

# SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

The following **Commonly Asked Questions** are followed by **why the interviewer asks it and a sample answer**. These answers are not meant to be memorized and used. **Develop your own stories and wording!**

1. **Tell me about yourself..** or.. Please spend a few minutes telling me anything that you'd like me to know about you.

Why asked? Assume that the Interviewer has read your resume so don't say "it's all in my resume". They want to judge you on how well and confidently you can tell your background story, over 1.5 – 3 minutes, which demonstrates that you understand how you qualify for the position. This is not to be your life story but rather a summary of your career with highlights that match the job they're interviewing you for.

Answer: Take 1.5 – 3 minutes using the following as a guideline:

1. *"I am a (how you identify yourself as a professional)"*
2. *"Let me take you back to where this all started".* Tell your career story of where you worked, what you did, and the skills you used that match the vacant position. Focus most of your time on the positions that relate to their requirements.
3. *"The reason that I'm able to be here today is ....."* Tell your reason for leaving your last employer – best to get it on the table early in a confident manner in order to alleviate any concerns they may have. It is critical to look the Interviewer directly in the eyes on this one.
4. *"Looking at the requirements of this position I know that I have the skills and experience to do the job well and it is what I have chosen to do for my next career move, and from my research on your organization you seem to have a culture that I'd be happy working in".*

If you are interviewing with one of the major consulting firms they want this answer to be less than 30 seconds and they will then probe if they want more.

## 2. Why did you leave your last job?

Why asked? To see if there was a problem that should caution them against pursuing you.

Answer: You must look the interviewer in the eye when answering. Stick to things like *"a business decision affected my position"* or *"a restructuring occurred and my position was affected"*. Stay away from "I" by using "my position". If others left at the same time as you then it is wise to say so and if the number of you was high then use it, i.e. *"a restructuring occurred and my position was affected along with 17 other people"*. *"They made a decision to close our office"*.

## 3. Tell me under what circumstances you will tell a lie.

Why asked?: To test your values towards telling the truth and to see if you understand that from time to time you cannot divulge the entire truth in order to protect the organization.

Answer: Example: *"I am an honest person and do not tell lies. I suppose I tell small white lies so that I don't hurt someone's feelings like when my wife asks if she looks good in a certain pair of pants. I do know, however, that in order to protect the business I sometimes cannot divulge the entire truth to a customer – like when we missed a delivery because 2 of our shippers didn't come back to work after lunch. I told the customer that we had a difficult internal challenge that would get fixed and we'd delivery the product in the morning."*

#### 4. What are your strengths?

Why asked? To see if you understand what you have to sell and how it relates to the requirements of the position.

Answer: Ensure that you analyze the required qualifications of the position before going to the interview. Break your answer down into 4 parts:

1. Experience: type(s), length of time, accomplishments
2. Skills: (technical & soft), knowledge, education
3. Qualities: like committed, dedicated, resourceful, resilient, drive, results oriented, etc. Behavioural Descriptive trained Interviewers believe that these can't be taught, or take too long to teach.
4. Values: like integrity, showing respect to everyone. The ingredients of being a team player are to show respect to all and treat everyone with dignity.

If the question is, **What are your key strengths?** then your answer will only outline your specific strengths that match what was written on the job posting.

#### 5. What are your weaknesses?

Why asked? To see if you recognize that you are not perfect and have areas for improvement.

Answer: Example: *"I feel confident that I don't have any weaknesses that will prevent me from doing a good job for you; however, I take the attitude that I can improve at everything. One thing that I'm working on now is .....*". Admit that you are not perfect and tell about something that is "real" but not one of the main qualifications of the job. Always say that you are working at overcoming it and have made strides. Try not to use the textbook answers of "I'm a perfectionist" or "I'm a workaholic"; seasoned interviewers hear it too often and don't believe it to be sincere.

#### 6. Please describe yourself in 3 words?

Why asked? To determine if you know your KEY strengths that match their job requirements.

Answer: You must choose your top 3 strengths from the answer to "What are your key strengths".

#### 7. I have 4 other applicants to be interviewed for this position. What makes you more qualified than them?

Why asked?: To see your level of confidence and if you have analyzed how your experience, skills, education, qualities, and values match their job requirements.

Answer: Example: *"I don't know the other 4 applicants however I believe that you wouldn't interview them unless they qualified for the job. What I can tell you is why I qualify for the job (State that you will get the desired results by using your KEY strengths from question 4 above)"*

#### 8. Why should I hire you?

Why asked?: To see how prepared (knowing your product and the benefits it can have) and confident you are.

Answer: The only reason that someone should hire you is because you can perform the job duties well and get the desired results for their organization. Example: *"Because I can do this job well and get results for you. I will use my ..... (tell your KEY strengths from question 4 above) to meet the expectations".* Other potential add-ons are *"My history shows that I stay long term with companies", "I share the same values towards work and the treatment of people as you do", "I am constantly looking for challenges and I know that your company gives them".*

**9. Please tell me your definition of success.**

Why asked?: To determine if you will bring a results orientation into their workplace.

Answer: We should always answer from a job perspective rather than our private life. Example: *“Success to me is meeting (exceeding?) the job expectations and feeling a sense of accomplishment from doing it. For this position that would include .... “* (be specific about what results you would bring to them.

**10. What is your work style? What is your management style?**

Why asked?: To better understand your fit into their culture.

Answer: This allows you to explain about your cultural fit and what makes you happy at work. Linking what you like to match with their organization helps the interviewer judge that you would be happy, and therefore productive, working with them. Some examples are: you like a combination of working independently and on teams; you like a busy workplace where people are often discussing things at workstations or you like a workplace that respects the need for quiet so people can do their work. Other factors are working hours, some remote work from home, at a desk, on your feet or outdoors, dealing with customers, doing analytical and problem solving work.

Management style refers to whether you prefer the Directive, Delegative, Knowledge Specialist, or Situational (using all 3 depending on need) models and why you believe that it is best.

**11. What are your future career plans? What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself in 5 years?**

Why asked?: To see if you think about, and plan for, your future or just go from job to job. The average Canadian spends more time planning an annual vacation than their career path.

Answer: No matter what the question, always explain your Immediate, Medium and Long Term goals. *“My immediate goal is to be successful securing the position that we’re discussing today because it is what I’ve decided to do and I can achieve results doing it. Within 2 – 3 years, after proving my worth to you, I would like the chance to take on greater responsibility (you can talk promotion or just more complex work). My long term goal, which I can’t think is beyond 5 years right now with how quickly things are changing, is to stay in this field of work that I enjoy and hopefully it will be with your company.”*

**12. Why are you interested in our company? What do you know about us? Why would you want to work here?**

Why asked?: To ascertain if you have prepared yourself by researching their company, and industry, and to hear how important you feel it is that it matches to your values/needs. They need to feel that where and how you work is as important as the money.

Answer: Tell the interviewer what you learned in your research including things like core business products/services, way of doing business, size, locations, reputation, standing in their industry, mission & values statements, leadership style, future plans, etc. (all that you know that is positive). Then describe how these things match with what is important to you.

**13. How did you get along with your last manager?**

Why asked?: To watch for your initial reaction; Do you look away? Do you seem uncomfortable? Do you smile and begin to describe things enthusiastically?

Answer: It is critical to look right into the interviewer’s eyes and begin your answer immediately saying something like, *“we had a very good relationship. She and I could speak freely with each other. I was able to have my ideas listened to and many were acted upon”*. Even if your relationship wasn’t very good, you can spin it with statements like *“We had many interesting conversations about what could be done”*.

**14. How would your coworkers/direct reports/manager describe you?**

Why asked?: To see your reaction and level of comfort and then assess if you are respected by others.

Answer: The most important descriptor of anyone is that you are good at your job (competent), could be counted on to get it done (integrity), and did so (results-oriented). Nothing is more important than this. Other factors can be *“a good teammate, funny, helpful, optimistic, and other softer skills and qualities”*. Basically others should describe you in the same way that you describe yourself so what you list as your strengths should match what others say about you. If you have had direct reports, you want to say things that apply, i.e. *“I am fair and equitable”, “I provided good coaching”, “I was a good mentor”, “I taught them good technical skills”, “I challenged them and also rewarded them when they were successful”*.

**15. Tell me about your greatest achievement.**

Why asked?: To determine if you can provide a good SAR (Situation, Actions, Results) or CAR (Challenge, Actions, Results) story within 3 minutes that relates to something that needs to be done in their workplace.

Answer: It is important that you prepare 5 – 8 SAR/CAR stories prior to going to the interview and order their priority in the same order as the job duties/responsibilities are listed in the job posting. If the #1 listed job duty is to “design, develop, and implement something” then your first accomplishment story should speak to when you did that same or a similar thing. Only tell stories that relate to their needs; don’t tell stories that have nothing to do with the job’s responsibilities. It is difficult to give the needed level of detail in less than 1.5 minutes and more than 3 minutes risks losing the interviewer’s attention. Use the STAR answer formula:

**SITUATION:** Explain the circumstances before you got involved. The more complexity and ugliness that you can inject, the more significant your result will seem. i.e. *“When I joined the department, people were having difficulty finding documents – it took a long time to retrieve things for internal and external clients and they often showed their frustration to us. Some of the clients stopped doing business with us and our poor quality reputation on the street was spreading fast. My Manager asked me to create a new filing system that would allow all staff to find important documents faster”*.

**ACTIONS:** This will take at least 50% of your answer time and must outline all of the steps that you took in detail. Instead of just *“Designed and implemented a new filing system”*. Think about the details. Would words like “investigated, researched, analyzed, assessed, read, interviewed/spoke to people, presented, communicated, convinced, negotiated, persuaded, consulted to, collaborated with others, designed, developed/built, tested, implemented, trained/taught people, enhanced” help explain things better?

**RESULTS:** Describe the benefits to your organization, i.e. saved money, made money, increased efficiency, increased productivity, retained clients, attracted new clients, enhanced company’s reputation.

*“With the new filing system we were able to retrieve electronic and hard copy information at triple the previous speed. Clients were much happier and continued to do business with us. My manager said that our reputation in the industry had improved and that we had landed a few new customers”*.

**16. Tell me about a time when you initiated a new idea for improvement to your Manager (and if you were successful convincing him/her)?**

Why asked?: To determine if your orientation is to accomplish the tasks assigned to you or if in addition to getting results you are always looking for ways to improve the workplace and have the courage and influencing skills to convince someone in a higher level position.

Answer: Tell a SAR story as outlined in Question 15.

**17. Tell me about your greatest failure and what, if anything, you learned from it.**

Why asked?: To determine what you define as a failure, if you care enough to fix it, and what it teaches you so that you can improve yourself.

Answer: Your beginning is important in defining what failure is to you and the end will demonstrate that you are now a better professional because of what you learned from it. If you say, *"I'm certainly not perfect and I've made a number of mistakes. One was last year when I made a decision to purchase from a company that went bankrupt and couldn't supply our needs. I sure won't let that happen again"*. This example is too recent and the interviewer might think that you should have learned assessment and analytical thinking skills earlier in your career.

A better way might be *"I don't think in terms of failure but there have been things that I didn't do as well as I would like to have and they taught me profound lessons that affect my daily thinking today. An important example is from early in my career when I accepted a job based on the salary offered. I was not happy there and ended up leaving after 9 months. This taught me that the most important aspect of work life is to do the work that I like in an organization where I'm happy"*. This answer example is from many years earlier and speaks to an important lesson that positively affects current thinking and also tells the interviewer that if you accept their offer it will be only because the job is right for you.

**18. One of the qualifications for this position is ..... and your resume doesn't show that you have it. Do you?**

Why asked?: To test if you can overcome an obstacle/objection by admitting that you don't have a certain skill or experience and then telling how you will still be able to perform.

Answer: Always remember that the interviewer invited you to the meeting after reading your resume so he/she believes that you can do the job even though you are missing something. Admit that you don't have it! Example: *"You are very thorough, Ms. Interviewer. I haven't had that experience however, I do have (tell your most important skills/experience) and I know that I'll be able to learn that aspect within the first few weeks in the position"*.

**19. Tell me about a time that you had a conflict with a co-worker/customer.**

Why asked?: To understand your definition of conflict and then what, if anything, you do about them. The reality is that most people avoid conflict and/or don't deal with them.

Answer: If we say that spirited team meeting discussions are conflicts, instead of very passionate and productive problem solving exercises, we are helping the interviewer understand our definition. Interviewers know that everyone has had at least one conflict with someone at work so to say that you never have had one simply tells them that you don't deal with the ones that confront you.

The best conflict stories will show you trying to repair things, i.e.

1. You ask to meet with the person privately.
2. At the meeting you say what the person did, or what they said, and how it made you feel, i.e. *"You have been using profanity in the office, Bob and I just want you to know that it offends me"*. This method doesn't judge Bob's behaviour – just states how you feel. Typically the other person says that they didn't mean for it to happen and that they'll try not to offend any more. Even if you cannot come to a successful resolution, it is viewed positively if you tried.

**20. Tell me about a time that your boss told you to do something and you disagreed with it?**

Why asked?: The interviewer wants to know if you will make suggestions for improving situations or whether you always do exactly what is asked of you without questioning.

Answer: Give the interviewer an example of when you told your boss your idea of how to do something that was different from what he/she had said. If your boss prefers the Directive style of leadership then you would have met privately to give your suggestion so that you didn't risk embarrassing him/her in front of other direct reports.

**21. What are your salary requirements? How much did you make at your last job?**

Why asked?: To ensure that they don't spend their time in a selection process only to find out at the end of it that they cannot afford you.

Answer: Try to give the salary range you know the market is paying for someone like you rather than being specific about your exact needs. Example: *"That is an important question. Since I left ABC I have done some research on what people with my level of experience and skills are earning and I've found that the total compensation (salary + bonus) is between \$x and \$y"* (this will not be the entire salary range but what your experience deserves). *"How does that compare to your thinking?"* Always ensure that you ask the Interviewer for confirmation of the compensation fit. This answer doesn't specifically give your exact needs, although \$x will be your walk-away point, and ends with your question. Typically the interviewer will then give their hiring range to you and you should verify that it seems fair by saying something like, *"that seems to fit the market so we should keep discussing how I can contribute to your company"*. If their range is lower than your bottom line walk-away point, ask, *"Is that the total compensation?"* Perhaps you'll hear about a bonus structure that could take you to your expectation. If that total compensation number is below your walk-away point you should continue with the interview hoping that you will convince them that you are worth more.

➤ **Note: This is not the time to negotiate!**

If the question is, **How much did your company pay you?**, then answer with something like, *"They paid me fairly within their range for the job that I was doing for them. Since I left them I have done some research on what people with my level of experience and skills are earning and I've found that the total compensation (salary + bonus) is between \$x and \$y"* (this will not be the entire salary range but what your experience deserves). *"How does that compare to your thinking?"*

Only if the interviewer persists, should you give that exact amount followed by what you feel the range is for your skills and experience.