

Charlie's Interview Tips

Top interview questions

Avoid surprises — interviews need preparation. Some questions come up time and time again — usually about you, your experience and the job itself. We've gathered together the most common questions so you can get your preparation off to a flying start.

Your skills

Typical questions an interviewer might ask:

- **What are your strengths and weaknesses?**
- **What can you do for us that other candidates can't?**
- **What would your colleagues and friends consider as your best qualities?**
- **Why should we hire you?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: can you do the job?

Know your strengths, and mention ones that are relevant to the job you're being interviewed for. It's important to quote examples of when you used the skills; it's not enough to just say you have the skills. Typical strengths employers look for are:

- Communication - the ability to get on with a wide range of people
- Team working - the ability to be an effective team leader or team member
- IT skills - most jobs these days need some IT skills
- Good attitude - hard worker, honest, polite, co-operative
- Problem solving - using your initiative to identify solutions
- Enthusiasm - employers like someone positive
- Quick learner - so you can take on new tasks
- Determination - shows you are focused on achieving goals
- Flexibility - doing a variety of tasks to achieve a common goal.

If you're asked about weaknesses, don't list many - only mention one! Choose a minor flaw that isn't essential to the job. Turn it into a positive, such as how you've worked on the weakness. Or you could present it as an opportunity for development.

Good answers:

- Strengths: 'I'm a good organiser, and I plan everything in detail. I showed this when I was given a new project, and I had to get it up and running from scratch.'
- Weaknesses: 'Sometimes I'm too enthusiastic when working on a new project. But I've learned to adjust to everyone else's pace, and not go charging ahead.'

The employer

Typical questions:

- **Why do you want to work here?**
- **What do you know about our company?**
- **What can you do for us that someone else can't?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Do you know what we do? Why have you chosen to apply to this company?

The interviewer wants to know you've done your homework and that you know about the organisation and its aims. They want to know you've thought it through and you've chosen to apply to them for a good reason. Show your knowledge of the company by having some facts and figures at the ready, such as:

- the size of the organisation
- what the product or service is
- last year's turnover figures
- latest developments in the field
- The history, goals, image and philosophy of the employer.

When talking about why you want to work for the employer, focus on what you can do for them, not on what they can do for you.

Good answer:

- 'Smith's is a respected firm with a reputation for high quality work, and I'd like to be part of that success. The quality of my work is important to me, so I feel I'd be at the right place. I've also heard you invest in your staff by training and developing them.'

About the job

Typical questions:

- **What will the main tasks and responsibilities be in this job?**
- **What do you think the main challenges will be?**
- **What would you do in the first day/week/month/year?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Do you know what the job's all about?

The interviewer wants to know if you fully understand what the job will involve. They want to know why you think you'd be good at it, and how you'd approach it if they offer you the job. To answer this question well, make sure you read the job description thoroughly and research how the organisation operates.

Good answer:

- 'The main task is to supervise a team of sales staff to ensure they exceed sales targets. It's my responsibility to motivate them and pass on my sales experience to enable them to achieve more.'

Your ambitions

Typical questions:

- **What are your goals?**
- **Where do you see yourself in five years' time?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: How ambitious are you?

This is your chance to show how enthusiastic you are to get on. (You should avoid sounding too aggressive and over-ambitious: 'I want to become managing director in three years'.) Avoid sounding unenthusiastic and passive: 'I'm not sure - I'll see how it goes'.

To avoid this, you could talk in terms of short-term and long-term goals. Remember you are at the interview for that particular job - so your short-term goal should be to get that job for the time being. Then you can start talking about moving on higher.

Good answer:

- 'My immediate aim is to get a customer service position, then to work through NVQs level 2 and 3 to become more qualified.'

Your work history

Typical questions:

- **Why did you leave your last job?**
- **Tell me about a typical day in your current/previous job**
- **What experience have you got from previous jobs?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: What have you done in your previous jobs?

When talking about previous jobs, focus on the positives. Even if you think your previous or current job wasn't very demanding, if you jot down the tasks and responsibilities it will sound more impressive than you think. You will have learned something, so mention it. Focus on the skills and experience that are relevant to the job you're being interviewed for.

Don't bring up negative things like having a dispute with a colleague or your boss. And don't criticise previous employers.

Good answer:

- 'In my current job I have developed my knowledge of computer software packages. But now I'm ready for a new challenge, and want to use these skills in a more customer-focused role.'

Your motivation

Typical questions:

- **What motivates you?**
- **Which tasks do you get the most satisfaction from?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: What makes you tick?

By finding out what motivates you, the interviewer can find out which environment you'll perform well in. Try to think of examples of when a work task excited you.

Good answer:

- 'I like problem solving - that point you reach in a project where you come up against something unexpected, and you have to think creatively to come up with a solution.'

About the product or service

Typical questions:

- **What do you know about our products/services?**
- **What do you think of our products/services?**
- **Can you think of any improvements to our products/services?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Are you keen enough to have looked at our products and services?

The employer wants to know that you're familiar with their products or services. They may also want you to have the initiative to look for ways of improving things. Be tactful: only mention small improvements. Make these the kind of suggestions people in the street might come up with and not because you are an "expert" and know best.

Good answer:

- 'Your products are recognised as the industry standard, leading the way in style and performance. However, maybe by altering your advertising style you could appeal to older consumers as well as young ones. I think older people would value your product just as much, and this could lead to increased sales.'

Team working

Typical questions:

- **What makes a good team?**
- **What makes a good team member?**
- **What makes a good team leader?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Can you operate effectively in a team?

Employers value team-working very highly. They want to know you can work effectively in a team, whatever your role within it is.

Good answer:

- 'A good team needs to have clear objectives and goals, and procedures to work towards these. Each person needs to be clear what their role is, and what is expected of them. There needs to be openness and trust, and clear communication.'

Your personality and interests

Typical questions:

- **What was the last film you saw or the last book you read?**
- **How would you describe yourself?**
- **How would your friends describe you?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Are you a well-rounded individual?

By asking personality questions, the employer wants to know how well you know yourself - how self-aware you are. Having self-awareness means you can look at yourself critically, and know what you're good at and where you could improve.

When it comes to your interests, the employer wants to know you're an active citizen, who tries to get the most out of life. When choosing examples of interests to mention, try to choose a wide range to show you're well balanced. However, when quoting films or books, choose classic or mainstream ones rather than obscure or extreme ones.

Some employers will expect you to know about current affairs and popular culture - jobs in the media, for example.

Good answer:

- 'In my personal life I'm always organising everybody. People look to me for ideas and plans - I guess in some ways that shows I'm a natural leader.'

Unusual questions

Typical questions:

- **If you were a biscuit, what type of biscuit would you be?**
- **If you were an animal, what type of animal would you be?**

What the interviewer really wants to know: Can you think on the spot and come up with a sensible answer?

You probably won't have prepared for this, so the interviewer is seeing if you can think on your feet. Take your time over this question, and think of something that generally reflects you, but also has positives you could apply to the world of work.

There is no 'good answer' but just be prepared for this sort of question.