

What Do Common Interview Questions Really Mean?

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Posted Nov 9th 2009 9:22AM

How to determine what a hiring manager wants to know

You've probably been on quite a few job interviews in your career, and you know that there are certain questions that every hiring manager seems to ask. Because you've heard them so often, you feel you can practically answer them in your sleep.

But are you providing the best responses possible?

Often, a seemingly simple question can have hidden layers of meaning. What is the interviewer *really* hoping to learn when he or she asks why you want to work for the firm?

Following are a few interview questions you're likely to hear the next time you meet with a prospective employer and insight into the qualities employers may be assessing with each one. Armed with this information, you can get to the heart of what a potential employer truly wants to know.

Question: "Why do you want to work here?"

Many people talk in vague terms about how they feel they could excel in the role, why the job sounds appealing or what they admire most about the company. But hiring managers want you to cover more than the basics in your response.

What it really means: "How much do you know about this company, and why are you hoping to work here instead of for one of our competitors?" When answering this question, mention specifics. You might note, for example, that you're excited by the firm's cutting-edge research, a recent merger or the company's corporate social responsibility programs. A detailed response will tell the interviewer that you are interested in more than just a paycheck. At the same time, showing that you've done your research lets the hiring manager know that you came prepared and are serious about the opportunity.

Question: "What are your strengths?"

Answers such as "I work well with others" or "I have a can-do attitude" may in fact be strengths, but many job candidates make the same type of statements, and a generic response will do little to distinguish you from other applicants.

What it really means: "How have you used your strengths to add value to your employer?" The interviewer wants to know how the particular talents you bring to the table will benefit the firm if you're hired, so put your best qualities in context. Talk about how your strengths can help meet a prospective employer's specific needs. In this economy, many firms are trying to cut costs, for instance. Your experience negotiating vendor contracts, for instance, could be a boon to your chances.

Question: "What are your weaknesses?"

People usually try to list weaknesses that can actually be seen as strengths, such as "I'm too much of a perfectionist" or "I never say no when people ask for help." These types of answers can seem canned and could make the interviewer wonder what you're hiding.

What it really means: "How honest and self-aware are you?" and "How have you successfully dealt with a challenge in your career or adversity on the job?" Everyone has weaknesses, but not everyone will admit to it. Employers look for workers who can recognize their own weaknesses and also take steps to overcome them. Show the hiring manager you can do both. If one of your weaknesses is a fear of speaking in public, for example, you could point out how you had to speak in front of your executive team to present a [project proposal](#). Although nerve-racking, the situation forced you to confront your weakness and take steps, such as first presenting at smaller meetings with your colleagues, to improve in this area prior to the big meeting. Since then, you've also joined Toastmasters International and continue to improve.

Question: "Would you rather work alone or in a team?"

This borders on being a trick question, because it's rare that someone would be required to just do one or the other in today's workplace.

What it really means: "Can you work with minimal direction?" and "Can you describe a time when you worked with a colleague or group to solve a workplace challenge?" Managers seek individuals who can take the ball and run with it. They may not always have the time to walk you through a project step-by-step, so you need to be able to work autonomously and devise solutions on your own.

At the same time, you need to be able to work with individuals from different levels, departments, offices or even companies, so the hiring manager is trying to gauge how well you can collaborate with others. You might cite an instance when you led a project team, for instance, to improve your chances of securing the job offer.

By knowing what types of responses interviewers truly seek with seemingly simple questions, you give yourself a much better chance of impressing the hiring manager. After all, he or she has probably gotten used to hearing the same responses over and over again. Distinguish yourself with a response that gets to the heart of the matter.