Ace That Job Interview\(^1\)

What you say is important, but how you say it is crucial

Job interviewing is a mine field. Prospective employers want to know what makes you tick. Are you hard to get along with? Can you meet deadlines? How badly do you want the job? Many excellent people have been nixed because of a single faux pas. A candidate may flunk because his socks sag. Another makes herself too comfortable. There is no sure-fire trick for navigating an interview. But you can increase your odds by knowing what you’re up against. Here are ten frequent questions and suggestions on how you might handle them:

1. **What exactly do you want from us?** Describe your ideal job. Do not dodge this question by giving some generic, safe answer. Prepare for this question by writing an “employment ad” that describes your dream job. Include a “headline” and several adjectives outlining the company, the job and yourself. This forces you to focus on exactly what you want and what you have to offer even if this question never comes up.

2. **Why did you leave your last job?** Don’t answer that you clashed with your last boss. This sends up a red flag. Concentrate on the business reasons for joining a new company. For example: “After two years running the marketing department at Widget Co., I’ve learned a lot about X. Now I want to learn Y.” Or, “I’m at the stage in my career where I want to add X to my background, and your company is the leader in the field.”

3. **Why are you switching careers?** In this question, interviewers are looking for careful self-analysis. Don’t say “I wanted to try something new.” This makes the recruiter think: this person doesn’t know where he or she is going. Instead, explain how your skills, personality and goals are more suited to the new career, or that you want to add something to your experience that will help you achieve a longer-term goal.

4. **Where do you want to be five years from now?** The best way to botch this one is to now have an answer, or to have an answer that is inconsistent with the company’s own goals. You may also alarm your interviewer by giving the impression that the job is merely a way station. An organization may fear that, if hired, such a candidate would spend more time jockeying for the next position than working. Make long-term goals a part of your answer, but focus on the short term. For instance: “I’m 30 and I love what I’m doing. Ultimately I’d like to be a CEO, but I realize I’ve got other things to learn first. The next logical step is to be a division manager. Here’s why I think I’ll be ready for that in five years ...”

5. **What’s your greatest accomplishment?** The most common mistake: responding with responsibilities rather than results. Describe the big picture, not just the activities. A poor candidate will say of a triumphal project, “I wrote copy and supervised photography.” The better candidate will say, “First we looked at the strategy of the company. Then we researched the audience. Then we determined what kind of payback we could achieve ...”

6. **What are your strengths?** You may be asked to name as many weaknesses so limit yourself to three concrete examples of strengths, again showing benefits to the company.

\(^1\) by Joan E. Rigdon, The Wall Street Journal
7. **What are your weaknesses?** Many candidates try to highlight vague weaknesses that can be viewed as assets. They say, “I’m impatient,” hoping the interviewer will see them as a hard-charger. Don’t try it. Interviewers are tired of hearing these stock answers. Instead, be honest, but emphasize the actions you’ve taken to deal with a weakness. Offer the following type of answer: “Sometimes I would push back deadlines to turn in higher-quality work. However, I’ve learned to delegate more, and I’ve only slipped once in the past year.” Beware: some interviewers fall silent during this question, letting a nervous candidate fill in the void by volunteering more information.

8. **What about a time you failed?** The best answer has this theme: “I fell off my horse. I learned what I did wrong. I got back up and rode it better.” The worst answer is: “I guess I’ve been lucky. I haven’t failed yet.” Either the candidate is not telling the truth or they’re not trying hard enough.

9. **Will you get along with your potential boss?** This is one question you may want to dodge. Try saying, “I concentrate on the job and the results, and I’m flexible enough to work with almost anyone.” If the question is more explicit, such as “Describe the worst boss you worked for,” couch your answer as a disagreement over a business issue or as a difference in styles-not as a personal dislike.

10. **How old are you? How’s your health? Are you married? Any children?** Employers can’t legally ask these questions. But if an interviewer does ask one of them, don’t cry foul unless you don’t want the job. Chances are the interviewer is really asking how much you’re willing to travel or work overtime.

    Most interviewers care less about what you say than how you say it. Flubs outside the “formal” interview count too. Don’t order the cheapest thing on the menu. They may not take you seriously or pay you enough. But don’t make the opposite mistake either.

    Remember, it is possible to recover from an honest faux pas. When it happens, relax during the rest of the interview. You have nowhere to go but up from there!