

BAD-BETTER-BEST ANSWERS TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Your ability to answer questions skillfully gives you the edge over your competitors. Learn to give answers that reflect your capabilities as they relate to the position you are interviewing for. Give answers that convince the interviewer that you have the skills, attitude, and desire to be hired. The following are some typical questions.

Tell me about yourself.

It is best not to talk about your personal life. Give a progression of your work history.

Bad: "I was born in Austin, attended U.T. and have worked as a secretary for three years because it was the best job I could find in a tough job market.

Better: "I attended U.T. and worked part-time through college. Since graduation I have been a secretary in the marketing department of Glad Advertising Company."

Best: "I attended U.T. on a scholarship and took several courses in marketing and business administration. I worked part-time through college as a salesperson at the campus bookstore. Since then I have been a secretary for three years reporting to the Marketing V.P. of Glad Advertising Co. where I organized the clerical work flow of the 24 salespeople in our division."

Why Did you leave your last job?

The rule here is that you should never say anything bad about a former job or boss because there's a good chance the interviewer will interpret this to mean that the problem was with you, and not with the employer. Try to find some positive way of explaining why you left. If you are having difficulty with good responses for your various departures, please consult with me. Proper responses are critical.

Bad: "I was not getting ahead and got bored."

Better: "I got good evaluations and a raise but I was not promoted as promised."

Best: "I gained a great deal from the company and had excellent training, good evaluations, and felt I was appreciated. I was ready for new challenges and more responsibility. My supervisor indicated that there was nothing available in the near future to aspire to. I needed to consider other opportunities that would allow me further growth. I thought I had found that opportunity when I accepted XYZ's offer."

Do you have any children? How old are you? Are you married?

Illegal questions about age, children and marital status represent an especially tricky

area during the job interview. You have the right by law to state that from a legal standpoint these questions should not be asked. However, you will probably decrease your chance of getting a job offer. The following are some answers to consider using if you do choose to respond. The employer may have concerns that your age (young or old), marital status or children will sometimes interfere with your ability to take care of all his needs. Read between the lines on these questions and put to rest those fears.

Best: "Children? I have two well adjusted children. I have a great situation with child care and a back up sitter. Arrangements can easily be made for last minute overtime situations. My children have not effected my flexibility and productivity on my previous jobs." or "I have older children that never really effect my work habits."

Best: "My age? I hope you will be comfortable with whatever age I am! I am in my 30's. (Be sure to keep a sense of humor.) "That's a lady's best secret! If it's really important to you I'll tell you." or "I am mature enough to make sensible decisions in tough job situations and young enough to maintain an enthusiastic high energy level throughout the day. Do you want the age that I feel like I am or the age I really am." or if you want to flirt a little..."I'm young enough to run faster than you around the desk and old enough to know better than to get caught! Don't take me wrong, I just like to kid around. What age would you like for me to be!"

Best: "Married? No, I'm single and have work as my top priority. I am not one of those wild party people that drag in with hangovers nor do I waste time at work arranging my social calendar or chatting with my friends." or "I'm lucky to be married to another work-aholic just like I am. We both enjoy having a career. I can't imagine not always working. I like having my independence." or "I'm married. The different cities you see on my resume are from my husband's transfers, however, I am pleased to say that Houston is forecasted to be a long term home for us with no more transfers. I am looking forward to many years with my next employer."

What are your goals? Where do you see yourself in five years?

The employer is really asking: Is the job we have what you want to be doing for awhile? Will you stick with this job or jump to another job where your goals can be fulfilled better. It is important to focus on what you can do for the company and not what you demand or expect from them. Your goals should reflect what is most compatible with the needs of the job opening. If you are not sure give a more broad and less specific response.

Bad: "I really want to be an office manager." "I really want to return to school and get my accounting degree." "I'd like to get more into sales and not be tied to a desk."

Better: "I like accounting and secretarial work. I see myself doing more of it and doing it better over the years." or " I plan to stay in general accounting and take more evening accounting courses in hopes of earning greater work responsibility and financial rewards over the next five years."

Best: "My long range plans depend a great deal on the type of job I take now. With whatever company I commit to I hope to focus on their needs, take job related courses that will enhance my value, find ways to make my job more productive and hopefully be recognized for top performance and gain more responsibility over the years. In five years I hope to be contributing significantly more to the company I join today."

What are your strengths? What were your contributions to your last firm?

Stick with the strengths that relate to the job. Remember to back up general statements with some specific examples that parallel what's needed in this opening.

Bad: "I think I'm friendly, a hard worker, and learn quickly." (too trite!)

Better: "I have been told that my enthusiasm is contagious. When I worked at ABC, people often commented on how I was always in a good mood and that the morale in my department was higher since I had been there." or "I'm a work-aholic and I like finding ways to improve systems. I saved XYZ Company \$10,000.00 by locating a health insurance policy with lower premiums and better benefits for employees."

Best: "You have indicated that the demands of the job require juggling multiple projects and staying cool under pressure. Working for 8 engineers at ABC I certainly had to change gears frequently and change priorities constantly to keep pace with the endless rush projects. The guys told me I was

the best secretary they had ever had for handling pressure and maintaining my cheerfulness and enthusiasm.

"I understand that you need a detail oriented person to work on your word processor the majority of the day. I am the kind of worker that enjoys working on computers and I don't mind being on the computer most of the day. I can stick with a long assignment. The majority of my day at Geosource was spent compiling and entering detailed data into the Wang computer terminal. My supervisor complimented me on how much work I could put out and how accurate I was. I feel my strengths include- my ability to work long hours on detailed tasks, my fast computer speed and accuracy."

What are your weaknesses? Where could you use the most improvement?

You are not in group therapy or in a confession booth so don't go crazy with true nitty-gritty! Of course you have weaknesses. Everyone does. However, your short suits don't need to hurt your chance for a offer. Stick with revealing "safe" weaknesses. If you are prepared, your "best" weaknesses should also imply a strength. A sense of humor can work for you--"Weakness? I'd like to plead the 5th Amendment!"

Bad: "Sometimes I talk too much." or "Sometimes I can be moody." or "I'm not the best at spelling and math." or "I can get impatient with co-workers that don't work hard." or "I can't stand being bored. I need to be kept busy and challenged."

Better: "I am sometimes too stubborn to throw in the towel on a problem that is unsolvable." or "Sometimes I am too honest and may hurt people's feelings."

Best: "One of my bosses used to complain about my being too energetic and that it was difficult to keep me with enough work to do."

"Sometimes I expect too much of others and find it difficult to delegate work that may not reflect top standards upon completion. I am a perfectionist and others might consider my attention to detail to be too picky."

"I am terrible at not showing how I feel. My office manager says she can read me like a book. I'm just not good at keeping a poker face." or "I have been told that I am too modest. I am not good at tooting my own horn and letting others know what my accomplishments are even though I am confident of my capabilities."

What is your salary requirement?

What kind of money are you wanting?

It is best to let the interviewer broach the subject first. Ideally you want to turn the question around and ask "What salary range did you have in mind for the position." The idea is to not get stuck revealing a figure that is lower than what the employer will pay or too high of a figure that might discourage the employer.

Bad: "Uh...what are you paying?" or "I won't take anything less than \$2000 because I'm worth it." or "I need \$1600 to pay my bills." (The employer does not care about your bills and he will make his own assessment of what you are worth to him.)

Better: "I am open to suggestion. What range would you consider fair for my qualifications?" or mention a range "I am hoping to earn between \$1400 to \$1700."

Best: "Salary discussion always makes me uncomfortable. I really like what I've learned about the position and do not want money to get in the way of my making a good career decision. From what you have learned about my background, what do you think would be a fair salary range?" If reversing the question fails..."I have been interviewing for positions ranging from \$1200 to \$1600 per month. Quick reviews, promotability, benefits and other factors weigh into the decision. Job content and my compatibility with the boss is really more important than salary. If I am the right candidate for the job I am sure you would try to be fair with me."

What jobs have you liked the most and least? Why?

Remember what the job at hand requires. Mirror what this company needs in you examples of "likes". Be very careful about what you enjoyed the least. Nobody likes a complainer. Negative responses are dangerous because they can be interpreted as indications of inflexibility, intolerance, and immaturity.

Bad: "I liked the location, benefits and pay of my last job. I disliked BOZO's politics. I had been there longer than another girl and because she became pals with the boss she got raises faster than I did even though she did less work. It wasn't fair."

Better: "My favorite job was at XYZ where I got to learn so many types of software. My boss really seemed to appreciate my taking initiative to streamline ways of doing things by learning how to computerize it. My least favorite job was when I first started out and had to begin as a file clerk although I rapidly

gained more responsibility and enjoyed my work more than."

Best: I have liked almost every job I have ever had. I have been fortunate to have fit in well with all my companies and I have always progressed well in each job. I probably liked ABC the best because I was challenged by gathering estimates and bids from subcontractors to get best prices for interior construction projects. I loved finding ways to save my company money. That's why I would love to be considered by your construction company. I would have a hard time picking a least favorite job. I suppose my days of doing CRT entry all day was not as interesting as the people interaction in some of my other jobs, although I am accurate and fast on the CRT.

Why would you like to have this job?

You may be getting desperate for a job but nobody will respect you for that answer. Keep personal considerations such as pay, location, hours and benefits out of your answer--you do not want to leave the impression that you are shallow and just using the company for what you can get. Focus on how you like the industry and the company's reputation, how your career goals could be met, how you like the work content how you seem to fit in and mesh well with the personalities of the people you have met and how you think you can contribute well to the company with your skills.

Bad: "The job is close to home and I like your benefits."

Better: "Working as an accounting secretary would be something I would like because I enjoy working with numbers and I am good at statistical typing. I feel that putting charts and tables together is almost like a form or art. The job allows me to continue using the skills I enjoy most."

Best: "I am attracted to both job content and the great success of the company. The positive attitude and high energy of the people I have met is very appealing. I feel that I could contribute well to the accounting department since I already have a strong background in numbers and secretarial work and this is what I want to do. The whole set up suits me and I think I would fit in." or "I understand that the health field will be one of the fastest growing industries over the next 30 years. This company seems to have the aggressive management, financial resources, and insight to take advantage of the upcoming boom. I want to be a part of this company's dreams and contribute to making those dreams a very profitable reality."