

Interview Q & A

The Elevator Question

Q. Tell me about yourself....

A: Start with the present and tell why you are well-qualified for the position. Use the key parts of your Elevator Speech to present your background, connect your qualifications to the specifications of the position.

Steps to take to prepare for this question include:

1. Ask relevant questions in phone screening or other sources to better understand the wants and needs (not the generalized needs of the industry or company).
2. Ask for a position description. Get more details on the needs and focus your comments about accomplishments to address the needs.

Asking questions may be a bit uncomfortable, but getting the wants and needs fully understood enables you to present your background most effectively. Once you know what the employer is looking for, connect your accomplishments to their goals. Provide specific examples of your responsibilities and especially your achievements, all of which are geared to present yourself as a perfect match for the needs he has just described.

Challenges and Goals

Q. What are your goals?

A: Be ready to discuss your goals for each major area of your life: career, personal development and learning, family, physical (health), community service and maybe generally allude to your spiritual goals. Be prepared to describe each goal in terms of specific milestones you wish to accomplish along the way, time periods you're allotting for accomplishment, why the goal is important to you, and the specific steps you're taking to bring it about.

Q. What was the toughest challenge you've ever faced?

A: This is an easy question if you're prepared. Have a recent example ready that demonstrates either:

1. A quality most important to the job at hand; or,
2. A quality that is always in demand, such as leadership, initiative, managerial skill, persuasiveness, courage, persistence, intelligence, etc

Q. Why should I hire you from the outside when I could promote someone from within?

A: Review the qualifications that only you offer.

“In general, I think it’s a good policy to promote from within when possible. But the very fact that you decided to look outside probably means you’re not completely comfortable choosing someone from inside.

“Naturally, you want this department to be as strong as it possibly can be, so you want the strongest candidate. I feel that I can fill that bill because... (then recap your strongest qualifications that match up with his greatest needs).”

Q. Why should I hire you?

A: Since you know the needs of the employer, this question enables you to contrast yourself with other candidates by providing more reasons for hiring you... reasons tied directly to the needs of the employer. Recap three or four “matches” (need matched by your qualifications).

Q. Why do you want to work at our company?

A: If you have done your research, this should be easy.

“On the basis of your company success in... And... And... I really welcome the opportunity to join the company as...”

Q. What was the toughest decision you ever had to make?

A: Be prepared with a good example, explaining why the decision was difficult... the process you followed in reaching it... the effective way you carried it out... and the beneficial results.

Q. I’m concerned that you don’t have as much experience as we’d like in...

A: If you are fully prepared for the interview, then you probably already identified this as an issue.

To address the question most effectively, uncover the wants and needs for the position and then match them with your strengths. More specifically when the interviewer poses an objection like this, you should:

1. Agree on the importance of this qualification.
2. Explain that your strength may be greater than your resume indicates because...
3. When this strength is added to your other strengths, it’s really your combination of qualifications that’s most important.

Review the areas of your greatest strengths that match up most favorably with the company's most urgently felt wants and needs.

Handling the question this way gets two things done:

1. It gives the interviewer more facts in the area of concern.
2. It shifts the focus away from this one, isolated area and frames the unique combination of strengths you offer, strengths that connect with the greatest wants of the employer.

Q. Aren't you overqualified for this position?

A: Deal with your extensive experience as an asset for the long-term, and convince the person you would make the personal commitment to getting the job done and make a positive contribution.

"The job market is very tight right now and I understand and accept that. You are correct that I am looking at opportunities like yours because the market has changed so much and positions like my former job seem to be dropping in number. So I am adapting my thinking about myself, what I can do for my next employer and next steps.

"But I also believe that there could be very positive benefits for both of us in this match.

"I have had extensive training and years of experience that will allow me to be an immediate contributor in...

"I could also help you in a few other areas of concern to you. For example...

"Right now, I'm unemployed. I want to work, very much, and the position you have here is exactly what I love to do and am best at. I'll be happy doing this work and that's what matters most to me, a lot more than money or title.

"Most important, I'm looking to make a long-term commitment in my career now. I've had enough of job hunting and want a permanent spot at this point in my career. I also know that if I perform this job with excellence, other opportunities are bound to open up for me right here. In time, I'll find many other ways to help this company and in so doing, help myself."

Q. Tell me about something you did-or failed to do-that you now feel a little ashamed of.

A: When it comes to faults and weaknesses, never confess a regret. But respond to the question asked.

"You know, I really can't think of anything." (Pause again, then add): "But I have also found that the best way to avoid regrets is to avoid causing them in the first place. One habit I try to practice is to review the day's events and conversations and think about the people and the work we are getting done together. How are they likely to be feeling? Sometimes I'll see things that do need more follow-up, whether a pat on the back, or maybe a five-minute chat in someone's office to make sure we're clear on things... whatever. I've found that if you let each team member know you expect excellence in their performance... if you work hard to set an example yourself... and if you let people know you appreciate and respect their feelings, you wind up with a highly motivated group, a team that's actually having fun at work because they're striving for excellence rather than brooding over slights or regrets."

Strengths & Weaknesses

Q. What are your greatest strengths?

A: If you have done your research and asked good questions, you should have some insights into the requirements for the position. Shape your responses in terms of the requirements. For each strength, have one or two specific examples.

Generally, the 10 most desirable traits that all employers look for are:

1. A proven track record as an achiever...especially if your achievements match up with the employer's greatest wants and needs.
2. Intelligence...management "savvy."
3. Honesty...integrity...a decent human being.
4. Good fit with corporate culture...someone to feel comfortable with...a team player who meshes well with interviewer's team.
5. Likability...positive attitude...sense of humor.
6. Good communication skills.
7. Dedication...willingness to walk the extra mile to achieve excellence.
8. Definiteness of purpose...clear goals.
9. Enthusiasm...high level of motivation.
10. Confident...healthy...a leader.

Q. What are your greatest weaknesses?

A: An interviewer really doesn't expect much good information from this question and rightly so. The canned answer won't work. Try changing the subject to what you like most and least.

Examples:

- **Marketing:** like new product rollouts, building market share, competing in the marketplace, not thrilled with...
- **Sales:** like business development, account management, customer relations, training others, prospecting, but not thrilled with...
- **Operations:** planning, meeting quality and productivity goals, performance improvement, not thrilled with...
- **Accounting/Finance:** like analysis, reporting, management support, fulfilling compliance standards, less interested in...

Q. Where could you use some improvement?

A: Emphasize an area where you want to grow.

“Over the next few years, I would like to... (select an area that is new and innovative, not related to the job) and maybe get into a position where I could use the new skill as well.”

Q. How could you have improved your career progress?

A: Don't explain or apologize for your career.

“I'm OK with my overall career progress. Maybe, if I had known something earlier in the industry such as (positive, negative) I would have done...”

“But all things considered, I am responsible for where I am now, how I got here, and where I'm going... and I have no regrets.”

Q. What's the most difficult part of being a...?

A: Select a “challenge” that everyone faces in your field in which you excel. Describe the process you follow that enables you to get great results.

“I think every ... manager finds it challenging to lead and motivate the team when business slows down. But that's probably the strongest test of a good... manager. That's the time to take care of the customers so I work hard at keeping the team focused on sales and service by...” (describe the steps you take to meet the challenge, results).

Q. Looking back on your last position, have you done your best work?

A: Focus on what you have accomplished.

“Over the past few years I have had assignments that really allowed me to do good work. I was able to apply my skills and expand on what I was able to do by learning more about...”

Q. What was the toughest part of your last job?

A: Keep your response focused on what you can do.

"I can't think of anything that was really difficult for me to do in my most recent job." If there's a follow up question, switch to talking about what you found most challenging, and the satisfaction of getting something done.

Behavior type questions

Q. Give me an example of your creativity (analytical skill... managing ability, etc.).

A: If you prepared for the interview, then you have a list of your greatest and most recent achievements. Use the list to present any of your achievements in terms that connect with the questions of the interviewer. Use the specifics of the question to develop your answer.

Q. Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized.

A: Emphasize the positive feedback you've gotten throughout your career and (if it's true) that your performance reviews have been uniformly excellent. Then select some feedback on your work early in your career that is not essential to job performance.

"My focus has always been on improving my performance, so I have always been open to suggestions on how to improve. Early in my career, I..." (share an example of a not-too-damaging learning experience from early in your career and relate the ways this lesson has since helped you).

Demonstrate that you learned from the experience and the lesson is now part of your performance.

Q. What changes would you make if you came on board?

A: Since you "don't know what you don't know," the best option is to talk about what you will do the first few months on the job.

"If you hire me, as I hope you will, I'd want to take a good hard look at everything you're doing and understand why it's being done that way. I'd like to regular meetings with you and the other key people to get a deeper grasp of what you feel you're doing right and what could be improved.

"From what you've told me so far, the areas of greatest concern to you are..."

Then do two things.

1. Ask if these are in fact his major concerns.
2. If so, then reaffirm how your experience in meeting similar needs elsewhere might prove very helpful.

Q. What makes you angry?

A: Give an answer that's suited to both your personality and the management style of the firm. Here, the research you've done about the company and its style can help in your choice of words.

- If you are a reserved person and/or the corporate culture is coolly professional:

"I'm an even-tempered, positive person by nature, which helps me a great deal in keeping my department running smoothly, with a genuine team spirit. I like to lay out the goals, get commitment from the team about what's expected, both for the team and individuals, and then follow up continuously to check progress.

"If something goes wrong, I want to know about it. If someone isn't getting the job done, I'll want to know why. If there's no good reason, then I'll get impatient and angry...and take appropriate steps from there. But if you hire good people, give them achievable goals and the resources to meet them, and follow up consistently until the job is done, it should not get to that stage."

- If you are feisty by nature and/or the position calls for a tough leader:

"You know what makes me angry? People who... (then fill in the blanks with the most objectionable traits for this type of position) people who don't pull their own weight, who are negative, people who lie... etc."

Q. Tell me about the most boring job you've ever had.

A: A job requires commitment and gets boring if a person stops putting himself/herself into it.

"I've never found myself bored with any job I've ever held. I've always enjoyed hard work and believe that in every company or department there are exciting challenges and problems crying out for energetic and enthusiastic solutions."

Q. Sell me this (some object on interviewer's desk)

A: Sales is a needs driven process. The steps are:

1. What are the needs of the customer?
2. What are the features and benefits of my product?
3. How does my product meet the customer's needs?
4. Summarize the features and benefits in terms of the customer needs

Ask questions and explain how you would "sell" the product at each step of the process above. If the "sales prospect" cooperates and goes along with the role-play, then complete the process. If he/she resists, back off and try another product or conclude the process by stating that a good Sales Rep. focuses on customers who are "ready to buy."

Q. If your boss really likes an idea and you don't, what do you do?

A: Integrity is the primary issue.

"I would gather all the facts and information about the issue and bring out the problems as well as the positives. If I have reservations, I certainly want to point them out, as specifically, objectively and factually as I can. In the final analysis, I owe my boss honesty. In this case I would work to make his idea stronger, perhaps addressing some of the concerns so that it effectively overcomes any initial reservations that I or others may have about it. If he says, 'no, let's do it my way,' then I owe him my full and enthusiastic support to make it work as best it can."

Q. What do you look for when you hire people?

A: Share your own ideas, but include the three most important criteria for any position:

1. **Qualifications:** Can the person do the work?
2. **Motivation:** Will the person do the work?
3. **Team Contributor:** Will the person fit in?

Q. What would you do if a peer wasn't pulling his/her weight... and this was hurting your department?

A: Focus on problem-solving and accountability.

"My first step would be to gather information and examples of the performance issues affecting me and my department. I would ask for a meeting, explain the situation, to try to enlist his/her help in developing a solution. I would go over the benefits we can gain from working together, and the problems we (company, team, customers) will experience if we don't. I would try hard to solve the issues between us and only involve other areas as needed, maybe above and below the person and my own boss if necessary. Solving the performance problem must be the final result."

Q. If you had to deal with (describes problem) what would you do?

A: Summarize how you address and solve a problem.

"I would... (describe steps to lay out your process in analyzing this problem, whom you would consult with, generating possible solutions, choosing the best course of action, and monitoring the results)." Don't try to solve the problem since the process is the issue.

Interests

Q. What good books have you read lately?

A: If you have read a good book lately, then recap the basics. If you have not had time, recap one of the articles or other materials you have read about career management, job search, etc.

"I recently read (title) and really enjoyed it. The author did a good job of..."

OR:

"I haven't had as much time as I would like to enjoy a good book. But I have done a lot of readings of articles and on-line information about careers as well as a few on my profession and management." (comment on one or two articles, or profession related information).

Q. Looking back, what would you do differently in your life?

A: Life is filled with regrets, disappointments or problems, but the job interview is not the place to talk about them. Don't give the interviewer any information that would reduce your chances for an offer.

"I've had a good life, I've learned a lot and the best is yet to come. Every experience in life is a lesson in its own way. I wouldn't change a thing."

Q. What are your career options right now?

A: A valued, productive employee always has options.

- **Still employed:** "Right now I have several possibilities with my company but I'm concerned about... (reason for leaving). I'm looking for... (challenge, money, responsibility, etc.)." Also mention that you're seriously exploring opportunities with one or two other firms.
- **If you're not employed:** Discuss one or two other employment possibilities you're actively exploring.

Q. Have you considered starting your own business?

A: If you have done your research, then you have some insights about the corporate culture and whether it is hierarchical and structured or entrepreneurial and supportive of new ventures.

- For the highly structured environment, be clear that your future is corporate:

“I have given it some thought, as everyone does, but my whole career has been larger organizations. That’s where I’ve excelled and where I want to be.”

- For the more entrepreneurial culture, you can say:

“A company like this seems to be open to new ideas, offering me the excitement of seeing my ideas and plans take shape... combined with the resources and stability of a well-established organization. Sounds like the perfect environment for me.”

In both cases, no matter what the corporate culture, be sure to indicate that any desires about your own business are part of your past, not your present or future.

The last thing you want to project is an image of either the dreamer who failed and is now settling for the corporate cocoon... or the restless maverick who will fly out the door with key accounts, contacts and trade secrets under his arm just as soon as his bankroll has gotten rebuilt.

Always remember: Match what you want with what the position offers. The more information you’ve uncovered about the position, the more believable you can make your case.

Q. How do you define success... and how do you measure up to your own definition?

A: Give a well-accepted definition of success that leads right into your own list of achievements.

“The best definition I've come across is that success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal. As to how I would measure up to that definition, I would consider myself both successful and fortunate...” (Then summarize your career goals and how your achievements have indeed represented a progressive path toward realization of your goals.)

Q. Describe your ideal company, location and job.

A: Respond with statements that reflect what this company is offering, using specific reasons to show why this opportunity is attractive to you.

“I have been looking for a company that (insert specifics like employer) in (location) where I could make a real contribution as (describe duties that match up well with position).” Be positive and enthusiastic.

Q. What are your Outside interests?

A: Show your stuff.

If you're over 50, describe activities that demonstrate physical stamina (home repair, workout at club). If you're young, mention an activity that shows responsibility or trust, such as serving on the board of a popular local charity. Keep in mind that your next employer is hiring you for what you can do for the company, not your family, yourself or outside organizations.

Service issues

Q. Why have you had so many jobs?

A: First, present your background correctly on the resume. Short-term positions may be explainable for reasons such as reductions, change in company plans, etc., that have little to do with you and your performance.

“My choices and decisions about jobs has been good, but my choices of companies has not always worked out.” (Describe each position as part of an overall pattern of growth in skills and career plan, taking responsibility for changes in career or companies and comment on any situations (RIFs) that were beyond your control.)

“At this point, I bring (x, y z) to you in skills and experience and I am very interested in a long-term opportunity.”

Q. You've been with your company a long time. Won't it be hard switching to a new company?

A: Point to the many ways you have grown and adapted to changing conditions at your present company. Highlight the different responsibilities you've held, the wide array of new situations you've faced and conquered.

“If you look at how much my company has changed over the years, we were often in the lead in our industry. I had to learn and adapt quickly to whatever was required and, most of the time, I enjoyed the stimulation of new challenges.” (Discuss one or two similarities between the new position

and your prior one, make it clear you are comfortable with the position since their needs and your skills make are a good match.)

Q. How many hours a week do you normally work?

A: If you are a workaholic and you know enough about the role that long hours will be essential, then talk about working nights and weekends and doing whatever it takes to meet goals.

If you are much more interested in a balance between working hard and having a life outside work, then talk about your successes in getting things done while also meeting responsibilities outside work.

Q. Have you been absent from work more than a few days in any previous position?

A: If you have had no problem, emphasize your excellent and consistent attendance record throughout your career.

- **No attendance issues:** "I consistently put in the hours necessary and have not had any problems."
- **Attendance issues:** "Over the past few years, I have had (explain any extended absence, such as health, family, etc.) But those issues are resolved and will not affect my attendance in the future."

Q. How do you feel about working nights and weekends?

A: Focus on getting both the job and the schedule you want. Options:

"What's the norm for your best people here?"

If the hours still sound unrealistic for you, ask, "Do you have any top people who perform exceptionally for you, but who also have families and like to get home in time to see them at night?" Chances are the company does, and this associates you with this other, "top-performers-who-leave-no-later-than-six" group.

If a lot of extra hours make you uncomfortable, say so, but phrase your response positively.

"I really enjoy my work and I am very good at what I do. My results that we discussed, especially in... (comment on two or three qualifications of greatest interest to the employer to reinforce your credentials.) I have built my whole career on working not just hard, but smart. I think you'll find me one of the most productive people here.

"I do have a family who like to see me after work and on weekends. They add balance and richness to my life, which in turn helps me be happy and productive at work. If I could handle some of that extra work at home in the evenings or on weekends, that would be ideal. You'd be getting a person of exceptional productivity who meets your needs with very strong credentials. And I'd be able to handle some of the heavy workload at home where I can be under the same roof as my family. Everybody would win."

Q. Why have you been out of work so long?

A: Emphasize factors that have prolonged your search by your own choice.

"After my job was terminated, I made a conscious decision not to jump on the first opportunities to come along. In my life, I've found that you can always turn a negative into a positive IF you try hard enough. This is what I determined to do. I decided to take whatever time I needed to think through what I do best, what I most want to do, where I'd like to do it... and then identify those companies that could offer such an opportunity.

"Also, in all honesty, you have to factor in the recession (consolidation, stabilization, etc.) in the (banking, financial services, manufacturing, advertising, etc.) industry.

"So between my being selective and the companies in our industry downsizing, the process has taken time. But in the end, I'm convinced that when I do find the right match, all that careful evaluation from both sides of the desk will have been well worthwhile for both the company that hires me and myself."

Q. Why are you leaving (or did you leave) this position?

A: If you are employed and not fully committed to a change, say so. Since you have a job, you are in a stronger position than someone who does not. Be honest about what you are looking for in your next assignment. Hopefully you have already uncovered the key elements of the position and have matched your background to the specifications...

- **If you are not currently employed:** describe the circumstances (RIF, merger, etc.)
- **If you have been terminated:** Never lie about having been fired. It's unethical and too easily checked.

Here's an option to deal with your firing:

Describe it honestly without anger or bitterness. As difficult as it may be, take the company's point-of-view, indicating that you could understand why it happened and you might have made the same decision. The message is

that you have dealt with this issue and are healed from the pain inflicted by the firing. This will enhance your image compared to other people who have been fired and may be defensive or display their anger/bitterness about the unfairness of it all.

For all prior positions:

Make sure you've prepared a brief reason for leaving. Best reasons: more money, opportunity, responsibility or growth.

Q. Where do you see yourself five years from now?

A: Reassure your interviewer that you're looking to make a long-term commitment... that this position entails exactly what you want to do and what you do extremely well. As for the future, your record of doing a good job will create future opportunities.

"I am definitely interested in making a long-term commitment to my next position. Based on what you've told me about this position, it's exactly what I'm looking for and what I am very well qualified to do. In terms of my future, I'm confident that if I do my best work, opportunities will open up for me. It's always been that way in my career, and I'm confident I'll have similar opportunities here."

Q. May I contact your present employer for a reference?

A: Express your concern that you'd like to keep your job search private, but that in time, it will be perfectly okay.

"I hope you can understand my position. My employer is not aware of my job search and I'd prefer to keep it that way. I'd like to keep our discussions confidential right now. Of course, when we both agree the time is right, then I will give you contacts for references."

Work Conditions

Q. Are you willing to relocate or travel?

A: Ask questions to determine what is required for relocation or travel before attempting to answer. If you will not travel or relocate, it's best to end the conversation. If you will (relocate, travel), say so enthusiastically. Or, if you have reservations, there are two options:

1. If you state that there is no problem with (travel , relocation), then the process continues, perhaps all the way to an offer. At that point, you can make a decision about whether it's worth it to you to relocate or travel. Also, by the time the offer comes through, you may have other offers and can make a more informed decision. There's also a chance that you may

still be looking a few months from now and regret the decision to turn the opportunity down.

2. Or you can express your concerns and make it clear that you are open to (relocating or traveling) for the right opportunity. If the company really wants you, saying this may move the company to "recruiting" mode and work at getting you to accept an offer. Or they may hire you in a position that does not require relocation or travel. The option you choose depends on how eager you are for the job. If you want to take no chances, choose the first approach. If you want to play a little harder-to-get in hopes of generating a more enticing offer, choose the second.

Q. How do you feel about reporting to a younger person (woman, minority, etc.)?

A. If this question is asked, be sincere and believable in your answer.

Compensation

Q. The "Salary Question" - How much money do you want?

A: For maximum salary negotiating power, remember these five guidelines:

1. Never bring up salary. Let the interviewer do it first. Good salespeople sell their products thoroughly before talking price. So should you. Make the interviewer want you first, and your bargaining position will be much stronger.
2. If your interviewer raises the salary question too early, before you've had a chance to create desire for your qualifications, postpone the question, saying something like, "Money is important to me, but it is not my main concern. Opportunity and growth are far more important. What I'd rather do, if you don't mind, is explore if I'm right for the position, and then talk about the money. Would that be okay?"
3. The #1 rule of any negotiation is, the side with more information usually wins. After you've done a thorough job of selling the interviewer and it's time to talk salary, the secret is to get the employer talking about what he's willing to pay before you reveal what you're willing to accept. So, when asked about the salary, respond by asking, "I'm sure the company has already established a salary range for this position. Could you tell me what that is?" Or, "I want an income commensurate with my ability and qualifications. I trust you'll be fair with me. What does the position pay?" Or, more simply, "What does the position pay?"
4. Know beforehand what you'd accept. To know what's reasonable, research the job market and this position for any relevant salary information. Remember that most executives look for a 20% - 25% pay boost when they switch jobs. If you're grossly underpaid, you may want more.

5. Never lie about what you currently make, but feel free to include the estimated cost of all your fringes, which could well tack on 25% - 50% more to your present "cash-only" salary.

Q. Why aren't you earning more money at this stage of your career?

A: Money matters, but other factors are even more important.

"Making money is very important to me, and one reason I'm here is because I'm looking to make more. Throughout my career, what's been even more important to me is doing work I really like to do at the kind of company I like and respect." (Then be prepared to be specific about what your ideal position and company would be like, matching them as closely as possible to the opportunity at hand.)

Odds 'n ends

Q. Tell me something negative you've heard about our company...

A: Nothing. If there have been any negative news published, then asking a question about the issues is appropriate.

Q. The "Silent Treatment."

A: A very small percentage of interviewers use a technique of silence after a candidate finishes a statement, usually to see how a job seeker responds under stress. For example:

You answer an interviewer's question and then, instead of asking another, he just stares at you in a deafening silence.

As you wait, growing a bit uneasy, the silence continues. Instead of allowing it to intimidate you, ask:

"Is there anything I can add or expand on regarding your question?" Don't let the silent treatment intimidate you into talking a blue streak, because you could easily talk yourself out of the position.

Q. Would you lie for the company?

A: Avoid choosing between two values of telling the truth versus deception. Example: "I would never do anything to hurt the company."

If aggressively pressed to choose between two competing values, always choose personal integrity. It is the most prized of all values.

Q. On confidential matters....(an interviewer presses you to reveal confidential information about a present or former employer)

A: Never reveal any information that is proprietary and confidential. "I hope you can understand my position. I certainly want to be as open as I can about.. But I also wish to respect the rights of those who have trusted me with their most sensitive information, just as you would hope to be able to trust any of your key people when talking with a competitor..."

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