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HR: Interview Questions

**The ultimate guide HR Interview
Questions and Answers**

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The ultimate guide to answering the most common interviewing questions

It is always tempting for recruiters or hiring managers to pursue applicants based primarily on the fact that a candidate looks especially promising on paper alone. Faced with pressures coming from multiple sides, many recruiters will admit that they sometimes short-circuit the interview process to speed things along rapidly. In the effort to fill a position that might have remained open too long, a manager will sometimes go through an interview in a perfunctory way—and this will allow candidates with strong paper resumes to land the job. Often, however, this kind of haste will result in hiring new employees who actually lack relevant skill sets or who turn out to be a poor fit.

The best strategy for any candidate, therefore, is to be thoroughly prepared. Following is a list of more than forty of the questions most frequently posed at interview, along with concrete advice as to how to formulate effective answers. The goal should not be to have a canned response at the ready, but it is wise to have a grasp on what may be asked, what kind of responses are being sought, and what is needed to be done for a candidate to demonstrate that he or she is truly the correct one for the job at stake.

Interviewers ask certain questions because they want to uncover how someone has performed in the past and how the person really thinks about the opportunity available. A proven approach for accomplishing these goals involves utilizing the interview to make three specific assessments:

- to recognize and ferret out the candidates who are great merely at interviewing;
- to gauge who will be the best fit, based on temperament, attitude, and experience;
- to identify the individual who really wants the position the most and can thrive and excel at it.

Classic Questions

These frequently asked questions touch upon the essentials which hiring managers want to know about every candidate: Who really is this candidate sitting across from me? Why might she or he be suitable for the new job? What is she or he particularly good at doing? Even if an interviewer doesn't use these exact formulations, candidates who have these questions in mind will find themselves optimally prepared.

1. Tell me about yourself.

Here we have the deceptively simple question for which many applicants neglect to prepare. The question is a critical one. The employer is assessing a candidate's poise, ability to respond, and communication skills. A candidate who offers a laundry list or a meandering personal or employment history is already on the wrong track. Good candidates will provide a compelling,

concise pitch that demonstrates why they are the right fit and that they capable of staying on topic while furnishing organized, compartmentalized responses.

2. Why did you leave your previous employer? (Or: Why do you want to leave your current job?)

Here, the key factors to stick with are transparency and honesty. Layoffs do affect talented employees, so those who have been downsized should hardly be penalized for that. But if someone offers only vague answers about differences of opinions or changes in supervisors, the interviewer would be wise to probe more closely. It could be a matter of performance issues; if that is so, these can be verified by checking references. A candidate who is currently employed ought to be able to give a logical explanation as to why he or she is seeking greater opportunities or challenges. If he or she wants to make a transition to a new industry, it's important to find out why. Answers should be credible and linked with both the long-term and short-term responsibilities involved in the new job. Ideally, a candidate should be able to reorient the discussion, emphasizing the ways in which aptitude and skills match the current position.

2. How did you hear about this position?

While this question may seem routine, it is used to distinguish the indifferent candidate who is only going through the motions from the serious contender who is genuinely passionate about the company and its activities. It is perfectly all right for a candidate to mention a friend, professional contact, job board, article, and the like. Most important is that the candidate should be able to articulate why the news of the open position caught his or her attention in the first place.

3. Why do you want to work at this company?

In answering this question, candidates are susceptible to generic, cookie-cutter answers that say little. By contrast, candidates who stand out will give unique answers that would not apply anywhere else. They should have done their research and show that they have genuine knowledge about the company and can articulate why it appeals to them. They will also be able to clearly discuss future growth opportunities and what kind of a role the candidate envisions for himself or herself in contributing to them. Or they might have already been in touch with employees and have gained a running start. Candidates who, by the time of the interview, have not figured out in their own minds why they want to work there are actually signaling that they are probably a poor fit.

4. Why do you want this job?

Companies, when hiring, want to find people who are really passionate about their work and will do more than go through the motions. To answer this question properly, candidates need to identify at least a few main factors that make this role a superb fit for them. For example, someone who genuinely enjoys working in customer support might be the type of person who thrives on constant interaction and the satisfaction derived from helping people solve problems. If a candidate can demonstrate a genuine interest in the company's activities and purpose, then this dedication will go a long way towards answering this question in a satisfactory way.

5. Why should we hire you?

Although seemingly intimidating and rather blunt, this question actually opens the door for candidates to sell themselves and to convey their skill sets to the person tasked with hiring. Good candidates will devise answers that will convey, first, that they can do the job; second, that they will deliver superior results; and, finally, that they will get along with the team and the culture of the company. Combined, all of these will show that a candidate is a superior choice.

6. What are your greatest strengths?

Interviewers almost invariably ask this question at some point, so every successful candidate should be fully prepared to answer it. Good answers will summarize—briefly—work experience as well as the particular characteristics and achievements that directly pertain to the duties and tasks involved in the new job. Interviews will take note of candidates who cite such abilities as initiative, self-motivation, and the willingness and ability to work effectively and smoothly in teams. Whenever someone rambles about a supposed eagerness to perform tasks unrelated to the job, or perhaps a vague, aspirational desire to return to school at some point, these may be perceived strengths—for the employer, they are red flags.

7. What do you consider to be your weaknesses?

The goal of this question, aside from identifying any hot-button issues, is to obtain an assessment of a candidate's honesty and self-awareness. Obviously, statements such as "I am no good at meeting deadlines," or "I'm chronically late—but don't worry, I always give 110%," are inappropriate in an employment context. The better candidates will discuss an area in which they may face some struggles but are nonetheless making tangible progress with improvement. For instance, someone who is not an especially gifted public speaker has joined Toastmasters and is conscientiously practicing this skill. Another approach is to illustrate how certain weaknesses can also be strengths, such as (possibly) excessive attention to detail.

Questions regarding work history

At any job interview, the core of the exchange will be your previous employment record. What was accomplished? How did the candidate succeed or fail, and what was the response? How did the candidate act in the work environment?

8. Tell me about a challenge or conflict that you've faced at work, and how you dealt with it.

At job interviews, most people are not overly eager to raise the subject of past conflicts, but it's invariably best for candidates to be honest. Pretending that conflict doesn't exist will not impress an interviewer. Instead, there is a need for balance: honesty is imperative, but a candidate need not become unduly familiar or discuss too many intimate details. The goal of the interviewer is to determine whether a candidate is willing to confront issues directly and make sincere attempts to resolve them. Emphasis should be on the resolution more than on the conflict itself, and how one might act differently in the future under similar circumstances.

9. What is your greatest professional achievement?

Specific, strong results at previous jobs are what interviews are looking for the most. A candidate with something to offer can use the so-called "STAR" method: *situation, task, action, results*. Using background context, a candidate will explain the situation and the required tasks, e.g., "At my previous job as a retailing analyst, my role involved the management of invoicing." Then, one describes what was done (the action) and what was achieved (the result): "In under four months, I was able to streamline several key processes, saving the group thirty-five person-hours each month and reducing the error rate by 20%."

10. Tell me about a time that you demonstrated strong leadership skills.

Even people who are not in specifically managerial or leadership positions will often have the opportunity to demonstrate real leadership skills. For example, a candidate might have been in charge of a single project, or an aspect of one. Or the person showed enough initiative to propose an alternative way of doing things, or novel ways to motivate the staff. A candidate can then use the STAR method to describe these events to the interviewer. The aim should be to create a clear, vivid image without digressing into irrelevant detail. In relating any story, a candidate should be explicit about the reason for doing so, drawing connections for the interviewer.

11. Was there a time when you disagreed with a decision made at work?

Candidates who answer this question effectively will demonstrate that they handled disagreements professionally and came away from the conflict having learned something worthwhile. The reason for telling the story should be incorporated into the beginning of the answer, and the response should conclude with a brief explanation as to why the experience would be of assistance in improving future performance in the new position.

12. Tell me about a time you failed.

As when asked about a mistake, an effective candidate should frame the answer by trying to derive something positive out of it. Failure should be defined, e.g., a lack of preparation, difficulty in managing conflict within a team, etc. A candidate can mention a specific incident, then juxtapose it with the definition—while clarifying what was ultimately learned.

13. Why are you leaving your current job?

Though this is a tough question, a candidate should be prepared to face it. Above all, the candidate should strive to exhibit a positive attitude. Negativity about a current employer always sends up an alarm signal. A better approach for a candidate is to express a willingness to accept new challenges and opportunities, and then to demonstrate that the new job will fulfill these better. If a candidate was simply laid off for economic reasons, then it is perfectly acceptable to say so.

14. Why were you fired?

It is entirely possible that an interview will follow up by asking specifically why a candidate was let go. If layoffs resulted from a reorganization, merger, or acquisition, etc., then these reasons, again, are entirely appropriate. If, however, a candidate was fired for performance reasons, honesty, once more, is the best approach. It can be framed as a learning experience: a candidate can explicitly demonstrate how personal and professional growth resulted from the situation.

15. Tell me about a time you made a mistake.

Nobody is particularly eager to explore any blunders from the past while he or she is trying to impress a hiring manager and land a new job. But it is possible to discuss a mistake in a fruitful, productive way—by being honest without trying to assign blame to others. A candidate should then explain what he or she actually learned from the mistake, along with the concrete actions taken to ensure that it didn't get repeated. In this case, the personal characteristics sought will

include self-awareness, the ability to accept constructive feedback and criticism, and a genuine desire to improve oneself and to perform better.

16. Why was there a gap in your employment history?

Reasons for an unconventional or non-linear resume, especially in our time, are numerous and do not require justification. Perhaps a candidate was caring for children—or aging parents. Perhaps health issues were at hand. Or even world travel. Or it simply took a long time for the candidate to find the ideal job. In any event, a candidate should be ready and able to forthrightly discuss any gaps on a resume. At the same time, there is no requirement to share every last detail, particularly those one might deem too private. A more productive approach is to focus on any qualities or skills gained or honed while not in the workforce. For example, volunteering, running a household, or coping with familial crises might have taught a candidate a great deal that will help him or her excel in the new role.

17. Can you explain why you changed career paths?

A solid candidate should not be thrown for a loop by this question. Instead, he or she ought to be able to explain the reasons for previous career decisions made thus far. It is essential to provide concrete examples of precisely how the various past experiences are transferable to the new role. For example, someone who has worked aboard ships who is looking for a new job in an unrelated field ashore can rightly emphasize qualities such as attention to detail, extensive multi-tasking, adaptability, working with diverse personalities, and the tremendous importance of punctuality and careful time management. Thus, various types of experience which might otherwise, at first blush, appear irrelevant can be depicted in an entirely different light.

18. What do you like about your job the least?

Above all, a strong candidate will not succumb to the temptation to use this question as an opportunity to launch into a colorful rant about what a terrible company his or her current employer supposedly is, how tyrannical the current supervisor is, or the like. Instead, the focus should be on the positive opportunities offered by the new position--opportunities that are lacking in the person's current job. Answers should be specific and pertinent. Companies seek to identify candidates who hold in high esteem the same qualities and values they do. A candidate can turn the question around by demonstrating that, even though a particular assignment or set of tasks (ideally, one that's unrelated to the new job) is unpleasant, he or she nevertheless always performs it well and without complaint. This will show that he or she can remain on point, even if the details are not always exciting.

19. What is your current salary?

Today, inquiring about salary history is illegal for employers in several cities and states—including New York City, Louisville, Kentucky, North Carolina, California, and Massachusetts. Regardless of where a candidate lives, however, this question is tricky to answer. It is acceptable to deflect the question by asking for more information about what the new role entails, suggesting that if the fit is right, both parties should be able to agree on a suitable salary figure. Alternatively, the question can be answered outright, or reframed around the candidate's salary expectations or particular requirements.

Questions about you and your goals

Yet another crucial element of interviewing involves becoming acquainted with a candidate. For this reason, interviews often pose questions about the mode of work—how one works—and what the candidate is really looking for in a team, a manager, a company, or in the job itself. Interviewers strive to ensure that a candidate will be a solid fit, and a good candidate will answer questions accordingly.

20. What are you looking for in a new position? Or: What type of work environment do you prefer?

To answer this question, the candidate should have thoroughly researched the company and the position and ought to be able to answer this question by invoking precisely those things now being offered by the position. Being specific is crucial.

21. How would your boss and coworkers describe you?

At the outset, being honest is imperative. Any candidate who makes it to the final round can expect that former supervisors and coworkers will be contacted for confirmation and for references. The best approach is to cite traits and strengths not raised in other parts of the interview—for instance, a vigorous work ethic, or a willingness to offer assistance with other projects as needed.

22. What's your management style?

Ideally, a manager should be strong, yet flexible. These are the qualities that an answer should reflect. It is appropriate to share incidents that highlight managerial ability. If a candidate was able to grow his or her team threefold, or to effectively coach an underperforming employee who later came to excel, these examples can be brought forth.

23. What do you like to do outside of work?

Hobbies or outside activities sometimes come up as subjects for interviewers, because the interview is attempting to get to know the candidate better by finding out what he or she is really passionate about doing. A candidate can use this question to reveal something of his or her personality, but ought to keep replies professional. Excessive dedication to hobbies or free-time activities might impart the impression that the candidate will spend too much time and energy on these, rather than on the job in question.

24. Are you planning on having children?

By now, it is well known that certain questions are outright illegal. These topics include family status, gender (“How would you feel about managing an all-male team?”), race, religion, ethnicity, nationality (“Where were you actually born?”), and so forth. Unfortunately, these questions still get asked. The best approach for candidates is to deflect any questions about one’s personal life, or any other inappropriate topics, and steer the discussion back to the job and career paths at hand.

25. How do you deal with pressure or with stressful situations?

It is unwise to attempt to sidestep this question in an effort to prove that one is simply a perfect candidate who can handle every type of situation. Overly pat replies, such as “I don’t get stressed,” or “I just power through it, convey an inappropriate message. The better approach is to discuss optimal strategies for coping with stress and how one communicates or tries to mitigate pressure in advance, for instances, by emphasizing organization and preparation. It is preferable, of course, if a candidate can furnish a clear example of a stressful situation that has been successfully addressed.

26. What are you passionate about?

The answer can align with the work that is expected in the role—for instance, someone applying for a job as a graphic designer might explain that he or she spends a lot of free time creating illustrations and other visualizations for Instagram posts. The interviewer wants to know the candidate better, so it is not fatal to mention an unrelated hobby, provided that it can be tied into strengths needed for the job at hand. For example, if a hobby demands both creativity and precision, these qualities are transferable to many job descriptions.

27. What motivates you?

While this may seem like an overly inquisitive existential question, in truth the interviewer wants to ensure that a candidate is genuinely excited about the particular role and the given company—and that the candidate, should he or she be hired, will be motivated to succeed. The ideal approach, then, is to refer to what has been energizing in previous positions, focusing on what was attractive about the new position. A candidate should select one particular item, ensure that it is indeed relevant to the role at hand, then integrate it into an illustrative anecdote. An honest approach will convey the requisite enthusiasm.

28. What are your pet peeves?

A good candidate should understand the underlying reasons for asking this question: the interview wants to ensure that the successful candidate will in fact thrive at that particular company. It's also an attempt to gain insight into how a candidate deals with any conflicts that may arise. It's important not to contradict the environment and culture of the company, without sacrificing honesty. The next step is to clarify what was done in the past to address the issue, and why, without losing composure. The best approach is to keep any answers to this question short and to the point.

29. How do you prioritize your work?

This question is designed to elicit responses that indicate a candidate is capable of time management, of exercising sound judgment, of communicating effectively, and of shifting gears as needed. A candidate can talk about how he or she has learned to plan the days and weeks, such as a spreadsheet or a new app. Real-life examples are useful, such as the response to a last-minute demand or other unexpected developments; the candidate can explain how he or she evaluated the situation and communicated a plan to managers and team members.

30. How do you like to be managed?

Like many interview questions, this one seeks to locate the right fit, from both perspectives, that of the candidate as well as the company. Candidates should have an understanding of what does and does not work well for them: how previous bosses could motivate them to succeed. Even if the experience was not altogether positive, the candidate should articulate it in a positive way, so that the interviewer can see that he or she wants to move forward. A highly positive example from a good boss or supervisor will produce an even stronger answer.

31. What other companies are you interviewing with?

One reason those conducting interviews are inclined to pose this question is that they want to ascertain how serious the candidate is about the role and the team involved (or even the entire industry). Alternatively, they may be trying to find out who the competition is. A candidate will certainly want to express enthusiasm for the job, but there is no reason to furnish the company with even more leverage than it already possesses. So the candidate need not state that nobody else is in the running. Depending on how the candidate's search is progressing, he or she can talk about applications for a few positions that have certain commonalities—while stressing why and how this particular job seems like an especially solid match.

32. What makes you unique?

Generally, this question is sincere; they do want to know. So the candidate ought to provide a reason why he or she ought to be selected over similarly positioned candidates. Answers should be relevant to the job in question. Random achievements such as a knack for trivia challenges or unusual athletic abilities are probably irrelevant. Instead, a successful candidate emphasizes a personal skill, qualification, or attribute that gives him or her an edge in the given area. Feedback from former colleagues, or themes that recurrently arise in written evaluations, can be useful sources for providing answers to this question.

33. What's your dream job?

Again, the goal here is to discern whether the open position really does jibe with the candidate's ultimate career aspirations. It is best not to play for laughs (e.g., by saying "movie star"); a sounder approach is to discuss ambitious and realistic goals—along with the ways in which this job will help the candidate attain them.

34. What Should I Know That's Not on Your Resume?

When a hiring manager or a recruiter shows interest beyond the four corners of a candidate's resume, that bodes well for the candidate. In all likelihood, they have looked at the candidate's credentials and are thinking that he or she might be a sound fit. A candidate can co-opt this question by talking about a positive trait, or perhaps a story or detail that reveals a bit more—but not too much—about the candidate and his or her experience. Other possibilities include missions or goals that make the candidate enthusiastic about the position or the company.

35. Where do you see yourself in five (or ten) years?

While it is vital to be honest and specific about future goals, some other factors ought to be taken into consideration by a savvy candidate. A manager in charge of hiring will want to know a) whether the candidate has set realistic career expectations; b) whether the candidate is appropriately ambitious—a person should not be considering this issue for the first time, and c) whether the position really aligns with the candidate's own goals. Answers should be along these lines. Even if the position does not exactly promise to fulfill all of one's aspirations, it's appropriate to admit that the future is not entirely clear, but that this experience will play an important role in it.

Questions about the job

Before any final decisions are made, the people tasked with the hiring process want to ensure that a candidate can take on the job and succeed in it. As a result, they often ask logistical questions to ensure that factors such as timing are in alignment. One way to accomplish this is to ask a candidate to imagine how he or she would tackle the job once hired.

36. What would your first 30, 60, or 90 days in this role look like?

By asking this question, the interviewer, who may or may not be the candidate's potential future boss, is trying to discover whether the candidate has done meaningful research and seriously thought about how he or she will hit the ground running and take initiative if actually hired. The objective is to review information and details about the company and the team that will be relevant. A candidate can even suggest a potential project for starting with, in order to show that he or she is willing to begin contributing immediately. Projecting such an attitude evinces that a candidate is thoughtful and engaged.

37. What do you think we could do better or differently?

Obviously, this is a loaded question that can be trying to answer effectively. The challenge is to provide an answer that has some meat on it without insulting the interviewer or the company. The optimal approach is to respond by mentioning positive aspects seen in the company, or a specific product that has been under discussion. Once a candidate is prepared to furnish positive feedback, he or she can also give further background details about the new perspectives he or she might be bringing, explaining why the changes are appropriate. Ideally, that should be grounded in real past experiences. Above all, it is important to demonstrate genuine curiosity and receptiveness about the company and its products or services.

38. What are your salary requirements?

In order to answer this question effectively, a candidate must, above all, have done enough research, such as using sites like Payscale, or by reaching out to his or her network. That will enable a candidate to have a reasonable salary range in mind. It's recommended to start by stating the highest number within that range, based on education, experience, and skill sets. After that, the candidate needs to convey a sense of flexibility, by communicating that although he or she knows that these skills are valuable, the candidate nonetheless truly wants the job and is willing to negotiate. It is also possible to deflect the question temporarily by asking specific follow-up questions about what the new position will entail.

39. Are you willing to relocate?

On its surface, this question may appear to call for a simple yes or no. But the reality is often somewhat more complex. Sometimes a candidate will indeed be entirely receptive to the idea of relocating and can state so. On the other hand, the answer may well be no, for a variety of reasons. The best approach for the candidate in this scenario is to emphasize his or her enthusiasm for the job, but then to explain, briefly, why a move is not possible at the moment. An alternative might entail working from home or from a satellite office. A candidate can certainly say that he or she wishes to stay put, for this or that reason, but might be willing to relocate, if a truly solid opportunity presented itself.

40. When can you start?

Here, a savvy candidate will aim to establish realistic expectations that will be a win-win for both the candidate and the company. The precise contours of these expectations will vary, contingent upon the specific circumstances. A candidate who is ready to start right away (e.g., an unemployed candidate) could even offer to start almost immediately, within a week or so. On the other hand, a candidate who is still obligated to give notice to a current employer should not hesitate to mention that. Most people will be understanding and will respect that an employee who wishes to honorably fulfill the terms of an existing contract. Alternatively, some candidates will need or require a break of sorts between jobs. If that's so, it's acceptable to cite previously scheduled commitments, but it is always important to remain flexible in the event that the new company needs someone to begin immediately.

Questions that test a candidate

Occasionally, interviewers like to pose rather quirky, even odd questions, with the intention of testing how the candidate can think rapidly on the spot. Above all, it's important not to panic. There is no single, absolutely right approach or answer.

41. If you were an animal, which one would you want to be?

Questions of this seemingly random, odd nature fall into the category of personality assessment; the goal is to get a sense of how the candidate thinks when confronted with a spontaneous challenge. As a result, there is no truly incorrect answer—but the best kinds of answers showcase a candidate's strengths, personality, or ability to establish rapport with the interviewer. It is all right to stall a bit by prefacing one's answer with phrases such as "That's a fascinating question," or "Well, generally, I would have to rule out..."

42. Sell me this pen!

This one is especially a favorite chestnut for sales positions. The interviewer is trying to put the candidate on the spot, in order to assess what kind of creative approach can be devised rapidly and on the fly. The aim is to discern how the candidate handles a high-pressure, often unfavorable situation. Here, above all, a candidate must remain confident and calm. Body language such as eye contact and good posture will convey a sense that the candidate really can come to grips with the situation. It's important to listen carefully and to pick up on the fictitious customer's needs, as well as to be specific about the qualities, features, benefits, and advantages of the item in question. Then, a candidate needs to end on a strong note, as one does in the real world when actually a deal is actually being sealed.

43. How many tennis balls can fit into a limousine?

So called "stump the chump" questions of this sort will sometimes arise, especially in quantitatively oriented fields. The questioner is not really seeking a precise figure—rather, he or she is trying to ensure that the candidate understands what is being asked and can find a logical, systematic way of answering. Even a rough estimate, based on some kind of logic, is better than no response at all.

Wrapping-up questions

At this point, a candidate has one last opportunity to add any final thoughts. It can even be perceived as a red flag if the interviewer declines to allocate any time for the candidate to ask any questions.

44. Do you have any questions for us?

An interviewer is also a person, and he or she expects some reciprocal curiosity. The candidate should use this opportunity to gain more insight as to the suitability or fit, from his or her own perspective. So it's fine to ask more questions about the company itself, the department, or the team. One strategy is to target questions to the interviewer, e.g., "What do you enjoy most about your work here?" or the growth in the company, e.g., "Can you tell me anything further about upcoming new products or future growth plans?"

45. Is there anything else you would like us to know? Do you have any questions? Would you like to add anything?

Candidates who automatically respond by saying no are actually raising another red flag, because this is the juncture at which they are expected to drive home the reason that they are the best choice for the job opening. To do that, it's expected that a candidate will ask relevant, prepared questions that have not yet been raised. A candidate is expected to show an interest in learning more about opportunities at the company for professional development and to seek further insights about their suitability for the job. Ideally, a candidate should raise a previously unaddressed point. At the very least, he or she can summarize—*briefly*—his or her own qualifications, ending on an enthusiastic, upbeat note.