Standard interview questions

Whether your interview is for a job as software engineer or a veterinary nurse, there are some interview questions that usually come up in all cases. This article gives a rundown of some of the most common questions and tips on how to prepare your answers.

Tell me about yourself

This is a common opening question, but because it's so open-ended it's easy to stray off topic. The interviewer is asking this as they want to get to know more about you and your suitability for the job, they don't want your life story!

So, an answer of around two or three minutes about your education, work experience to date and why you are interested in working in that particular field or industry is appropriate.

Read carefully through the job and person specification, identifying your experiences that demonstrate the skills or knowledge gained. Again, practise your answers. Writing down an answer is a good way to do this — reading it aloud, recording yourself or having a mock interview is even better.

What are your weaknesses?

This might sound like a trick question but it's not really! You're going to be thinking 'How can I say what my weaknesses are? Won't that make me look bad?' Remember that everyone has weaknesses.

Interviewers ask this question because, again they are trying to get to know you, but also to see how you cope with a slightly awkward question and that you are honest.

A good way of dealing with this question is to pick one of your weaknesses and how you have tried to overcome it.

For example: Making presentations is a weakness that I am trying to overcome by practising more and making sure that I am well prepared.

What are your key skills/strengths?

The best way to answer this is to focus on the skills that they are looking for. The job description and person specification should detail what skills and competencies are required for the position you have applied for, so make sure that you know what these are.

It is also important to back up the skills or strengths that you mention. For example, if you say that you are good at working in a team then describe a time when you did, such as working on a project with other people.

It is good if you can use examples from your current or previous jobs, but if you are applying for your first job then you could use examples from school, college or university or even work experience that you've done.

Why did you apply for this job?

This is where researching the company and the job comes in handy. You should be able to explain to the interviewer what you know about the company and why working for them interests you. For example, it could be that they have a good reputation in their industry or you have read that they are developing a new product.

Also explain why you believe you are suitable for the job and convey your enthusiasm.

Remember to focus on how employing you would be of benefit to the company and not just on what you will get out of it.

You can use the job description and person specification, as well as internet research, to help put together an answer for this question.

Tell me about a difficult situation at work and how you dealt with it

Interviewers ask this to get an idea of how you cope under pressure and to gauge your communication and problem solving skills.

If you aren't prepared for this question, it might be hard to think of something off the top of your head, so think about some good examples. It could be where you've successfully resolved a situation with a difficult customer or been able to meet a deadline that had been brought forward.

If you are applying for your first job, then think about situations at school, college or university, or in a part time job.

Why did you leave your last job?

There could be any number of reasons for leaving a job, such as redundancy, dismissal, not liking the job, not getting on with the boss or looking for promotion. Some of these reasons are more difficult to explain than others!

Whatever the reason, remember not to be negative about the company or the people and never criticise a previous employer.

It might be that your previous employer didn't have any opportunities for career progression or you're looking for something that will allow you to use your full skillset. Whatever it is, make sure that you have a positive answer prepared.

Do you have any questions?

The answer to this question should never be 'no'!

Take a look at our article Interview questions that you can ask for some good examples and tips.