

Part 11 – Answering Questions

People get very hung up about being asked questions at interview. It's not actually the biggest problem you'll have to tackle in your interview, and let's face it, you should know the answers if you are being asked questions about yourself! Being questioned about your CV, your skills and experience is the real core of an interview. Only by doing this can the interviewer establish whether or not you are a good fit with the requirements of the position for which you are being interviewed.

So, everyone attending an interview expects to be questioned. Perhaps that is why answering questions gets blown up out of proportion in many people's minds, and why they get so worked up about finding good answers to them. The bulk of questions in any interview will be about you – what you've done, how you think and behave, what you think and feel. There is no reason why anyone should worry about answering this sort of question, as you know yourself (and therefore the answers) better than anybody! But what concerns everyone is how to present those answers in the best possible light – how to make yourself look really good at interview. Understanding questions and answers can help here.

Understanding Good Questions:

The aim of an interviewer is to get you to tell them what they need to know, in order to make their decision. They need to get you to talk, so they can listen and pick out the information they need. So the aim of any question isn't necessarily to 'catch you out', it's to get you to talk to them!

Good Questions:

There are three main types of 'good questions':

- Open questions
- Probing questions
- Forced choice questions.

Forced Choice Questions:

Forced choice questions are designed to put you on the spot. They force you to make a choice of answer. As questions they are actually not as good as the other two types, as they can often be answered with one or two words, or even a 'Yes' or 'No' which doesn't really encourage you to talk.

For this reason, they are usually followed up with a probing question, such as 'Why?' or 'Could you explain that?' here are some examples of forced choice questions:

- Did you enjoy that type of work or not?
- 'Do you prefer tasks in stages or whole projects to get on with?' 'Are you very organised or more spontaneous?'
- 'Do you get more satisfaction from teamwork or achieving something alone?'

Dealing with Bad Questions:

Bad questions are questions that close you down and make it easy for you to say very little. They are also questions that don't actually give the interviewer any useful information about you or your suitability for the job. Good interviewers don't ask bad questions, but here are some of the types of bad questions you may be asked at interview.

Closed Questions:

Closed questions are poor because they only require a very short or simple 'Yes' or 'No' answer. They 'close you down' and either prevent you from saying very much, or let weak candidates get away without elaborating their answers.

Here are some examples:

- Did you like working there?
- 'How many staff did you have?'
- 'Were you there long?'

If you are asked a closed question, deal with it by answering in a reasonable amount of depth anyway – as if the interviewer had asked you to expand your answers.

Leading Questions:

Leading questions are questions that tell you exactly what answer the interviewer wants you to give. Asking leading questions is bad because it enables weak candidates to get away with doing fairly well at interview – as they can guess what the interviewer wants them to say! It's also bad for strong candidates, as it makes it hard for them to disagree with the interviewer without knowing that this will be unexpected and unwelcome. Here are some examples of leading questions:

- 'So you liked it there?'
- 'I've always thought X, don't you agree?'
- 'I assume you left because . . .'
- 'That was a pretty senior role, wasn't it?'

Deal with leading questions by standing up for yourself. Try the 'Yes, but . . .' approach – it could work well for you.

Multiple Questions:

Multiple questions are where the interviewer asks several questions at once. They are bad questions because they confuse candidates and make it hard for them to create a good impression by giving the interviewer the information, he/she wants. Here are some examples of multiple questions:

- 'Did you like working there?'
- 'They're fairly laid back aren't they?'
- 'What would you choose, why would that particularly be your first choice, and do you foresee any particular problem?'
- 'Why did you leave there – I imagine it must have been wrench – didn't you work there for quite some time?'

Deal with multiple questions by answering all parts of the question if possible. Organise your thoughts by numbering the questions, for example: 'Firstly, I didn't and secondly, that was because . . . ' It will help you remember to answer all the questions within the question. If you lose track, just ask politely for them to repeat the question: often they will make it easier to understand the second time around.

Hypothetical Questions:

Hypothetical questions make you use your imagination. That may not sound terribly bad, but it means you are not being allowed to give the interviewer facts, only conjecture. It can often show up a weak interviewer, and yet these questions are all too common. Here are some examples:

- 'What do you think you would do if...?'
- 'How would you handle a customer who . . . ?'
- 'If you had been in charge, how would you have handled it?'
- 'Why do you think we put that in the advert?'
- To stand out from the other candidates, deal with hypothetical questions by treating them as if they were asking for facts anyway. 'Well, when I worked at X I had to do that, and I handled it like this . . . '

This will make you stand out from weak candidates who are speaking from guesswork and imagination, not demonstrating experience and skill.

Disagreeing - Your right to an opinion!

Interviewers are in charge during an interview situation, and it's true that they do control whether or not you get the job. But that doesn't mean you have to agree with everything they say – it might curry favour, but it may be against what you really believe, and may even make you look weak. Tell the truth, and if you disagree with something the interviewer says, don't be afraid to say so – nicely!

Most people would rather someone stood up for themselves than agree with everything. Plus, there is always a chance that the interviewer is merely testing you – saying something they expect you to disagree with, to see whether or not you have the strength of character to do so.