

Common interview questions

Part of the interview preparation process involves anticipating questions you will be asked and thinking of questions you will ask the interviewer. While the following list is not comprehensive, it should provide a framework to help you appreciate the range of possible questions. When asked these questions, try to answer in a way that showcases your career competencies, outlined on the backside.

Traditional interview questions

Most interviews will include some traditional questions that focus on your career goals, strengths, and interests. Employers use these types of questions to get to know you better and learn about your communication skills and fit for the job. It's best to keep your answers to two minutes or less.

Tip: Respond to traditional interview question directly, honestly, effectively and simply.

Interview question Strategies for answering traditional interview questions

Tell me about yourself.

A solid response can lead the conversation in a direction that allows you to elaborate on your qualifications.

While this seems easy, it can be challenging to answer effectively, because it is so broad. Use this opportunity to talk about what makes you a great fit for the job. Include highlights of your education and relevant experiences that are relevant to the job. Be sure to include why you're interested in working for their organization. See the Powerful Introductions handout for more tips.

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Give a concrete example to showcase your strengths.

The employer may be assessing how open you are. You have an opportunity to showcase your strengths by giving a concrete example. You should be honest in describing an area where you want to improve (i.e. a weakness). When citing a weakness, be sure to describe how you are working to improve it. You can leave a more positive impression if you start by describing your weakness and finish by describing your strength.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

If you are interested in growing with the organization, share your desire to develop the skills necessary to advance.

The interviewer wants to know if you are ambitious and whether you think about your long-term goals. It's okay not to know all of your goals moving forward, just be honest with how you hope your career will progress. Consider highlighting the skills you want to gain as a professional and how you can use those skills to be an asset to the organization.

Why should I hire you?

Speak positively about yourself.

Responding to this question generally reveals how confident candidates are about their qualifications for the position. The response should showcase your top skills and strengths that relate to the job. Since it is highly unlikely that you know who all of the other candidates are, it is unnecessary to try to make comparative statements.

Why do you want to work here?

Demonstrate what you know about the organization.

This question reveals how much you know about the organization. You want to convey your genuine interest and can only do that if you are sufficiently familiar with the organization. There is no substitute for researching the organization in advance.

Why did you leave your last job?

Always bring up the positive attributes of your previous employment even if it was not always a positive experience.

It's normal for people to move on to new positions and organizations throughout their career. In your response to this question, consider how moving from one position to another helped in your professional growth.

What accomplishments are you most proud of?

Choose a relevant accomplishment.

As with most interview responses, be specific and select an accomplishment that relates to the position. If your greatest accomplishment seems unrelated, try using the "Crafting Your Career Story" handout to think of accomplishments related to some common career competencies.

What are your salary expectations?

Steer clear of discussing salary specifics before receiving a job offer.

This is one of the hardest questions, particularly for those with limited experience. Before the interview, research the salary range in your field. Let the interviewer know you will be open to discussing fair compensation when the time comes. If pressed for a more specific answer, always give a range rather than a specific number. Refer to our Negotiating a Salary handout for more strategies on how to effectively negotiate.

Behavioral based questions

Behavioral based questions are designed to determine your likely future behavior given specific experiences from your past. It's important to answer these questions using the STAR response method. Refer to our handout on Crafting your Career handout for practice questions and information on how to use the STAR method.

Interview question

Strategies for answering behavioral based questions



Tell me about a difficult decision you made.

The interviewer's goal is to understand your thought and decision-making processes.

What factors did you consider when making the decision? What alternatives did you consider? Did you think about additional timelines, deadlines, quality, budget, monetary issues, etc.?



Describe a time when you went above and beyond expectations.

The interviewer is trying to measure your initiative and your energy.

What were the expectations that were given? What actions did you take to exceed those expectations? What were the results of you going above the expectations?



What did you do in a project that contributed to the team environment?

Your answer reveals how successfully you interact with others.

How did you make a difference to the project? What was your leadership style? What were your main contributions to the project and to the team?



What strategies did you use in your last job to organize and prioritize tasks?

Responding to this question provides evidence about how you organize, plan and prioritize.

Which factors did you consider in your actions? How thorough were your ideas and their execution? How do you measure your own effectiveness?



Tell me about a time when you had to bend the rules.

This demonstrates your flexibility and your commitment to continuous improvement.

Did you use good judgment when determining whether to bend this particular rule? What rules do you consider bendable? Do you know the difference between bending and breaking a rule?



Tell me about a time you encountered a difficult customer or co-worker.

Your answer should leave emotions out.

Focus on the resolution and your role in effectively managing the situation. Make sure to focus on the positive resolution of this difficult situation or experience.

Technical interview questions

Technical questions are designed to help employers understand your level of skill or knowledge. When responding to a technical question, employers are evaluating your logic in solving a problem. Walk the interviewer through your thought process and demonstrate how you arrive at your answer.

Examples of technical questions:

- What is your experience in operating tools to assess the security of IT networks?
- What is the capacity of human brain memory?

Questions to ask your interviewer

It is important to have at least a couple of questions that you will ask the interviewer(s) at the conclusion of your conversation. Candidates have a good deal of flexibility in the questions they ask. Now is the time to ask questions ranging from small details about the job to big picture analytic questions. This is your chance to ask questions that can't be answered through the job description or by searching the organization's website. Try to avoid questions that are based on the presumption of being offered the position (i.e. what is the salary range for this position?) too early on in the interviewing process. Questions of this nature can be raised after the preliminary interviews if they haven't been addressed by the employer already.

- What brought you to this organization? Can you tell me about your own experiences so far?
- What have been some major contributions made by individuals who have held this job previously?
- What are some examples of problems I would be expected to address?
- Based on your experience with the company, what have you seen in terms of opportunities for advancement in this functional area?
- Could you tell me a little more about the team I would be working with?
- How would you characterize the culture of this organization?

NACE career competencies icons

These icons represent career competencies that have been identified by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) as most important to employers when seeking new employees.



Career
Management



Leadership



Global/ Intercultural
Fluency



Digital
Technology



Critical thinking/
Problem solving



Oral/ Written
Communication



Professionalism/
Work ethic



Teamwork/
Collaboration