

Top 5 Interview Questions

Tim Bearden at philly.com Dec29, 2009

A job interview may be stressful, but it doesn't have to be difficult. In fact, with research and practice any jobseeker should be able to ably field the toughest questions a prospective employer might throw their way.

Anticipating what questions an interviewer is likely to ask is half the battle, says Frances Bolles Haynes, co-author with Daniel Porot of the newly revised "101 Toughest Interview Questions and Answers That Win the Job," (Random House, 2009). In fact, Haynes believes there are just a few key questions that nearly all interviewers ask. They aren't necessarily the toughest questions for everybody, but they're the most important questions that interviewers use to screen a potential employee.

"There's really no single toughest question for everybody," says Haynes. "Whatever problem... in your background, if you have one, that's probably going to be your toughest question."

Haynes, an author in Newport Beach, Calif., who has worked in career development for more than 25 years, points to five key questions that are likely to come the way of job candidates in almost every job interview. Of course, there other important questions to master – at least 96 of them, judging by Haynes's book. But here's a good start.

1. Why do you want to work for us?

The days of wandering into a job interview and asking basic questions about what the employer does are long gone, says Haynes. With the Internet at almost everyone's disposal, jobseekers should do their research in advance and be totally prepared to present terrific answers to this question.

"Tell them something you know about their company that kind of puts a fire in your belly," she says. "If you don't know anything about their company, you probably shouldn't be sitting in front of them."

Jobseekers should be able to see where they fit in with the company, Haynes says. They should sit down, make list of what they can offer and match up these skills with what the company needs, she says.

2. Tell me about yourself.

This open-ended question can be especially tricky. This is not the time for jobseekers to talk about hobbies or relate personal stories, Haynes says. It's the time for jobseekers to focus on professional achievements and qualities that make the candidate a fit for the job.

"It's one of these questions where, if the interviewer doesn't like what you said or you basically don't tell them any important information, it's a reason to screen you out," Haynes says.

Jobseekers get nervous if they haven't thought this question through completely, Haynes says. Her advice: pretend it's the only question the employer will ask. Be prepared to tell them what they need to know about you so you stay in the running for the position.

She says this question is a "gift" because it allows jobseekers to set the agenda. The more time jobseekers spend to prepare for this question the less likely they are to stumble through it.

"It's like a stack of dominos," Haynes says. "You want to prepare so you don't knock one over and then get nervous and knock the rest down."

3. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

A lot of times the interviewer might simply ask, "What are your weaknesses?" This is a clumsy question, Haynes says, but interviewers always ask it in some form. It gives the interviewer an idea of how you react to challenging or stressful questions, she says. Her advice is to always lead off with a strength. Never pretend you don't have any weaknesses or try to pass off a strength as a weakness.

"That trick is so old that no interviewer is going to put any merit on it," Haynes says. "They're going to keep at you until they get an honest answer."

She suggests using this question as an opportunity for jobseekers to show how they plan to improve their professional skills.

For example, if you've never learned a language and wish you had, because it might make you more employable, then say that, she says.

"A weakness is really about something you need to improve and what you're going to do about it," she says.

4. Why did you leave your last job?

Be honest, she says. This is the toughest question for jobseekers fired from their previous position.

If you were fired from your last job, tell the employer that. But put it in a positive light. Let's say a jobseeker got fired for surfing the Internet too much at work. Not only tell the employer that, Haynes says, but also explain what you learned and how you might change this behavior in the future.

Rehearse the answer before going into the interview. And keep it short and sweet. "Explain why you lost your last job in one sentence, explain how you understand and take responsibility for it and move on," she says.

5. What salary figures do you have in mind?

This question only comes if a jobseeker has impressed the interviewer to the point he or she is considering offering the jobseeker the job.

If the jobseeker sets too high a figure it can knock them out of the running. Haynes suggests doing research and finding out what similar positions pay. "There are a billion Web sites out there that tell you salaries for everything," she says.

Also, always try to deflect this question back to employer and ask what they have in mind. If they don't bite, then suggest a broad range. But it's important for jobseekers to have done their homework beforehand.

These are just a few of the questions out of Haynes' book that she feels are the most important to landing a job. Being adept at answering them is only part of the battle, she says. The thing for all jobseekers to remember, she says, is to focus on landing a position that allows them to do the sort of work that makes them happy.

"I think it's important to honor who you are when it comes to the work you want to do," Haynes says.

... And 5 More for Extra Credit

When it comes to preparing for questions in a job interview, practice makes perfect. Here are 5 more top questions jobseekers are likely to face, with suggestions on one wise response, from "101 Toughest Interview Questions and Answers That Win the Job," (Random House, 2009) by Frances Bolles Haynes and Daniel Porot.

Q: What did you like most and least about your last job?

A: "What I liked most were the challenges I found there." Then list an example and move on. Don't mention what you liked least.

Q: Do you think you're under qualified for this job?

A: "Is there a specific skill that concerns you?"

Q: How would you describe your personality?

A: Don't sound over rehearsed. Pause for a moment then tell the employer two or three of your key traits that apply to the job.

Q: How long will you stay with us?

A: "I see no limit, as long as I feel that I'm developing in the position and advancing when I'm ready, and as long as you are pleased with my performance."

Q: Are you willing to lower your salary expectations?

A: "If the work environment was good and there are strong possibilities for promotion, I would consider it."