

Managing Questions



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Chapter outline

Managing Questions

- Types of questions
- How Interviewers can get it wrong!
- Deep probing techniques
- How long should an answer be?
- Structuring your answers
- Dealing with the ‘opinion question’
- Preparing for the ten standard questions

Introduction

You will need to be prepared for the various types of questions you may be asked during the interview. It can be a potentially intimidating feeling to be probed in detail on your past achievements and motivations. To keep you safe this chapter deals with the range of standard questions and offers some suggestions on how to deal with them.

*I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why
and When
And How and Where and Who
(Rudyard Kipling).*

Types of questions:

Interviewers tend to use the following types of questions:

➔ Open Questions

An open question is one where the answer can vary in length.

Examples:

- ➔ *What attracts you to this job?*
- ➔ *What do you think of...?*
- ➔ *Tell me about yourself?*

HINT: Avoid spinning out your answer!

➔ Probing (or Follow-up) Questions

Questions which follow up on an answer you have just given and look for more information.

Examples:

- ➔ *How did you do that?*
- ➔ *Can you tell me more about the problems you mentioned a moment ago?*
- ➔ *When did the difficulties with X start...?*

➔ Closed Questions

Defined as questions where the answer can be YES or NO or a specific piece of information.

Examples:

- ➔ *Who opened the post?*
- ➔ *How much did it cost to produce?*
- ➔ *On what date did the system go live?*

➔ Hypothetical Questions

Designed to test how you would deal with a specific situation related to the job.

Examples:

- ➔ *How would you give feedback to a difficult member of staff?*
- ➔ *How would you break bad news to a customer?*

HINT: In your answer try to incorporate previous experience: e.g. What I normally do in this situation is to ask lots of questions and reassure the customer... as when confronted with... I...

Panel 4.1

How Interviewers can get it wrong!

When Interviewers ask the wrong type of question!

It may be comforting to know that Interviewers frequently make mistakes. Here are some of the common ones:

1 Multiple Questions

The Interviewer starts to ask one question which grows into another, and then maybe a third question in the same breath! This shows that the Interviewer is not very skilled. Another form of the multiple question is where two questions are connected by an 'or' statement.

→ *Example: Would you be dealing with the customers or would you be on the computer?*

→ Think carefully about this one – the answer could be a simple yes. It also shows that the Interviewer hasn't prepared properly and is thinking on the fly.

2 Asking too many closed questions

→ Another frequent fault of Interviewers is their tendency (especially when under pressure) to ask too

many closed questions. This gives them selective information about the candidate as they are not really allowing the candidate to explain himself/herself.

3 Trick questions

→ There are some questions that are traditionally asked which may be incriminating, for example "Tell me, have you ever lied to a client?" These questions are much rarer than they were because Interviewers are now aware of Interviewee rights under equality legislation which requires that interviews be properly structured and run. However, there are occasional breaches of good practice.

4 'Good Cop, Bad Cop'

→ Where the questioning switches from one Interviewer to another, with one being 'nice' and the other not so. On some occasions this can be a good and useful tactic, but the problem about this type of routine is that the information collected can be very scattered. Unless the Interviewers are very practiced they may be seriously at cross purposes. From the Interviewer's point

of view it can send out a very negative impression of the company? Would you want to work to a boss who would subject you to the third degree? Not if you had any choice.

Deep probing techniques

Interviewers expect you to answer their questions but in assessing your answers they will be looking for the following:

- 1 What's the nature of the data you are giving them: facts, opinions, waffle?
- 2 Are you specific on facts, figures, names or dates?
- 3 What are you leaving out?
- 4 How do the pieces of your answers fit together into a pattern?
- 5 Do you construct propositions or arguments that are tight and persuasive or loose and generalised?
- 6 What is the context of your information? Is the data you are giving out of proportion to the whole picture?
- 7 Do you use generalisations a lot? E.g. Well-motivated staff *always* perform!

- 8 Are you using specific names, brands, reputations to try and influence them by association? E.g. Microsoft asked me to do a report!
- 9 Are you telling the whole truth? Most people who lie provide information that is mostly true but exploit the fact that they will get the benefit of the doubt.
- 10 What's your language – that of feeling, information or strong belief?
- 11 Are you specific about your role in anything you have done?
- 12 How relevant is your answer?
- 13 How do you structure your answer?
- 14 Do you wait before answering?
- 15 Does your pattern of eye contact, voice inflection, gestures change during your answers?

Unsatisfactory answers to any of the above can raise some doubts in Interviewers' minds and may trigger searching probing questions!

How long should an answer be?

The key issues re the length of answers are shown in Panel 4.2 opposite.

Panel 4.2

Length of answers

- As a guide keep your answers SHORT
- As a general rule longer answers should last between 30 seconds and a minute unless the matter is particularly complex and you are being questioned by specialists (who will be able to process longer answers). Beyond 30 seconds, information retention is difficult for the listener – particularly if the information is not well structured
- Give preference to longer answers about areas that are core or critical to the job. You can be a bit more expansive, for example in providing evidence of results you have achieved – if you are being asked about hobbies or interests – keep it short
- Avoid telling stories with a lot of detail. People tend to lose track of time in storytelling mode!

Panel 4.3

Being alert to Interviewer's signals

- Check in with the Interviewers non-verbally to see if they are engaging with your answer. Be prepared to wind up your answer if you feel you are losing connection
- Look for positive signals which can be quite subtle – nods, small noises and smiles indicate that you may be doing well
- Try to develop an awareness of the Interviewers' changing state of mind – if you have provided a particularly convincing piece of data you may become aware of the Interviewer relaxing and giving you more space.
- Is the Interviewer's stance similar to your own ('mirroring'). If so, you may be in rapport. Watch for changes

Panel 4.4

Structuring your answers

See information on competency interviewing in the previous chapter. Additional structures you can use would include:

→ **EVIDENCE**

When making statements, always link them to EVIDENCE-that clearly demonstrates that you know what you are talking about

→ **POLAR**

- Problem
- Opportunity
- Limits
- Action
- Final Result

→ **HYPOTHESIS**

Data observed and Conclusion. (Taken from the Scientific Method)

→ **GAP ANALYSIS**

What you expected versus what you observed
– how the difference was explained

Dealing with the ‘opinion question’

This is where you are asked to present your thinking on a controversial topic – for example you might be asked to present on the question: *Should we cut staff or services to the public?*

Your fear is that you are being put into a position where you might incriminate yourself. How do you protect yourself?

In this situation you should follow the principles of effective persuasion by presenting ideas or information that will be agreeable to all in the initial stages so that you are maximising areas of agreement before areas of controversy. Use these points of agreement to build your argument. Present an alternative point of view and compare the two before declaring your position. If you declare your position at the outset you are more likely to face probing questions in a less than favourable way!

A topic like this is controversial and you might think that neither position is the right one.

What is being tested here is your ability to present both sides of an argument.

→ **HINT:** Provide the Evidence. If you claim you are a natural, follow up the statement with the evidence.

Panel 4.5

Structure for controversial questions

- **Step 1:** Decide what your position is – this should be the last idea that you present
- **Step 2:** Give brief background to the issue
- **Step 3:** Present the points in favour of whichever proposition your audience is most likely to agree with
- **Step 4:** Present the opposing position
- **Step 5:** Contrast and evaluate the points
- **Step 6:** Present your position (“on balance then...”)

This will show your audience that you can think objectively around a controversial issue.

Preparing for the ten standard questions

It is clearly impossible to anticipate all the likely questions you might be asked in an

interview. However, there are some common tried and trusted general questions that professional Interviewers tend to fall back on – in addition to the competency questions covered in Chapter 3.

One of the most common mistakes you can make is preparing for the interview as if you were preparing for an exam – by preparing set answers to set questions – and parroting these answers at the interview. This type of preparation may blind you to the fact that the interview is a conversation where particular topics may be probed in more depth than others.

You may have to judge the amount of information you give and be open to the levels of probing that the Interviewer requires. You could spend a lot of time wading through books entitled “Answers to the World’s Greatest Interview Questions”. What you will get for all this effort will be generic answers to generic questions. Other downsides are that (a) you will waste a lot of time preparing questions that will never be asked, (b) you may make yourself more nervous than before and (c) it will distract from valuable research time.

Here are 10 questions that are asked regularly – together with some strategies for dealing with them. Each of the questions also hides other questions – and I have indicated the ‘questions behind the questions’.

1 Tell Me About Yourself (TMAY)

The question behind the question: Can you be brief in describing yourself in a professional way? Are you the same person I see in your resumé?

This is a standard introductory question. What is needed here is a concise 30 second to one minute introduction about you: current job or role, qualifications, experience, results you can achieve and where you see yourself going in the future.

Example: *“I am Dara O’Keeffe, currently Sales Account Manager with Treston Industries. I graduated with a Business Degree in 2000 and have worked with Treston since then having been promoted twice. I manage over 50 Client Accounts with combined annual turnover of €38m and since I got this job two years ago I have been growing the business by an average of 20% per annum. I am also studying for a part-time MBA with the Open University. I am interested in moving into a senior strategic position in Business Development.”* (90 words)

The answer to this question should also relate your experience to the job you are looking for.

The sample answer given above has a structure with the following elements:

- Name and current role
 - Background: Academic and Professional
 - The results you have achieved in your current job
 - Key areas of expertise and skills
 - Where you can contribute in the future
- There are other elements you can consider in your response:
- Why this organisation or field interests you
 - Current major projects you have in hand
 - Recent successes or awards
 - How you are regarded/viewed in the industry
 - Countries or territories where you operate

If you are planning your own introduction you should consider writing your own personal **WHO’S WHO?** entry. Look at a few professional directories to see how other people summarise their careers.

You should also ensure that your brief introduction includes a characteristic statement about yourself that would help the Interviewer remember you.

The TMAY introduction is important because it sets the tone for the rest of the interview.

The following are not useful in your introduction:

- Generalised, woolly statements about yourself and where you are from!
- A lack of structure in your opening statement
- Inappropriate personal disclosure about your weaknesses
- Boastful statements!
- Claiming you are an excellent communicator!

Expect to be probed on your prepared answer; a common probe is: “That’s about you, professionally – but tell me about you as a person?” What is required here is a summary of how you achieve your results, how you work, your traits and what gives you most satisfaction.

A possible response might go along these lines:

“My managers have described my work as being thorough, and well planned. In teams I am usually assigned the role of chair and I enjoy helping people with different agendas work to a common purpose. However, I am versatile enough to

play other roles according to the requirements of the job in hand and the needs of the people charged to carry it out.”

2 What are your strengths?

The question behind the question: What can you do for me?

What is required here is your own estimate of what your strongest skills are, what are the areas of knowledge you have most developed and how you like to be described. Any information you have from performance reviews which give an indication of how your performance is viewed is very useful here.

Example: *“I have developed my programming skills to level 5 and can diagnose and fix problems in the following business packages..... I have studied German for the last 5 years and can conduct negotiations in that language. As a team leader I have received very positive feedback on dealing with potential conflict in a multi-team environment.”*

Strengths can be defined as key skills.

To prepare adequately for this question you need to complete a proper skills inventory on yourself

- What are your best skills? Are they with people, information or things?

- What skills help you to do your current job properly?
- What skills or abilities got you through school or college?
- What do other people ask you to do?
- What are your most marketable skills?
- What skills are easier for you than others? (You have a certain knack for...)
- What skills do you continually fall back on?
- What are the low level skills? (Everybody has these) – screen these out!

Strengths can also be defined as your areas of **knowledge** – including the following

- What you studied at school or college
- On-the-job expertise – including product and customer knowledge
- Professional contacts and networks

Strengths can also be described as **traits** – how others tend to describe you:

- Patient
- Persevering

- Solution-centred

Avoid woolly self-descriptions such as ‘professional’, unless you are going to substantiate why you are so

3 What are your weaknesses?

The question behind the question: How self-aware are you?

One of the most difficult interview questions. What you are being asked here is how aware you are of yourself and your impact on others.

A professional weakness may be considered to include the following:

- Something that is not a natural strength
- A problem/weakness that you have overcome
- A performance issue on which you have been coached successfully
- An area where you have to work harder than others
- A task you would prefer not to do or to delegate to somebody else – if you had the choice
- A weakness is something that has taken you longer to master than others – but which you now can manage

- A weakness is something that you tend to overlook because your eye is on something else
- A weakness is something that you are constantly working on

Don't let your weaknesses phase you – we all have them; others seem to be better at hiding them! You would need to have thought this one through and have several points prepared. What is **not** required is a catalogue of your personal failings or bad habits. Such a list could cost you the interview. What is needed is an honest assessment of areas where you are aware of your lack of facility or talent and how you have recognised and dealt with these.

Some examples:

- *Because I am naturally outgoing I tend to over-contribute in team discussions. Following feedback from my boss and colleagues I have learned to listen better and read non-verbal signals from colleagues*
- *I am a recent convert to technology. However, I have learned some core skills from doing an ECDL programme which I funded myself. I can now prepare costing spreadsheets which are used by other members of my team*
- *Because I prefer to work with the big picture I tend to be less*

effective with fine detail. As a manager, I have learned to delegate such work – and where that is not an option I work in tandem with other colleagues to make sure I don't lose sight of important items

- *I have learned to keep my irritation to myself when colleagues fail to deliver – I have learned to get delivery using my assertion skills but in a respectful way*

Further probes may ask for something that is a real weakness. Do not fall into the trap of exposing personal flaws or failings.

4 What differentiates you from anybody else?

The question behind the question: How will we remember you?

Note: the question is **not** *what makes you better than anybody else?*

Differentiation is about the skills you have that others don't have, the unique experience or project that you were involved in.

Handy differentiators are things like language skills.

e.g. I got my Masters in Brussels so I can respond to Customer Queries in Dutch, German and English.

My managers have remarked that I can remember more names of clients than anybody else on the team. I have no difficulty putting names on the 250 people who pass through our branch on a regular basis. Anybody else can cope with about 100.

Panel 4.6

LIP – Leading Interviewers towards your Preferences

Try this very useful technique:

- When talking of any topic, just mention in passing a preferred topic that might also be of interest to the Interviewer(s)
- Do not provide any great detail
- You will likely get a question on this topic either immediately or soon afterwards
- By using LIP you can direct the Interviewer(s) into your preferred agenda
- Do not overuse this technique!

5 Why should we give you the job?

The question behind the question:

What are the four or five things I should say to my Managing Director about you that would convince him/her that you are the right person for the job.

The Crunch Question. Possible answers:

Because I have what you are looking for, I understand what the job entails -I can do it (and would be happy doing it for the foreseeable future).

I know all about your company and what it's like to work here and I can see this as a place I can contribute to and grow in.

Be prepared to articulate the four or five points which your claim on the job rests: For example-

- I have 10 years experience in Sales Training
- I have consistently produced results above the set targets
- I have received company and national awards
- I am very familiar with your company's products and processes
- I am clear about the

requirements of the job, its future challenges and how I would deal with them.

6 Why does this job interest you?

The questions behind the question:

*What will make you stay with us?
What's in it for you?
What do you really want?
Do we have the same interests?*

Consider carefully what is being asked here – your understanding of what the company is best at – and how it matches what you are good at and enjoy doing?

Some examples:

→ *I understand your company is at the leading edge of applying multimedia solutions to internet retailing. As I have both qualifications and experience in this area I am looking for opportunities to contribute to creating solutions in the retailing environment*

→ *Ipson Financial Services is well-known in the marketplace as providing the best in-house training programme for staff who are interested in its specific areas of specialisation – international investment and globalisation. As these are areas I have studied in College I am interested in being part of this work.*

→ *My research brought me to your website and to your Ethical Statement of how you do business in the Third World. Success for me in my career should involve making a return to society in some form or another. Your projects in International Co-Operation would allow me to do that, gain some valuable skills and learn about myself.*

7 What Salary are you expecting?

The question behind the question:

*Can we afford you?
Are you worth it?
Are you aware of your market value?*

See Chapter 8 for more on salary negotiation.

8 Where do you see yourself in five years time?

The questions behind the question:

*Do you know where the industry/company/job is going?
Do you know where you are going and how you might grow in a role like this one?
How open are you to change?
Do you understand our vision, mission and values?*

Some Interviewees pull faces or groan when this question is asked.

This type of non-verbal response could cost you the interview. Interviewers like this question (or alternative forms of it) because it tests how well you understand the job, the organisation's culture and how you might fit in. Interviewers may see you in the job and so should you. Try to visualise how you would grow into your new job and manage the changes. Review your last job and how it changed over five years.

Some Examples:

- *I would like to think I will remain in this industry – and hopefully within your organisation. That however will depend on our on-going contentment with each other*
- *I hope to be in a job and an organisation that values change, as change and growth are very important to me.*

9 How would your colleagues describe you?

The questions behind the question:

*What are your traits?
How do you perform in a team?
What do your colleagues rely on you for?
How self-aware are you?*

The Interviewer wants to know if your understanding of yourself

is in line with their observations and any feedback you would have received in the past. See the piece on traits in Question 2 above. *This could also be seen as an elegant variation on the question: What are your weaknesses?* – see Question 3 above.

10 Is there anything else you would like to add?

The questions behind the question:

*Are you well-briefed on this interview?
Have you been in control of your part of the interview?
Have you made all the points we need to hear from you?*

In communication we are influenced by the phenomenon of **primacy** and **recency**

- **PRIMACY**
Being more influenced by first impressions
- **RECENCY**
Being more influenced by impressions made on parting.

This means the final impression you leave with the Interviewers has to be positive and has to show that you have been in proper control of your end of the interview.

Before you answer this question you should pause to consider

the situation and observe your Interviewers: Are they under time pressure? If they are you have just a few seconds to respond.

Here are your major options:

- Take a few seconds to reflect and, if you cannot think of anything, thank the board positively for their time and hand back to them
- If anything occurs to you that you think will make a major impact on the decision, present it clearly and concisely in a few short sentences
- Briefly present any additional piece of information or benefit of your experience which would help the board make their decision
- Re-emphasise briefly why your experience and knowledge would help the company in the results you could achieve for them
- State what attracted you to the company – their reputation, their image in the marketplace and state that you would be very happy working in such a place
- Quote something from the company’s mission and values that relates to the way that you work or have delivered results in the past

- State that the interview has been an interesting and valuable developmental opportunity for you

Avoid the following:

- Asking when you will hear the decision (unless there is a real need to do so)
- Making boastful statements about yourself
- Making disparaging comments about other Interviewees (“I think you will find that nobody else has my experience.”)
- Veiled threats (“You do not know what you are missing if you do not give me the job”)
- Showing clear relief that the interview is over (at last!).
The Interviewers will remember the clear relief on your face and perhaps question your ability to handle stress!

Your last non-verbal exchange with the board should be positive with good eye contact. Imagine you had just met your new work colleagues – who were about to welcome you to the organisation.

In this chapter we have treated:

- All of the main types of questions with which you will be confronted, and

ACTIVITY:

Your personal answers to the 10 Great Questions

See exercise 9 within the Workbook Supplement at the end of the book.

- ➔ Take time out to list your answers to the 10 standard interview questions. It will help you refine your thinking before the interview.

- ➔ Optimum responses that you can use

In our next chapter we will briefly look at presentations, which are now more common in selection.

Summary of Chapter 4

- ➔ Understand the question behind the question
- ➔ Take time to think before you answer
- ➔ Be clear about your strengths, skills and knowledge gaps and how you have dealt with them
- ➔ Practice your responses to the usual expected questions
- ➔ Keep answers brief
- ➔ Be sure to provide EVIDENCE with your statements
- ➔ Use LIP- Leading Interviewers towards your Preferences

- ➔ Conclude the interview positively

- ➔ Interviewers use a wide variety of questions – focus on the question. Be clear exactly what is being looked for

- ➔ Interviewers can get it wrong. Interviewing may be very structured but is not an exact science!