

How to Handle Common Interview Questions, Part 4

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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. 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.

Questions: Tell me about an assignment that was too difficult for you. How did you resolve the issue?

***Intent:** The intent can be varied. The interviewer may be interested not only in your ability to respond to a challenge but also in how you respond. Or he may want to know how you define "too difficult." Your ability to learn from a situation you considered too difficult is also relevant. Answer the right way, and you can impress with your coping skills and range of abilities. The wrong answer could take you out of the running.*

***Context:** If you have been in challenging roles, then at some point you should have found yourself stretched to the limit. This is when we grow. So this question is a marvelous opportunity to talk about a time you dealt with a really big challenge successfully.*

***Response:** Do not make the mistake of saying you have never had an assignment that was too difficult for you. Discuss an example of a time you had to overcome a lack of knowledge, skill or experience, or when you took your game to the next level: "I wouldn't say that it was too difficult for me. However, I was faced with..."*

Question: What is your management style?

***Intent:** This is a classic question for management-level candidates. The interviewer's intent here is threefold: to find out if your management style fits, to determine if you have management ability and to probe how much you understand your own work style.*

***Context:** Avoid responding with cliches. Hopefully you can say more than that you have an open-door policy or you manage by walking around.*

***Response:** In today's environment, you need to speak to leading and developing your team, communication, how you organize and plan, how you execute and how you measure progress. It need not be a long answer, but responding with a well-thought-out approach to your management style will make a better impression than spouting generalities.*

Question: How would your past experience translate into success in this job?

***Intent:** Either the interviewer is asking in a tone that indicates his doubt about your legitimacy as a candidate, or he is asking you to make the connection for him effectively.*

***Context:** You can blow the whole interview here. In fact, you have no business being in the interview unless you are clear why you have what it takes to do the job well.*

Response: You might start with naming the top few requirements for this job and then describing how you meet or exceed each one. Or you might begin with your background and summarize how it has prepared you for this job. Often, the context of the job is almost as important as the skills required, so don't forget to speak to the specific challenges and objectives you see in the role.

Question: How would you tackle the first 90 days?

Intent: This question is about thoroughness, process and appreciation for organizational complexity. In a second or third interview, the interviewer may also be testing how much you have thought about the job itself.

Context: Most people would say they would study the company's business. You must go beyond this answer to speak to specific job's key challenges or goals. You also want to assure your potential employer that current production will continue without interruption. Of course, you want to express that you would work with the team, your boss and any key influencers to get up to speed as quickly as possible.

Response: Unless asked to do so, do not get specific on changes or initiatives you would make. Instead, think of your response as an operating framework that demonstrates you have a solid, realistic understanding of what needs to be done and how.

Question: Give me proof of your technical competence.

Intent: This question is worded vaguely on purpose. In any number of ways, your interviewer will likely ask you to prove your competence in some technical area important to the job. You need to do so decisively.

Context: You could be given a hypothetical scenario, such as a case study or a technical problem to solve, or you simply could be asked to describe your level of competency in a specific skill. How you do this will depend on the kind of question.

Response: Remember the three possible competency scenarios: exceeds, meets or needs development. Even if you find yourself in the last category, you need to demonstrate that you are purposefully and rapidly developing in that area and trying to compensate with an area of strength. You are better off acknowledging where you are rather than trying to fake it.

You can see themes running throughout this series: Know yourself. Think about the position you're interviewing for. Connect the dots between your background and the job and organizational requirements. Expand upon your responses to ensure you effectively communicate the depth and breadth of your experience. And of course, understand the nuances behind the questions. Good luck!

[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.]