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How to Answer the Worst Interview Questions

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Job seekers – to put it mildly – don't like interviews very much. Aside from having to dress up and worry about the firmness of their handshakes, applicants have to field question after question. No matter how much they fear unexpected trick questions, job candidates dread the most common ones above all others.

When it comes to the least favourite interview questions, "What is your greatest weakness?" is job seekers' top pick, according to a recent Zogby poll. Although it's a common question, nobody knows what to say. If you're too honest, you've just told the interviewer why you shouldn't be hired. If you pretend you're flawless, you look arrogant and still don't get the job.

When you're asked questions that seem set up to make you look bad, what are you supposed to say?

"What we don't want is a lot of BS. We are looking for a realistic and accurate picture of a candidate," says Donna Flagg, workplace expert and the president of the Krysalis Group, a human resource and management consulting firm. "We want to see someone who thinks, not someone who is rehearsed or spits out sound bite after sound bite. Mostly, we want the truth."

To help you think critically about your answers so you can respond honestly and thoughtfully, here are five common (but tough) interview questions the Zogby survey respondents disliked most and how to respond to them.

Question: What is your greatest weakness?
Don't say: "I'm such a perfectionist" or "I work too hard."
Instead: Think about areas where you can improve and figure out how they can be assets.
Why: If you try to conceal your past and refuse to admit to a mistake, you're sending a red flag to the interviewer that you're stubborn or that you don't have the capacity to recognize your own flaws. "Be balanced; be human," says Ben Dattner, an industrial and organizational psychologist at New York University.

Dattner suggests picking some areas where you have room for improvement and make them reasons you should be hired. If you didn't have the opportunity to develop certain skills at your previous job, explain how eager you are to gain that skill at the new job. Also, point out how you've dealt with a past weakness. For example, if speaking in front of large groups once terrified you, mention the public speaking course you took to help you through it. This answer demonstrates your problem-solving skills and your willingness to learn.

Question: Tell me about yourself.
Don't say: "It was a cold February morning when the doctor placed me in my mother's arms for the first time..."
Instead: Give a brief overview of your career and qualifications in a few sentences.
Why: The interviewer doesn't want to know about your first kiss and what your blood type is. Your answers should be a quick rundown of your qualifications and experience. Focus on your strongest skills and traits so that you make a good first impression. This question often prompts follow-up questions, so if you cite creativity as one of your best traits, be prepared to give examples of how you have demonstrated it in the past.

Question: Why do you want to work here?
Don't say: "I've maxed out three credit cards and need a paycheque ASAP."
Instead: Articulate why you want the job and why you're a good fit for the company.
Why: A chief mistake job seekers make is focusing on selling themselves to the company and failing to prove why the job is right for them. It sounds narcissistic, but it's not. Dattner suggests asking yourself: "Why is the job right for you and why are you right for the job?" The question helps you give the right answer because you prove that you're in this for more than the paycheque.

Question: How would others describe you?
Don't say: "They would say I'm the best you'll meet and you'd be stupid not to hire me."
Instead: Answer honestly.
Why: "With regard to what others say about you, this gives a lens for the interviewer to use to see characteristics and attributes that the individual being interviewed may not be aware of," Flagg says.

You should always be asking for feedback from your colleagues and supervisors in order to gauge your performance, Danner advises. Then when you are job hunting, you can honestly answer the question knowing you've improved your performance based on the feedback. If you haven't asked co-workers for their opinions, start now with past and present colleagues so you can answer this question honestly. It might also help you discover what your strengths and weaknesses are.

Question: Why did you leave your last job?
Don't say: "Gee, there were so many reasons I got out of that hellhole."
Instead: Take your time to answer this question, Dattner says. "If the interviewer thinks you are rushing through it, there's a problem."
Why: This is your chance to talk about your experience and your career goals. Don't badmouth a former boss or explain why you were just too good to stay at such a menial job. Instead, focus on what you learned in your previous position and how you are ready to use those skills in a new position. Detail the path you want your career to follow while illustrating how this job is right for you and how you're right for the company.

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