

## Common Interview Questions

Questions asked by skilled and well prepared interviewers always have a purpose regardless of how irrelevant to the position they may seem. It is important to realise that the purpose of many questions is to test out whether you have the specific qualities and skills required for the position. There is not necessarily a right or wrong answer to such questions, rather interviewers are seeking evidence of such qualities as your motivation, energy, attitudes, initiative or maturity.



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS – BE PREPARED AND  
BITE THE BULLET!

An example of a seemingly irrelevant question could be “Tell me how you would go about buying a car?” In this situation the interviewer is not concerned so much about what car dealer you would go to or the order in which you would go about doing this, but rather about the sort of approach you would use. Do you plan? Do you give up easily? Do you seek assistance from other people? How do you budget your time and money?

The following are examples of some of the more difficult questions you may be asked in interviews. The guidelines are intended only to stimulate your thinking. They are not model answers. You will not necessarily be asked all or even many of these questions in one interview. The questions as set out here are not in priority/sequential order.

Please note that these questions are in addition to those that relate to specific job competencies e.g. research skills, writing skills, technical knowledge, customer service skills etc. Look carefully at the job description or analyse the role carefully to identify the skills the interviewer is likely to focus on.

### Question 1

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**“What do you have to offer us?”**

Guidelines – Answer in terms of the skills and personal qualities you have relevant to the job. You may refer to your academic qualifications, relevant sections of university courses, experience in the workplace, leisure activities or personal qualities.

### Question 2

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**“What has prompted you to apply for this position?”**

Guidelines – Explain why you are interested in the organisation. If you have had a long-term interest in them, say so. If location is significant, you could mention this after talking about your interest in the firm. Try not to focus on what you will get from the organisation, but the

qualities you will bring to them. You could mention that you see the position as offering challenge, a chance to learn new things and to enhance and develop skills and abilities necessary for the position.

### Question 3

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**“What do you want from us?”**

Guidelines – This is a good time to talk about training or promotion opportunities giving some idea of long-term career plans. There may be aspects of the organisation’s work that really interest you, and you may wish to move into another area of that organisation later on. The interviewer is probably trying to assess your enthusiasm and ambition.

### Question 4

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**“At the end of the first year, if you got this job, how would you measure your success?”**

Guidelines – In your preparation for the interview you would have developed a good understanding of the duties and personal attributes listed in the job description, as well as finding out about the goals and objectives of the organisation. Think about tangible results you might be able to achieve on the job that contribute to those goals and objectives. The interviewer is not so interested here in what tasks or duties you plan to have completed, but how you go about planning and assessing your own performance. Are there any practical ways you currently measure your success

in part-time work or study e.g. sales figures, grades, feedback from your supervisor or lecturer?

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### Question 5

#### ***“What appeals to you about this job?”***

Guidelines – This is similar to Question 2 and 3, but you may want to focus more closely on the specific duties outlined in the job description or what your understanding of typical tasks for this kind of job would be. Again, cover the kinds of skills, interests or knowledge from previous study or work that you would bring to the position.

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### Question 6

#### ***“What are your long-term plans?”***

Guidelines – If you are flexible about your long-term plans say so, however, it pays to give a general picture of what interests you now, and how you see that developing. You should not commit yourself to a long-term period with an employer if you do not honestly feel that you can do so. At this stage you may not be in a position to know how long you would see yourself staying in any one job. On the other hand, you are keen to put to work the skills that you have developed. Avoid “I don’t know” and a shrug of the shoulders, as an employer is usually trying to assess how motivated and interested you are!

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### Question 7

#### ***“What do you see yourself doing in five years from now?”***

Guidelines – Similar to Question 6. Your answer will give evidence of whether or not you are the sort of person who plans ahead. Remember that fewer and fewer employers expect all their employees to make a life-long career in their organisation. You may want to express a desire to progress as rapidly as ability and opportunities allow within the organisation, or what you would like to do on a broader scale.

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### Question 8

#### ***“How long do you expect to stay with us?”***

Guidelines - Do not commit yourself to a specific time unless you are quite clear on this. Indicate you anticipate staying in the position for as long as it takes to learn the job and to gain experience in it, and that you then hope to move on within the organisation. After making a comment yourself, you can always turn this question back to the employer and ask how long they would expect you to stay with them.

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### Question 9

#### ***“Tell us about yourself?”***

Guidelines – If this is asked at the beginning of the interview give a quick run down of your qualifications and experience to date, then ask whether the interviewer(s) would like you to expand. If the question is asked towards the end of the interview and you have already talked a lot about yourself, then this is an opportunity for you to elaborate on any positive points and put across any messages you have not had the chance to give so far.

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### Question 10

#### ***“Why should we appoint you?”***

Guidelines – Answer in terms of the qualifications, skills and interests that you have which are relevant to the position i.e. summarise your suitability. Where a job description is available before the interview, make sure you have studied it thoroughly as part of your preparation for the interview. Your reply should be based on the required skills outlined in the job description. Do not compare yourself with other applicants even if you know some of them. If you are invited by the interviewers to compare yourself with other applicants, politely state that you are not in a position to judge others, and leave that side of the interviewing to them!

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### Question 11

#### ***“Have you applied for other jobs?”***

Guidelines – Be honest. This question is often used during graduate recruitment. Your approach to job hunting indicates how you approach challenges. Employers are aware of the competitiveness of the job market. They would be most surprised if you indicated that you have not applied for other jobs and may question your initiative or motivation. If you are not a student/graduate participating in a university recruitment programme, you may wish to approach this question more carefully. The interviewer may be looking to ascertain how focused and clearly defined your job objective may be.

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### Question 12

#### ***“How do you handle pressure?”***

Guidelines – Give examples of situations where you have been under pressure and ways in which you have positively handled it. Remember this is a typical example of a question where there is no one correct answer. The employer is more interested in whether you have developed strategies for coping under pressure rather than in what these strategies are.

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### Question 13

#### ***“Aren’t you over qualified for this position?”***

Guidelines – This is a leading question. If you have been called for an interview it is unlikely the employer considers you greatly

over qualified. Otherwise they could not justify the time spent interviewing you. Do not apologise for your degree. Rather state your willingness to start at the bottom and work your way up, your enthusiasm for the organisation and your desire to develop a broader range of skills. Emphasise skills such as fact finding, analysis, your capacity to acquire new knowledge quickly, rather than the specific content of your degree. Some employers are more interested in what you can offer in the 'practical hand-on' sense than in the 'academic' sense!

### Question 14

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#### ***“What are your major strengths and weaknesses?”***

Guidelines – Once again the employer is seeking to ascertain how mature you are and your awareness of yourself as a person. If you have a job description, you may find it useful to focus on where you see your strengths and weaknesses in relation to the tasks listed. Remember weaknesses can be turned into strengths. Talk about the strategies you use for dealing with that weakness, or its positive side e.g. taking time to make decisions may slow you down, but on the other hand you are not impulsive. Listing too many weaknesses will type you as very negative. You may have to admit that you do not have a particular type of experience called for however you may be able to give evidence of your ability to determine the skills required. Don't bring up too many weaknesses – one or two will suffice!

### Question 15

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#### ***“How much do you know about our organisation?”***

Guidelines – Your answer will reveal the amount of homework you have done before the interview. For example, if the company has products in the market place look for these at points of sale. Use your initiative to find out as much as you can about the organisation and during the interview cite ways in which you have gone about finding out this information.

### Question 16

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#### ***“How much do you expect to be paid?”***

Guidelines – This question is generally more common in the private sector when you have applied for a position with no identified salary scale. Where the salary range is unknown it is very important to investigate comparable rates elsewhere before you attend the interview. Never discuss salary until the end of the interviewing procedure, when they have actually offered you the position. If the question is asked before the offer, reply along the lines that until an offer is made, you feel any discussion of salary is premature. You might also add

that as a reputable organisation, you expect that they will be paying a fair and competitive salary for the position. When an offer is made talk about a range rather than a fixed figure. Since the employer created the position, they will already have some figure in mind. Find out what that is, use your salary research, and don't undersell yourself.

### Question 17

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#### ***“Have you any questions for us?”***

Guidelines – It is important that you do have questions for the following reasons:

- In order to make your own assessment of the job you need to find out as much as possible about what the job is really like, or more information about the organisation;
- To show your serious interests in the position and preparation for the interview;
- To further outline achievements and skills not covered so far in the interview. This is a good time to ask the employer what skills they consider to be the most critical for the position, and whether they see a gap in the skills you have to offer. This will give you an opportunity to identify skills and /or experiences which have not yet come up during the interview.

### Question 18

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#### ***“Why did you choose to major in ...?”***

Guidelines – Avoid the impression of aimlessness or uncertainty. It is fine to major in a subject because of your interests. However be willing to talk about this interest. Show evidence of knowledge, positive attitude towards study, and an understanding of skills and knowledge you have gained.

### Question 19

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#### ***“What do you do in your spare time?”***

Guidelines – This is generally asked by employers seeking a fuller picture of you or to help you relax during the interview. Finding out about your other interests and leisure activities gives employers another opportunity to uncover skills and abilities which may not have been discussed. Other activities also give employers a chance to assess your enthusiasm, curiosity and quality of life.

### Question 20

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#### ***“What are the most important considerations for you in choosing a job?”***

Guidelines – Answer in terms of job objectives, training, experience available or future prospects. Do not answer in terms of pay or overseas travel or other indications of self rather than job interest.

## Question 21

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### ***“How do you get on with other people?”***

Guidelines – This question is asked to find out more about your social and interpersonal skills. Quote examples of past participation in teams, committees or community organisations. Avoid discussing reasons why you do not get on with certain people. This is a good opportunity to give evidence of any situations which you may have had to use skills of negotiation, motivation or conflict resolution.

## Question 22

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### ***“Tell us about a project or piece of research you have worked on while at university”***

Guidelines – This is a question commonly asked at graduate recruitment interviews. The interviewers are not particularly concerned about which research/project you choose to give as an example, but are more interested in finding out the steps you took in completing the project/research. By examining ‘why’ and ‘how’ these steps were taken, the interviewer can get an idea of some of the skills you possess, and assess your ability to solve problems. Skills identified in your answer may include: preparation and planning, team work, time management, organising and researching. Interviewers may also ask you to elaborate further on this issue by asking questions such as ‘What did you learn from this project?’ and ‘Why do you consider this project to be an achievement?’

## Finally

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1. Remain flexible in the interview so that you hear and answer the actual questions that are asked rather than the ones you thought or hoped the interviewers would ask. After interviews are over reflect upon any of these and other questions you were asked. Think about the ways in which you could improve your answers so that when such questions are asked in the future, you will be able to answer them more competently.
2. Keep in mind that answering interview questions with general responses is not making the most of your opportunity. Interviewers want to hear evidence of your abilities. By being factual in your approach you can reveal your skills without appearing to be ‘boastful’. Illustrate your answers with concrete examples whenever possible. Graduates with no full-time work experience will be able to use as their examples their participation in sports, voluntary committee work, casual employment or university studies to give evidence of initiative, administrative, research or communication skills.

3. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE! Get a friend or family member to ask you some of the questions listed in this handout and practice your answers until you feel comfortable with your response. However, be aware of developing pat answers and listen carefully to the questions.
4. If you feel you would like more assistance, a Careers Adviser is available to discuss informally/confidentially with you ways in which you can improve your skills in handling these and other interview questions. Also, you can sign up for one of our many workshops run throughout the year in order to gain more practice in interview skills.

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