

Answering Tough Interview Questions

Careers expert John Lees FREC has been training recruiters for 15 years, and now tells career changers their secrets.

You can't prepare for every question that will come up at interview, but you can anticipate most of them. Here are some deadliest questions, and ways of handling them:

“Tell us about yourself”. Prepare for the worst – a classic opener that can really throw you. Plan ahead by having presentation statement to cover this.

“Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?” – if your answer doesn't ring true for you, it won't for anyone else. Talk about career plans, and what you want to learn and achieve in the future.

“Why do you want this job?” Have a clear answer to this (even if, privately, you're not sure – you only have to decide when the job offer is in your hand).

“What kind of person are you?” Handle questions about personally carefully. Rather than say “I'm an ideas person”, talk about a time when you changed things with a good idea.

“Why did you leave....?” Employers will probe for reasons for job change. If you are currently out of work, they will probe this, too. Rehearse short, simple, positive 'stories' to cover these points. This is not telling lies, just a simple, positive summary.

“How will you cope in a crisis?” Have a couple of good examples of past triumphs up your sleeve.

“How will you....?” Questions are beginning to create a future which includes you – so welcome them. Describe what you would do within the organisation as if you are there already. Create the right picture, and the employer won't be able to imagine a future without you...

“What would you do if...?” Some interviewers ask fantasy questions not related to reality, but watch out for questions that are like verbal in-tray exercises. You might be asked to “sell me this pencil sharpener/ paper clip/ biro” – prepare to think on your feet.

“What do you need to earn?” Wrong question. Focus on the value you can add to the employer, not your basic needs. Find out what the company is willing to pay, or work out what similar employers pay for good people. Always throw pay questions back to the other side of the net.

“What are your weaknesses?” Remember that the recruiter gives far more weight to negative information. Talk about weaknesses that are also strengths, e.g. being demanding of your team, being a perfectionist, pushing hard to get things done...