

The Tough Questions

1. Tell me about yourself

Cover four segments about your life – your early years, education, work experience, and what has happened recently.

Keep your complete answer to not more than 2 or 3 minutes. Be sure you do not ramble or elaborate.

2. What can you offer us?

Be sure you know something about the job situation they have in mind before you try to answer. Then you can relate some of your past experiences where you have succeeded in solving problems that appear similar to those of your prospective employer.

3. What are your strengths?

You should be able to list and concisely explain 3 or 4 key strengths that are relevant to their needs.

4. What are your accomplishments?

Try to pick out accomplishments that have a bearing on the challenges you have been discussing. Stay away from ancient times.

5. What are your limitations?

Respond with a strength which, if overdone, can get in your way and become a weakness. For example, you might say, 'My ambition to get the job done sometimes causes me to press a little hard on my organisation. But I am aware of this problem and believe that I have it under control'.

Or deal with your need for further training in some aspect of your profession. Do not claim to be faultless.

6. How much are you worth?

Try to delay answering this until you have learned quite a bit about the job and, if possible, explore beforehand the typical ranges they are accustomed to pay for similar positions.

If you feel obliged to answer something, you might reply along these lines, 'You are aware of what I have been earning at Ajax, and I would hope that coming to you would be a progressive step. Perhaps we can discuss this question a little better when we both have a more complete idea of what the job responsibilities and scope would be'.

7. What are your ambitions for the future?

Indicate your desire to concentrate on doing the immediate job well and you're confident that the future will take care of itself. You do not want to convey the idea that you have no desire to progress, but you need to avoid statements that are unrealistic – or that might threaten some of the present incumbents.

8. What do you know about our Company?

If you have done your homework, you can honestly state that you have studied the information that is publicly available about Acme and are thus aware of several of the published facts. However, you might also state that you would like to know more – and then be prepared later to ask some intelligent questions.

Do not try to show off and recite all you have learned, but merely let your knowledge show gracefully through the informed way in which you handle the interview.

9. Why do you want to work for us?

Indicate that, from your study of the company, many of the activities and problems would give you a clear chance to contribute to the company through past experience and skills. If you can honestly say so, explain your admiration for the company and what it is that appeals to you.

10. What do you find most attractive about the position we are discussing?

Mention three or more attractive factors, but hold the unattractive down to one or two minor ones.

11. What do you look for in this job?

Keep your answer opportunity orientated. Talk about the chance you would have to perform and get recognition.

12. Please give me your definition of a..... (the position for which you are being interviewed).

Keep your answer brief and task orientated – that is, deal with responsibilities and accountabilities.

13. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our firm?

Be realistic and speak in terms of three months depending on what experience you have.

14. Do you not feel you might be overqualified or too experienced for the position we have in mind?

A strong company needs strong people, with the appropriate experience to deal with current problems. Explain that your interest in the company would be long term, and that you feel confident that your accomplishments in the first year or two will lead eventually to growth opportunities for you.

15. What is your management style?

If you have not thought about this, it is time you did. If the job you are going for has management responsibilities, you might want to talk about how you set goals and then get your people involved in them. Also, describe the techniques that you like to use to bring out the best in people. Try to sense whether the company believes in a highly participative style, or is a more military approach.

16. Why do you feel you have good potential as a manager?

Keep your answer orientated towards your past achievements and the task to be done. Explain how you go about getting work done – either by yourself or through your organisation.

17. As a manager, what would you be looking for when you recruit people?

Their skills, initiative, adaptability – and whether their chemistry fits with that of the organisation.

18. As a manager, have you ever had to terminate anyone? If so, what were the circumstances and how did you handle it?

Answer in brief that you have indeed had experience with this problem and that it has worked out to the benefit of both the individual and the organisation.

19. What do you see as the most difficult task in being a manager?

Getting things planned and done on time, within the budget.

20. What important trends do you see coming in our industry?

Pick out two or three things that you see coming in the future – macro and big picture. This is your chance to show that you have thought about the future, the economics, the markets and the technology of your industry.

21. Why are you leaving your present job?

This is one of those sensitive questions that must be handled crisply and briefly. If it was a workforce reduction owing to economic circumstances, make that clear. If possible, explain how your termination was part of a larger movement. When you have finished answering, let it go. Stay away from analysing your areas of friction with your boss.

22. How do you feel about leaving all your benefits at.....?

Concerned, but confident that you will make it up when you are established in your new company.

23. Describe what you feel would be an ideal working environment?

This is a place where you can bring in some satisfiers and ideal job preferences – but do not make it sound too sublime or impractical. Otherwise they may conclude that you are not ready for the realities. Play down the dissatisfiers.

24. Looking back, how do you perceive your past employer?

It is an excellent company which has given me a lot of good experience and opportunities to perform.

25. What have you done that helped increase sales or profit? How did you go about it?

This is your chance to describe in some detail a business accomplishment that is relevant to the proposed new job. Feel free to dwell on this.

26. How much financial responsibility have you had to account for?

You can answer this in terms of your budget or head-count or the size of the project or sales that you directed.

27. How many people have you supervised in your recent jobs?

Be specific – and feel free to refer to those over which you had influence, such as a task force or matrix organisation.

28. Which do you like better – working with figures or words?

Answer honestly.

29. How do you think your subordinates perceive you?

Be as positive as you can, but remember to be honest too. They can check your references easily.

30. In your last position, what were the things that you liked most? And liked least?

Be careful here. Emphasise the positive and do not carry on at length about the negative.

31. In your recent position, what were some of your most significant accomplishments?

Be ready to describe three or four of them in detail. Where possible, try to relate them to the nature of the new challenges you might be facing.

32. Why have you not found a new position after these many months?

Finding just any job is not too difficult, but finding the right job takes care and time.

33. What do you think of your previous boss?

Be as positive as you can, and avoid getting in too deeply. This is a loaded question, because most bosses shy away from a contentious or difficult subordinate.

34. Describe a situation in which your work was criticised?

Be specific and brief – avoid getting emotional or defensive about it.

35. If I spoke with your previous boss, what would he say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Be honest about this one, but do not emphasise the negative. Your old boss will probably want to give you a good send off. Recount some of the good things you did for him.

36. How do you hold up under pressure or deadlines?

I can handle it. It is a way of life in the business world.

37. Do you think that you are cut out better for staff work or line work?

I can handle either, and my preference depends a lot on the specific job, the boss I would be working for, and the challenges in the position.

38. In your most recent position, what problems have you identified that had been previously overlooked?

Keep your answer brief and do not brag unduly.

39. If you had your choice of jobs or companies, where would you choose?

Talk about the job at hand and what is attractive in the company that is interviewing you.

40. Why are you not earning more at your age?

Do not be defensive about this. Explain that you are hoping to correct the situation through this career change.

41. What do you feel you should earn in the proposed position?

You may want to answer this question, such as, 'What is the typical salary range for similar jobs in your company?' If there is no range in the company, give the range that you had in mind. But qualify it by saying you hope to learn more about the job responsibilities and scope.

42. If we were to offer you this position, exactly how much would you expect?

Again, be careful about not pinning yourself down – either too high or too low if possible, deal in terms of what the market value is for the job. For example, 'my understanding is that a job like this you are describing might well pay in the range of £xx to £xx. How does this fit in with the present salary structure?

43. Do you have any objections to taking a battery of psychological tests?

No, none at all (This would mean that you are a serious candidate).

44. What other types of jobs or companies are you considering at this time?

Do not feel obliged to reveal details of your other negotiations. If you have other irons in the fire, refer to your campaign in a general way: but concentrate mainly on the job in hand.

45. What sort of outside reading do you do?

Be honest. If possible, mention some of the things you read in order to keep yourself up to date in your professional field. However, it is fitting to show balanced interests by your recreational reading as well.

46. Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?

Yes (and be prepared to give a couple of examples).

47. How would you describe your own personality?

Balanced and human. Mention 2 or 3 useful traits.

48. Are you a leader?

Yes. (Give examples)

49. What are your long-range goals?

Relate your answer to the company you are interviewing with, rather than give a very broad, general answer. Keep your ambitions on a realistic track.

50. What are your strongest points?

Be ready to present at least three – preferably in a way that relates them to the potential job opening.

51. How long would you expect to stay with our company?

You can hedge a little here by saying that 1) you would expect to progress with your next company and 2) salary would keep up with this progress, as well as inflation.

If you are pressed, you might answer ten years might well bring a doubling of salary for a person who is moving well with his company.

52. What sort of relationship do you have with your associates, both at the same level and above and below you?

This is a very important question, and you can well afford to take your time and answer it in steps.

When talking about your relationships with subordinates, be prepared to state your philosophy of handling them, particularly when they have performance problems.

With regard to bosses, indicate your keen interest in understanding the expectations of your boss, so that you and your organisation can build your goals in a way that will support his goals. You may also want to talk about how you would go about keeping your boss informed.

53. What are some of your outside activities or recreations?

Your answer can show that you live a balanced life. But avoid throwing in so many outside activities that it casts some doubt on how much time you will have for your job. Remember too, that your hobbies and recreations can be quite revealing as to your own personality.

54. Are you continuing your education?

If you are not actually attending or planning to attend formal classes, be ready to explain what sort of outside reading or attendance at professional seminars you undertake in order to keep yourself fresh in your chosen field.