

Interview Questions

Most interview questions are fairly predictable (although they may be worded in slightly different ways) meaning you should be able to prepare yourself to give concise, relevant and meaningful answers. Once you have removed the 'fear of the unknown' factor from an interview you should feel much more confident and better able to get the best out of the interview, for you and the interviewer.

So, here are a few of the most common interview questions asked, along with a couple of tips on where to start. Just remember, a 'stock reply' is not possible, nor desirable. These questions are designed to make you think about why you're suitable for the job role and how best to demonstrate this to the interviewer:

Tell me about yourself

Don't just start waffling! This is an open question and gives the interviewer a chance to see whether your words match up with your cv as well as observe your body language to determine your level of composure and confidence. So, prepare a few key points that you'd like to get across here. Give a very brief employment history (if you have one) and then focus on the strengths you have that will enable you to do the job well. Finish by asking if there is anything they would like you to give more detail on.

What do you know about the organisation?

They don't expect you to have memorised the company website but you should be able to demonstrate that you understand who they are and what they do! Familiarise yourself with their industry/sector, culture/values, main competitors, main goals, challenges and recent successes. Use the company website, press releases and industry specific publications to do your research. If relevant, use the services of the company you're applying to- eat in the restaurant, browse the store, enquire about joining the gym!

This question often leads into....

Why do you want to work for us?

This sorts out the genuine applicants from those who are testing the market or looking to negotiate higher salaries with their current employer! Show your genuine interest and enthusiasm in the company and the role. Mention something specific about the place or job that interests you. Don't use it as a chance to moan about your current job or boss! Think about framing your answer in the future rather than the past e.g. "My boss doesn't like me and won't give me a chance for promotion" could be more positively phrased, "I would like to work for a company where there is a clear path for progression or professional development available to me."

Why do you think you're suitable for this job? (also known as 'Why should I offer you this job?', "What can you bring to the team/company?" What can you offer us that other candidates can't?")

Refer back to the job role and the key skills it requires. Think about how you fulfil those requirements and examples of when you demonstrated those skills. Tell them about your passion for the industry. What is your USP (unique selling point)? -Is there anything you have that may bring a fresh perspective to the job?

Typical USP's could include:

-  Being trained in health and safety or first aid
-  Being a team sport captain, leader or referee
-  Being a key holder or responsible for petty cash in a part-time job
-  Prefect/ school council/student mentor
-  Duke of Edinburgh awards

- + Volunteering in the community
- + Being a Young carer
- + Being trained in using a particular tool, application or system
- + Possessing a certain qualification or certification
- + Fluency in other languages, including sign language

What are your weaknesses?

Don't say "I'm a perfectionist!" Gimmicky answers are outdated and can come across as unprofessional. Instead focus on something you know you can work on. Be reflective; nobody's perfect and employers like to see that you are self-aware.

Here are a few suitable possibilities:

"I get nervous before doing presentations and have been looking at courses to overcome this"

"I used to procrastinate or spend time doing tasks that weren't high priority so now I'm working on an ABC time management planner"

"I'm naturally quite shy and perhaps not the first to speak out in class, so I have joined a choir/drama group/volunteer at the local care home to take myself out of my comfort zone."

"I used to struggle with my self-belief but am the first to spot the potential in others, so I've volunteered to be a mentor for younger students at my school to help build my confidence and theirs!"

What are your strengths?

Quite simply, match your genuine top strengths with the key skills they are looking for (and don't forget the examples!). Again, avoid the gimmicky or cliched answers. "I work well on my own and in a team" doesn't give an employer much information. You can refer to the 'why are you suitable for this job?' question for further ideas!

What would an excellent performance look like in this role?

This is not an easy question to answer and requires that background research again as to what the company see as a measure of success. Industry awards, Market recognition, gaining or extending key accounts/contracts or tangible KPIs could be cited as defining excellent performance and, if you can demonstrate how you could help achieve this (or have in a previous role), then talk about it!

Tell me an achievement you are proud of

Academic or work achievements are fine but if you want to stand out from the crowd, talk about something that will tell the employer more about you and what makes you tick! Have you completed an endurance fitness challenge, or raised money for a charity in such a way that shows resilience, a strong social conscience or positively involved in changing communities? If so, mention it!

What kind of environment do you like best?

It's really important to be totally honest here as you don't want to end up in a position where you'll be unhappy! So, give it some thought and answer the question- What environment do you enjoy? What style of workplace- a formal, traditional environment or a relaxed, modern or 'alternative' company? Do you want to be in the hub of a team or work more effectively with some time alone? What working hours do you want? What kind of people do you want to work with? If you're just starting out and are unsure, it's okay to admit that too!

What's your dream job?

This question implies many others. It looks at your skills, passions, ambitions, loyalty, values, ideals and how all of these align with the company you are applying to! Talk about the nature of your dream job rather than a specific title. Don't pick a job that doesn't exist or mention anything which could compromise your position if they offered you this job (like working for their main competitor or setting up your own business!) But link it to the job and/or industry you're applying for.

What motivates you?

Motivation is key at interview and right throughout a person's career with any company. Without motivation, enthusiasm dwindles, performance suffers and people are left dissatisfied and unhappy. Each interview question presents itself as an opportunity to get across that your personality, skills and experience match the role; this is no exception. Refer back to that vital company research and think about how the company mission and job role fit in with what motivates you. If the company value innovative self-starters and set clear sales targets, talk about how you are motivated by reaching and exceeding targets and by being given some autonomy to find fresh ways to deliver those figures. If the company prides itself on its excellent customer service and reputation in the industry, focus on how you love to make others happy and appreciate recognition from peers/colleagues when you've done a great job. Remember to try to include examples!

If you were an animal what would you be?

The curveball question... It feels unrelated to the role, but it will give the interviewer insight into your personality, initiative, how you handle pressure, and how you react when put out of your comfort zone! Again, try to focus on the positive and think of an animal which has characteristics you may portray in the workplace! Are you a confident, social, organised meerkat, a productive, meticulous, team-working ant or more of a strategic, patient cat?!

Other questions which may fit into this category are: Which three items would you take to Mars? If you could have anyone, which 5 people, dead or alive, would you invite for dinner? Sell me this mug... When asked a question like this it's perfectly acceptable to buy yourself some time to have a think ... "That's an interesting question, you must get some unusual answers to that!" compliments the interviewer, gives you a few seconds thinking time and shows you're not fazed by an odd question!

Describe your character in under 30 words

This question is sometimes 'disguised' as "How would your friends describe you?" Or "What would your boss/teacher/colleagues/friends say about you?"

This question shows whether or not you are self-aware and can delve into how you are perceived by others. If you need to answer in a certain word-count it also makes you demonstrate your ability use words wisely, to summarise large volumes of information. Try not to list traits- you may run out of steam! Instead, use well thought out sentences! "I can see you need a confident, self-motivated person who can politely, empathetically and professionally deal with your varied customers. My colleagues would say that's me!" Weave in your knowledge of what they require, with your personality- you will keep ticking their boxes! Feel free to put your own stamp on this because the question requires it. To add that they would also say you're the best gift-buyer, a force to be reckoned with on the dance-floor or make a great curry, is fine! If you want to add any negative traits keep it light and something that wouldn't affect your ability to do the job in hand. Being an appalling singer never stopped someone being a great accounts manager and 'making an awful cup of tea' shouldn't stop you being a successful police officer!

What are your salary expectations?

A question to avoid unless the interviewer brings it up. Salary negotiations, if necessary, are best done at job offer stage. Hopefully you will be fully aware of the salary or hourly rate offered for the role you are applying for but, if not, do some research! Browse job adverts for similar roles in the industry, in

your area (salaries vary massively across different regions and sectors!) and be aware of the kinds of packages offered. Other benefits such as healthcare, phones, gym memberships, company discounts and bonuses can complement salaries, so be sure to compare what companies are offering as like-for-like as possible! Be realistic- don't overestimate or underestimate your worth. If you're happy with a salary equal to the one they're offering, say so! Never use your personal finances as a way of reasoning your salary expectations- it's not their problem if you have a diesel-guzzling car or credit card debts to pay off!

Do you have any questions for us?

Interviews are a two-way street and employers will expect you to have questions so, it's best to have some smart ones prepared!

Can you explain the day-to-day responsibilities this job entails?

- ✚ You should know the basic job role, but our day-to-day happiness and contentment is really determined by the nitty-gritty tasks of the job that we do every day.

How would you describe the characteristics of someone who would succeed in this role? Or What are the key characteristics that you look for in employers?

- ✚ You could this as an opportunity to show that you know the 'company values' (if they are clear in the company research you have done!) But that you would like to know what they really value in their employees.

What is your favourite part about working in this company?

- ✚ This is a great indicator as to the kind of company they are- Is the interviewer immediately enthusiastic?

What challenges are you/the company currently facing? Or What is the most challenging aspect of the job role?

- ✚ Show them you are not looking for an easy option, are up for a challenge and, at the same time, forearm yourself! It's important to know the potential hurdles or problems you may be facing.

What does 'success' look like in this position? If I were in this position how would my performance be measured? How often?

- ✚ It's useful to know how you will be 'judged' and how the company measures success. What are the KPI's (Key Performance Indicators)?

Are there opportunities for professional development?

- ✚ It's important to join a company that has a learning and development programme, particularly if you are just starting out on your career path but, on any level, stagnation is never a great prospect!

What departments does this team work closely with? Or... Who will I be working most closely with?

- ✚ Jot down names/roles as appropriate. It's good to know the dynamics of who you collaborate with. How many people/what teams will your role depend on and who will rely on you?

Is there anything about my background or cv that makes you doubt that I am a good fit for this role?

- ✚ This question shows you are interested in the job and committed to being a fit for the role. It may give you an opportunity to respond to any potential concerns the interviewers have and could be used as a chance to address/overcome any objections.