantasies of starting your own cupcake bakery or of joining the PGA tour after knocking a couple strokes off your handicap.

In healthcare in particular, employee turnover is costly. Staff, from human resources to management, will devote hours to finding and interviewing the right candidates, and then training them after they are hired. This is not a process they hope to repeat any time soon. Recruiters are looking to make sure your professional goals align with the company and that you will be a good fit for the role at hand.

Rick Saia, CPRW, content writer, Pongo Résumé, www.pongoresume.com, said hiring managers are looking for a long-term commitment to the company. The best way to



KNOW WHAT'S COMING: Don't be thrown off by tricky interview questions. Prepare your responses in advance. *ADVANCE photo*

answer this question is to show you hope to be well established as someone who is helping that company succeed.

"You can also turn the question back to the interviewer, and ask where they see the company in 5 years," he suggested. "You might not know on a personal level where you'll be, but most companies have goals and plans that look ahead 2 to 5 years. Their answer might give you a good idea if it's a company worth sticking around that long for.

While it's good to establish yourself as a potential long-term employee, don't get too cocky, Lavie Margolin, job search advisor, Lion Cub Job Search, www.lioncubjobsearch.blogspot.com; and author of *Lion Cub Job Search: Practical Job Search Assistance for Practical Job Seekers*, cautioned. Keep in the context of the industry and role, but as you have not been hired yet, an answer of "here" might not be appropriate.

Instead, say something like, "The actual role is not as important to me as the responsibilities. I would like to assist an organization such as yours in helping to train staff, being a go-to employee for senior management and a trusted representative for the company," Margolin said.

3. Tell me about yourself.

This seemingly innocuous question can be a real danger zone for the chatty, the unfocused and the unprepared. "Employers ask questions about your past, experience, skills and goals to determine fit," Margolin reported. "Your answers will help the employer determine if they can see *you* in the role of the job." Your goal during the interview is to prove you have the skills, qualifications and abilities for the job no matter the question asked.

When the recruiter asks you about yourself, keep your answer framed in a professional context, Margolin reminded. Don't focus on your family, favorite vacation spot or your Chihuahua, Peanuts, but on your relevant skills, experience and abilities. Keep your answer within 2 minutes to avoid wandering into inappropriate topics.

4. What about us?

Recruiters will often see if you have done your homework on the company you're interviewing with by asking what you know about the company.

"In this day and age of information being readily available on your fingertips, you would think that all job seekers would have an answer prepared for this question," said Roberta Chinsky Matuson, job search mentor and president, Human Resource Solutions, Northampton, MA (www.yourhrexperts.com); and author, *Suddenly In Charge: Managing Up, Managing Down, Succeeding All Around*. However, "Most respond with a blank stare, while the hiring manager is thinking, 'Next!'"

This is your chance to demonstrate your level of interest in the position, by researching the facility and by asking questions during the interview. Many candidates stumble at the close when asked if they have any questions for the recruiter, reported Linda Konstan, Sensible Human Resources Consulting, LLC (www.lindakonstan.com).

"A candidate should have questions," Konstan stressed. "Even if you are stumped, you can always ask something like, 'What would be the most important contributions I could make in the first 3-6 months?'"

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5. What are your weaknesses?

This one is the real kicker. While it's against every survival instinct raging during a professional evaluation, looking at the recruiter with a blank stare or smiling widely while declaring yourself flawless is interview suicide. First and foremost, because *everyone* knows it's coming, pointed out Joey Price, PHR, HR specialist and founder of Push Consultant Group, LLC, www.pushconsultantgroup.com. You may not like it, but you have to prepare for it.

"An impressive and confident response shows that the candidate 1.) has prepared for the question; 2.) has done serious self-reflection; and 3.) can admit responsibility and accept constructive criticism," Price noted. Great responses sound sincere, confident and proactive.

"Sincerely give an honest answer (but don't say too much!), be confident in the fact that this weakness does not make you any less of a great candidate, and show that you are working on this weakness and can tell me how," Price advised.

Job search experts are of basically two schools of thought when it comes to how to answer this question:

Disguise a strength as a weakness

Jeff Gordon, recruiter, blogger, educator and marketing consultant, IWantAnEducation.com, encourages

candidates to focus on characteristic that is not altogether weak or is in fact a hidden strength. "Many folks answer those questions with answers like 'I work too late' or 'I tend to take on too much,' he said. "But what's important is that you follow up with a solution to this so-called weakness. For example, 'I take on too much, but I'm learning to prioritize my activities based on monetary value to the company.'" Frances Cole Jones, author of *The Wow Factor: The 33 Things You Must (and Must Not) Do to Guarantee Your Edge in Today's Business World*, cautioned many interviewers know you've practiced your couched "weakness," so they will follow up with, "Great, tell me another." So be sure to have a second answer ready.

Show your ability to change

Nancy Anderson, Blackbird Learning Associates LLC, <http://blackbirdlearningassociates.com>, coaches job applicants to select a job-related weakness (pick something small that is obvious on your resume-you're not giving anything away, just make sure it's not one of the job requirements) and then say what you've done to correct the weakness.

Try, "My weakness happens to be disorganization. I realized that this was an issue for me and have worked to correct it over the past several years. After I found that my disorganization stemmed from a struggle with time management, I attended a time management training program and make sure that I use the daily to-do list and prioritization skills presented on a daily basis. I've improved 98 percent and I still follow the techniques," Anderson suggested.

Hurwitz has a more creative approach. "'What are your weaknesses?' means 'Why should I not hire you?'" he cautioned. While the answer has to be positive, humor-used appropriately, doesn't hurt, he noted.

He provided this example: "I am great at coming up with a strategy and implementing it. However, I literally get lost going around the corner. I always look for a way to overcome weakness, so if you ask, I'll give you a kidney but I won't give you my GPS! More seriously, I do not suffer fools well. I am very patient. I will spend as much time as necessary with supervisees who are trying and willing to learn. I get along very well with children. I have all the patience in the world for 6-year olds born in 2004. However, I have no patience for 6-year olds born in 1984!"

Now that you've learned how to phrase your responses, practice, practice, practice. Brian Hinchcliffe, Kurru, LLC, www.kurru.com, told *ADVANCE* if job applicants have thought through these questions and prepared responses, they will find them far less tricky when the big day arrives and they are put in the hot seat.

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