

When the Going Gets Tough; Tips to Help You Tackle 13 Difficult Interview Questions

By Sheng Wang

During interviews, a difficult question can leave you momentarily frozen or desperately scrambling for the right words. Fortunately, many of these questions can be anticipated in advance and, after some practice and preparation, the answers will come easily. Here are 13 tough questions and some tips on how to tackle each one.

"Tell me about yourself."

Rehearse your answer ahead of time! Give a brief summary of your career, including your education, previous experiences, and technical and interpersonal skills. Back up all of your claims with facts, past accomplishments, or a brief anecdote.

If you've been following the same career track, emphasize how your past experiences have built on each other and enabled you to develop the skills necessary for the job for which you're applying. If you've held several unrelated jobs, or are trying to change careers, focus on why you're eager for this particular position and how transferable skills from your previous jobs will benefit your potential employer.

Remember that you are not an actor delivering a monologue, so pay attention to your interviewer's verbal and physical cues! Stop to clarify a point if the interviewer looks confused, and hurry things along if s/he looks impatient. Instead of trailing off, end by emphasizing how your past experiences have prepared you for this particular job.

Questions about negative work experiences, e.g., "Describe the worst supervisor you've ever had." "How do you deal with difficult coworkers?" "What did you dislike about your last job?"

These questions are not an invitation to rant about your old workplace, boss, or profession! Instead, the interviewer is trying to gauge how good you are at working with others and dealing with difficult situations. Give an objective summary of a problem you've encountered on the job, then focus on how you worked to resolve the problem or used it as a learning experience.

"What's your biggest weakness/shortcoming?"

"I have no weaknesses whatsoever" is definitely the wrong answer! You also don't want to say something that's damaging enough to put you out of the running for the job. Do make sure that the weakness pertains to work, and make sure that you are sincere and end on a positive note.

For example, one popular strategy is to talk about how you can go overboard with a good trait, such as "I can become too focused on work and sometimes neglect my personal life

as a result." You can also mention skills or experience that you're currently lacking, followed by how you're planning to remedy that problem. For example, "I have not worked in emergency before, but I'm eager to learn, and I'm sure I'll be able to transfer skills from my three years of work experience in ambulatory care."

"Why should we hire you?" or "Why do you want to work for us?"

This question gives you the chance to summarize your skills and experience, and explain why they make you uniquely qualified for the position. One trap that is easy to fall into is talking too much about why landing the job would be good for you. Instead, focus on how you can benefit your potential employer and why you're eager for the job.

"Why did you leave your last job?" or "Why were you fired from your last job?"

Honestly and succinctly state your reason for leaving, and don't complain about your former boss, coworkers, or workplace.

This question is tougher if you were fired or quit due to difficulties at the job. The best approach is to be frank and open. If the problem was your own fault (e.g., tardiness or poor job performance), acknowledge that you made mistakes, explain the steps you've taken to overcome the problem, and why it will not happen again.

If the problem involved other people (e.g., a personality conflict between you and your former boss), briefly explain the situation and why it would not be an issue if you were hired. Do not badmouth your old boss or coworkers – no matter who was in the right, slandering others will only make you look bad in front of your potential employer.

If possible, put a positive spin on the matter by emphasizing what you've learned from previous difficulties.

"Explain the gaps in your employment record."

Give your reasons honestly and succinctly. You can also try to address any underlying questions the interviewer may have. For example, if you did not work for six months due to family issues, tell the interviewer that the situation has been resolved and will not interfere with your work in the future. If you've been unemployed for a few years, focus on what you've done (e.g., retraining courses, updating your certification) to prepare yourself for reentering the workforce.

"What do you think of the new da Vinci robotic surgical system/findings on breast cancer risk genes?"

Scenario 1: You should know the answer, but don't.

If you don't know the answer to a question that's directly related to your job duties, then you've probably lost the job. Learn from your mistake and prepare more thoroughly

before your next interview.

Scenario 2: The question is relevant to your field, but not directly related to the job.

What if you're an oncology nurse and the interviewer asks about the latest cancer research? Interviewers ask such questions to separate candidates who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their field from those who'll do what's required for the job and no more. Give the best answer you can, even if you can't go into great detail. The most important thing is to show the interviewer that you take an active interest in your field and are aware of how new developments may affect your work.

Scenario 3: The question is not related to your work, and you should not be expected to know the answer.

Don't panic! Chances are they know full well that the question falls outside of your area of expertise, and just want to see how you react to stress during the interview. If this is the first time you've heard of the subject, don't fib and try to sound more knowledgeable than you are. Instead, ask the interviewer for more information, or give a generalized answer about how new technologies or research findings can affect healthcare.

"How would you handle this situation ...?"

It's best to answer these questions with a relevant, real-life anecdote. Remember that it's fine to ask the interviewer for more information and to pause briefly before answering. Clearly describe a similar situation that you've encountered before, the actions you took to resolve the situation, and the final outcome. If you have never been in such a situation, or even anything similar, say so, and explain the steps that you would take to resolve the situation, e.g., "I have never been in such a situation, but based on reading I've done in this subject, this is the approach I would take"

"If you could choose to be any kitchen appliance, what would it be?" (And other wacky questions!)

Go ahead and laugh, but then give your answer and a justification as though this were any other question. Interviewers sometimes ask irrelevant or bizarre questions to gauge candidates' personalities and see how they respond to unpredictable situations, so just follow their lead. (Incidentally, I was asked this very question during a job seeker's training session.)

"What are your long-term goals?"

Interviewers ask this question to gauge your drive and ambition, and the most important thing is to express a desire for continued growth. Even if you plan on doing the exact same job in 10 years, stress how you want to develop as a professional. For example, "I think pediatric nursing is really my calling, and plan to further develop my skills by completing child psychology courses within the next two years." A pitfall interviewees

often fall into is answering with what they think the interviewer wants to hear instead of their real plans. Employers will be more impressed by realistic goals and timelines than grandiose, but unlikely, plans.

A second reason that interviewers ask the question is to see whether or not your goals are compatible with those of the hospital. It's OK to admit your desire to become chief of surgery within 10 years, but you do run the risk of losing the job if your ambitions are greater than what the hospital can support. Until you're sure that your personal goals are compatible with those of your potential employer, it's safer to give more general answers like, "I plan to further develop my interpersonal and leadership skills, and I'm interested in moving into management positions within the next 10 years."

"What important trends do you see in the healthcare industry?"

Since healthcare is a rapidly changing field, this is your chance to show off your knowledge of the latest developments and your understanding of the big picture. Focus on how one trend is likely to affect your profession and what you're doing to prepare for it (e.g., continued education and training). If you're interviewing for a managerial position, you should demonstrate a firm grasp of current trends and have a plan for leading your staff through potential challenges.

Stick to neutral topics, such as drug and technological advancements, and avoid sensitive or politically-charged issues such as nursing staff shortages or abortion rights.

"What are your salary expectations?"

Do research before the interview, and make sure that you know the standard salary for the position you're applying for. Don't name a number that's much higher than what you expect and don't go so low that you're underselling your abilities. One option is to name a salary range, rather than a specific number. Let the interviewer know that you've done your research, and give a brief summary of all the skills and experiences that make you the right person for the job. Remember that employers may be willing to negotiate if they are really interested in hiring you.

If the employer has already stated a salary in their job description, and you want something that's significantly higher, make sure that you have very good reasons for your demands. Also be aware that you may be pricing yourself out of the running.

Finally, keep in mind that salary is only one part of the compensation package. Many other factors, such as benefits, vacation time, hours, relocation allowances, and other perks may affect your decision about whether you'll be suitably rewarded for your work.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Research your employer ahead of time and always prepare a few pertinent questions. Insightful questions will help demonstrate your interest in the job and the workplace.

Good examples include inquiring about the clinic/hospital's future goals or asking the interviewer to expand on a topic that was mentioned during the interview.