

Job interviewing can be an unnerving experience, but if you know how to handle some of the stickiest situations encountered in interviewing, you can be that much more confident. Here are 10 of the stickiest.

#### **1. THE BAD INTERVIEWER.**

Not every professional who conducts job interviews with candidates knows how to conduct an interview effectively. In fact some are downright lousy at it. A bad interviewer might be unfocused, disinterested, unprepared. He or she might dominate the interview by doing all the talking or might ask inappropriate and illegal questions.

The unfocused, unprepared interviewer probably hasn't read your resume and maybe can't even find a copy. This hapless soul doesn't even know what to ask you. Be sure to offer this disorganized interviewer a copy of your resume while asking, "May I take you through some highlights of my career?"

While the big mouth interviewer is holding forth, make as many mental notes as you can (or jot them down if you've brought a small note pad). Don't show your exasperation; instead be an attentive listener and hang on the interviewer's every word. Try to get a word in edgewise by leaning forward and opening your mouth slightly, advises Anne Kadet on Smartmoney.com. If that doesn't work, even a nonstop talker will likely eventually ask if you have any questions. At that point, you can ask questions or describe your fit with the company and the position based on the mental notes you've been making.

For inappropriate and illegal questions, see No. 6 below and try your hardest to keep the interview focused on your qualifications for the job.

#### **2. THE "TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF" QUESTION.**

Of course, this question is not a question at all but a request for a command performance. It's the most commonly asked interview question, yet it frequently still rattles interviewees. The trick is to make your response a succinct summary of information that is specifically targeted to the job you're interviewing for. For example:

"My background to date has been centered around preparing myself to become the very best financial consultant I can become. Let me tell you specifically how I've prepared myself. I am an undergraduate student in finance and accounting at \_\_\_\_\_ University. My past experience has been in retail and higher education. Both aspects have prepared me well for this career."

The interviewer is not looking for your autobiography and probably is not interested in your personal life unless aspects of it are relevant to the job you're interviewing for.

#### **3. THE "WEAKNESS" QUESTION.**

The conventional wisdom about responding to "What are your weaknesses?" used to be that the candidate should spin a weakness into a strength. For example: "I'm a perfectionist and don't believe anyone can do the job as well as I can, so I sometimes have a hard time delegating." That type of response has, however, worn out its welcome with interviewers. Other approaches include offering a weakness that is inconsequential to the job (such as being a poor speller and relying on spell check) or denying that you have any weaknesses that would stand in the way of your performing the job effectively. The former approach may work but be seen as shallow, while the latter sometimes lacks credibility. After all, everyone has a weakness.

An approach that seems to work well is to talk about an area that was once a weakness but that you have worked to improve. Here's how you could frame the perfectionist example above in terms of professional growth: "I tend to be a perfectionist who has had trouble delegating tasks to others, but I've come to see that teamwork and capitalizing on everyone's strengths is a much more effective way to get the job done than trying to do it all myself."

**THE QUESTION WAS: “IF YOU WERE A SUPERHERO, WHAT WOULD BE YOUR SUPER POWERS, AND WHY?”**

**4. THE “WHY SHOULD I HIRE YOU?” QUESTION.**

The unspoken part of this question is: “Why should I hire you [above all the other candidates]?” This is your chance to shine, to really make a sales pitch for yourself. Use your Unique Selling Proposition to describe what sets you apart from other candidates. The employer will make a significant investment in hiring and training you, so tell the interviewer that this investment will be justified. For example, you could say: “I sincerely believe that I’m the best person for the job. Like other candidates, I have the ability to do this job. But beyond that ability, I offer an additional quality that makes me the very best person for the job —my drive for excellence. Not just giving lip service to excellence, but putting every part of myself into achieving it. Throughout my career, I have consistently strived to become the very best I can become. The success I’ve attained in my management positions is the result of possessing the qualities you’re looking for in an employee.”

**5. “OFF-THE-WALL” QUESTIONS, ALSO KNOWN AS “WILD CARD” OR “NO-RIGHT-ANSWER” QUESTIONS.**

Occasionally you’ll be asked an interview question that’s just downright weird and certainly doesn’t seem to have anything to do with the job — for example, a question like this: “If you were an ice-cream cone, what flavor would you be?” Interviewers often ask these oddball questions to see how quickly you can think on your feet and whether you can avoid becoming flustered. Others, unfortunately, ask them because they enjoy seeing interviewees squirm. Still others are amused by the range of creative — and not-so-creative — responses they receive.

Don’t let an off-the-wall question rattle you. Take a moment to gather your thoughts and respond the best way you can. There is rarely a wrong answer to this type of question, but quick-thinking candidates can turn the response into an opportunity to impress the employer. A response given by one of my former students has always stuck in my head as being a standout answer.

**6. ILLEGAL QUESTIONS:**

It’s illegal to ask about age, marital status, children, childcare arrangements, and the like, but employers still do — or come up with subtle ways to ask, such as by inquiring about when you graduated from high school/college. It’s best to address the concern behind the question rather than the question itself by saying something like: “There is nothing about my personal status that would get in the way of my doing a great job for your company.” While it may also be tempting to point out the illegality of the question, doing so likely won’t endear you to the interviewer

**7. SALARY QUESTIONS:**

As a screening device, interviewers often ask early in the interview what salary you are looking for. If you ask for more than the employer is willing to pay (or occasionally, on the flip side, undervalue yourself), the interviewer can eliminate you before spending a lot of time with you. That’s why the best tactic for salary questions is to delay responding to them as long as possible — ideally until after the employer makes an offer. Try to deflect salary questions with a response like this: “I applied for this position because I am very interested in the job and your company, and I know I can make an immediate impact once on the job, but I’d like to table salary discussions until we are both sure I’m right for the job.”

**8. QUESTIONS ABOUT BEING TERMINATED FROM A PREVIOUS JOB.**

It’s always uncomfortable to be asked your reasons for leaving a job from which you were terminated. Don’t lie about it, but don’t dwell on it either. You could explain that you and the company were not a good fit, hence your performance suffered. Or that you and your supervisor had differing viewpoints. Emphasize what you learned from the experience that will prevent you from repeating it and ensure that you will perform well in the future.

Job-seekers need to think of each interview question as an opportunity to showcase an accomplishment or strength. Every response should build momentum toward convincing the interviewer that you deserve to advance to the next level, whether that level is another round of interviews or a job offer.

**9. QUESTIONS ABOUT REASONS FOR LEAVING A CURRENT JOB.**

This question is similar to the previous question, even if you haven't been fired. Responses about fit with the company and differing views from your supervisor can also work here, but remember never to trash a current employer. Always speak positively about past and present employers even if your experience has not been positive with them. Another good response in this situation is to say that you determined you had grown as much as you could in that job and you are ready for new challenges.

**10. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE.**

Interviewees are often asked, "Where do you see yourself in five (or 10) years?" Strike a delicate balance when responding to this kind of question, with just the right mix of honesty, ambition, and your desire to be working at this company long-term.

Avoid responses such as starting your own business, running for Congress, which suggest that you don't plan to stay with the company.

It's not totally inappropriate to mention the personal (marriage, family), but focus mainly on professional goals. Mention your career and company goals first, and tack on any mention of marriage and family at the end.

Your response could be: "I'm here to let you know that I am the best person for the job. If in the future you feel I would be a candidate for a higher level position, I know I wouldn't be passed up."

OR: "I hope to stay at the company and expect that in five years, I'll make a significant advance in the organization."

OR: "I would like to become the very best \_\_\_\_\_ your company has."

And then there's my personal favorite, which a student told me a friend had used. Asked by the interviewer, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" The response: "Celebrating the five-year anniversary of your asking me this question!" While the response probably made the interviewer laugh, it's probably not the best answer.