

How to Handle Common Interview Questions, Part 1

by Ian Christie

Monster Contributing Writer

Every interview has a unique focus, but some questions are asked so often, it makes sense to do all you can to prepare for them. In order to be successful, you need a strategy -- not scripted answers. Your goal should be to emphasize the experiences in your background that best fit what each interviewer is looking for.

In this series, we'll look at some common questions and what you should consider when formulating your responses. Work through each potential question, creating your own responses, and you will be in great shape for your next interview. It helps to write out potential answers. Even better: Practice aloud with someone.

Question: Where would you like to be in your career five years from now?

Intent: *Early in your career, interviewers want to get a sense of your personal goals, ambition, drive and direction. At mid-career, they will be listening for responses relevant to their needs.*

Context: *You'll need to decide how much to share. If you want to run your own business five years from now and need a certain kind of experience in a competitive company, don't reveal that goal. But if you want to become a VP by age 35 and are interviewing in a merit-based environment, go ahead and tell the interviewer.*

Response: *"My goal is to be a corporate VP by the time I am 35." Or you might give a more subjective answer: "In five years, I want to have gained solid experience in marketing communications and be developing skills in another marketing function."*

Question: Tell me about your proudest achievement.

Intent: *This question, often worded as "significant accomplishment," ranks among the most predictable and important things you'll be asked. Interviewers want to hear how you tackled something big. It is vital you give them an organized, articulate story.*

Context: *This is a behavioral question -- meaning you're being asked to talk about a specific example from your professional history. Pick an example or story about how you handled a major project that is both significant to you and rich in detail.*

Response: *Set up the story by providing context. Recount the situation and your role in it. Next, discuss what you did, including any analysis or problem solving, any process you set up and obstacles you had to overcome. Finally, reveal the outcome and what made you proud.*

Question: Give me an example of a time when you had to think out of the box.

Intent: *This is code for asking about your innovativeness, creativity and initiative. Interviewers want to learn about not only a specific creative idea but also how you came up with it and, more importantly, what you did with that insight.*

Context: *This is another [behavioral](#) question, and the example you select is critical. It should be relevant to the job you're interviewing for, and your impact in the story should be significant.*

Response: *Tell interviewers how you came up with a creative solution to a customer problem, improved an internal process or made a sale via an innovative strategy.*

Question: What negative thing would your last boss say about you?

Intent: *This is another way of asking about your [weaknesses](#).*

Context: *A good approach is to discuss weaknesses you can develop into strengths. However, do not say you work too hard or are a perfectionist. These answers are tired and transparent. Come up with something visible to a past boss that was perhaps mentioned in your performance reviews as a developmental area.*

Response: *"I don't think she would have called it negative, but she identified that I needed to work on being more dynamic in my presentation skills. I have sought out practice opportunities and joined Toastmasters. I have seen some real improvement."*

Question: What can you do for us that other candidates can't?

Intent: *Some interview questions are more important than others. This is one of them. It's another way of asking, "[Why should we hire you?](#)"*

Context: *There are two nuances to this question. The first is asking you to compare yourself to other candidates -- usually a difficult if not impossible task. More importantly, the interviewer is asking you to articulate why you are special. Your response should sum up your main selling points, related specifically to the job requirements.*

Response: *Consider what you have to offer: past experience directly related to the job; specialized knowledge; relevant situational expertise and experience (growth, change, turnaround, startup); skills; networks; demonstrated commitment and enthusiasm for the business or your profession; future potential.*

Create a list of four to six categories of reasons that best support and summarize your candidacy, and put them in logical order, along with supporting evidence for each reason. Most points should be backed up with follow-up information.

[Ian Christie founded BoldCareer.com to help individuals build bold, fulfilling careers and help organizations attract, develop and retain talent. A career coach, consultant, three-time entrepreneur, former senior director at Monster and former retained executive search consultant, Ian is an expert in the fields of careers and recruitment. He believes that career management is a central theme to both personal and organizational effectiveness. BoldCareer.com offers career services to companies and individuals as well as free career resources.]