

Interview answers

10 brilliant answers to tough interview questions

Infinite Ideas

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Interview answers

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Introduction

So you've found the right job opportunity, you've sent in your immaculately prepared CV: all that's left to land the working life of your dreams is to win at the interview. The art of successful interviews includes the art of interesting and free-flowing conversation. It's also about technique – techniques for interviewing and techniques for being interviewed. Here's how to bone up on great answers to the interviewers' questions, and to make sure you understand exactly what they're looking for.

Despite scientific advances in hiring techniques such as assessment centres and psychometric testing (if you don't know now, you'll know what they are when you've read the relevant chapters), the interview remains the main way that managers decide which people they invite to work for them. It's an interesting struggle, the one between interviewee and interviewer, in that both sides can win. The hiring company can get the right person and the candidate can get a job that they are right for and that is right for them.

But it's competitive, of course. In most interview situations there are other people bidding for the same job. Beating them off means thinking about and rehearsing good answers to the most popular questions that'll be thrown at you. This book covers all the standard questions you're likely to be asked and suggests prize-winning answers. And then it does a bit more.

There's an ancient Chinese saying, 'Give a person a fish and they eat for a day; give a person a fishing rod and they eat for the rest of their lives.' The fish are the answers to the

questions you'll find in the chapters; the fishing rod is the explanation of where the interviewer is coming from and what they're looking for. After all, most of the people who are going to interview you have had some training in interview techniques. Some of them, the human resources (HR) people, have spent a lot of their working lives studying how to prepare for and use the interview to get the right person for the job.

We'll talk about being scrupulously honest; but we'll also show you how to give that honesty the best possible spin. We'll look at exploiting your strengths and putting your weaknesses into a context where not only do they not matter but by the end of the interview may very well have metamorphosed into strengths. After all, though everyone wants a win/win result, the point of going to an interview is to be offered the job. So, yes, you need to be open so that they see the real you; but, yes, you need a bit of guile as well to put you out in front as the candidate with what it really takes.

If you do all this preparation you might be wondering if it's all right to take a folder in with you containing your notes. That's fine. But be careful: they don't like it if it looks as though you're reading a prepared script; so keep the notes brief, just reminders of the stories and examples you're going to use to plead your case.

These ideas are taken from Knockout interview answers: 52 brilliant ideas to make job hunting a piece of cake. There are more than 50 inspiring interview tips in this book which you can buy on Kindle from the UK store or the US store.

1

Why do you want to work for this company?

Time to put on display the huge amount of research you did to get ready for this interview.

All interviewees know a lot about themselves and their aspirations. Only a few have the competitive edge of knowing a lot about the organisation and its aspirations. There are now so many sources of information about businesses that you should be able to do a thorough analysis in a fairly short period of time.

What do you need to know?

Here are the headings:

- industry sector
- aims and strategy
- company/divisional structure
- financial performance last year
- main customers and competitors
- products and people

Find the website of someone who analyses this industry sector. That will give you a good overview and identify the organisation's place in the scheme of things. Then phone the company and ask for a hard copy of their annual report – they're used to being asked for them. The hard copy is better than the web version because you you can see how glossy the report is, or how thrifty, or how environmentally friendly – all good clues. You'll discover the aims and strategy in the chairman's statement and the chief executive's report. The structure will be clear from the divisional reports that follow

in the report. Note the overall structure and then read carefully about the part you're trying to join. It's only high level; but that's exactly what you need to answer this question.

There's a summary of the organisation's financial performance in the chairman's and finance director's statements. It would be good to be able to say, 'Your profitability is still growing well, compared both with last year and with the rest of the industry.' If you're going for a finance job, of course, you'll need to do all the financial ratios.

Most annual reports talk about the main customers they're proud of. It's good to have a success story from among these to talk about: 'You certainly did no harm to your reputation when the UN spoke about the Caracas project.'

It's easy enough to find out about the company's products and services. You need to know the whole breadth of what they do. It's good if you can find out something about their reputation for treating their people. This helps you to know whether you want to work for them and gives you a nice compliment to pay them during the interview.

We recommend you look at two of their competitors, either by obtaining their annual reports or by visiting their websites. If you can experience the company from a customer's point of view, for example in retail, then you should certainly do so.

Relate your knowledge of the company to the job

Start with the sector: ‘You’re in the gas sector, which is still a pretty exciting place to be. The market’s growing and companies in the industry is still jockeying for position in the new competitive environment.’ Now move on to the company. It’s excellent to start with a quote: ‘Your Chairman said, “The Group’s excellent performance has been combined with major progress in the establishment of a culture that seeks continual operational improvements, high service standards and, above all, safety.” These are all values I share and, since I’m applying for the job of safety supervisor in Sector 7G, I particularly like the emphasis on safety. The financial strength is attractive too; I want to work somewhere that can afford to keep up with the huge amounts of capital investment you need to put in just to stand still – plus some for innovation. According to the Gas Producers Council, a lot of investment still needs to go into offshore safety, for example.’

Keep the answer to the company itself; don’t go into the attraction of the job unless they ask you to do that. You’re trying to keep yourself out of this reply and concentrate on something you know they’re vitally interested in – their own company.

Finally, ask a question to get them talking about the same thing: ‘I wasn’t sure from what I could read about you whether your ventures abroad are likely to expand or not. Can you tell me that?’

Here’s an idea for you…

To prepare more deeply for this question you can use SWOT analysis of their situation. Take the mission statement or aims

and objectives you got from the report and ask the question, 'In terms of achieving that objective what are the company's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats?' This will give you good ammunition for demonstrating knowledge and some good questions to ask about the company and its plans.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'For also knowledge itself is power.' ~ FRANCIS BACON

How did it go?

Q That's all very well for a big public company. I'm going to see a little training company who haven't even published their last year's accounts. How do I do all this for them?

A You'll have to come clean and ask them for anything they can give you: brochures, company profiles, newspaper articles and so on. You can still research their industry. How do little players fare? Who are the big boys they'll be competing against? Would it be possible to talk to one of their customers? The latter are a great source of information and often happy to talk about their experience. It'll knock the interviewer's socks off if you give them feedback they were unaware of from a customer. If you can't get what you need by research, make a note and ask about it at the interview.

Q I used this stuff and it went down really well. The only time I stumbled was when I said something that was out of date. We talked at cross-purposes for a while until they understood what had gone wrong. Anything I could have done to avoid that?

A They're the experts and they're bound to know much more than is published. You ought to check their website or the site of a financial newspaper to get the most recent information about them.

2

So, why do you want this job?

Turn a question like this into a selling opportunity by using a double answer – balance what you'll get out of the job with what they'll get out of hiring you.

It should be reasonably easy to answer this one as long as you're going for the right job. If it's very difficult, then ask yourself if this is the right employer for you before you go in.

An employer wants people to join them with enthusiasm for the challenges they're about to face. Similarly you want to get into an environment where your working life gives you joy rather than grief. Research and good self-insight will give you the right answer to achieve both aims.

What's in it for me?

It's probably best to start the dual answer with the straightforward answer to the question. It's another question that depends on your research. You've got to be able to reply in terms of the company's attributes as you find them. It doesn't really matter what the situation is; you can still paint it as ideal for you. 'Most people want to work for the market leader; I could use your name with pride' could equally be 'I like the way you've made such progress in your industry over the last few years. A growing company like yours suits my energetic way of working. I really enjoy success.'

Now try to get in something about their reputation. 'I understand that you can offer me a stable, challenging and inspiring work environment – you certainly have that

reputation. I think it's the sort of environment that brings out the best in me.'

Now compliment the company on what it actually does. 'Many people regard your products and services as the best around. It's a pride thing again; I like to work for someone who is passionate about service and quality. I think we share those values and that I would enjoy fitting into your team.'

And what's in it for them?

Your unique selling proposition is you and your skills and experience. Try to work out a way of illustrating that everything you've done points at you being the right person for them. Perhaps start from specific experience. For a team leader in credit control: 'My experience in the credit control department of a builders merchants was, frankly, a hard school. The building industry is always suffering from companies going under. I know about collection periods, credit ratings calculated from company reports and, of course, I've heard every excuse under the sun for not being quite ready to issue the cheque. I think that as team leader I would be able to help others to learn from that experience.'

Now relate the specific skills to the goals of the organisation. 'I understand the benefits to you of getting payment in on time or even before time because I've controlled cash flow for an organisation and seen the impact it can have on profitability.'

You can also be more open about your skills where you're sure they're appropriate. For a production manager: 'I've always scored well in problem solving and from what you've

said you need to find some new ways of cutting down the waste at the end of the production line.'

Something more personal can emphasise your uniqueness. For a training deliverer: 'The fact that I've done a bit of amateur dramatics helps me to understand the "performance" side of running a training course.'

Now bring the three things together: 'So you see why I was excited when I saw your job ad; you seem to need a person with pretty much the experience, skills and interests that I've developed.'

Here's an idea for you…

This question really is one to prepare for carefully. The time will never be wasted, since this question will always crop up in one way or other. The best way to prepare is to find someone to role-play the interviewer and then try out with them the actual words you're going to use. If you can get someone in the same industry that would be best, but anyone with good experience of organisations or business should be able to help.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

‘And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.’ ~ JOHN F. KENNEDY

How did it go?

Q I’ve thought long and hard about this. There’s rather a good job in a company that’s not doing very well. I think part of the problem is that their values don’t include a focus on teamwork. They have a reputation for ‘hire and fire’ and come over as a bit ‘every man for themselves.’ When they ask this question should I point out that while I’m not sure I share their current values I think I can introduce some new ones that will help to improve their performance?

A Possibly. Our first reaction to this was ‘NO, wait until you’ve got the job and then sell the changes that you think they need to make.’ But on second thoughts you could be right. Depends if you think that someone in the room is thinking the same way as you, in which case go for it. You could get the pleasant surprise of one of them telling you that they know they need to change in this area – in which case your preparation is ideal. (Sorry to be sceptical, but you should also bear in mind the words underneath the title of this Idea.)

Q I’d like to end this answer with a bold statement. Can I say that I would like to be in my boss’s position within two years – in order to demonstrate my ambition?

A Yes, but choose the words carefully. You’re trying to make them feel confident about you, not insecure. Try ‘Finally, I

have aspirations to get to your level in the not too distant future.'

3

How easy are you to work with?

This is the real question hidden under a number of aliases. In this part of the interview they're probing for how you work with your boss and whether you are likely to be an employee who causes problems rather than one who resolves them.

You've got to show loyalty, stability and that you will be an easy person to work with and manage.

Such a question may come towards the end of an interview when they've been watching your performance for half an hour or more. Their concern is that it is a 'performance' and they want to make sure that they understand the real you.

Who is the real you?

They can ask this question in various guises. 'How do you get on with your current boss?' What they're looking for here is any sign that you will rock the boat in their department. One of the most disruptive things you can get in an organisation is a person who sows seeds of doubt about the competence or character of the manager or team leader. So it's a straightforward 'Personally we get on well: he's easy to work for and I think we have achieved quite a lot together.' Try to say no more, although it's likely that they'll ask supplementary questions to get you to substantiate what you've just said. They could go close to the bone with 'I've heard that he doesn't consult much when he's taking a decision.' Just stay with a positive attitude: 'I haven't found that.' There's little possibility that they're actually interested

in the character or competence of your boss; they're just probing to see if they can get you to display disloyalty.

'How are you on accepting instructions?' An easy-to-manage person is one who likes to be given objectives and tasks that are well explained at the outset. Then they just get on with it and deliver. But they're also aware that circumstances do arise where a team leader may at short notice take them off their current task and ask them to do something else. With this question the interviewers are checking that you're a team player and that you recognise that, from time to time, your boss will give you brief directions and expect compliance. You can probably find a dual answer that covers both points. 'I like to work in an environment where the logic behind what I'm being asked to do is clear. But I understand that I won't know about all the pressures and deadlines that exist. This may very well mean that I have to get on with something without knowing all the details leading up to the directions I've been given. This is fine by me because it's just a part of working in a fast-moving competitive environment.'

Working under stress

'What keeps you awake at night?' This is not a therapist's question aimed at finding out your innermost fears; it's an attempt to get to know your ability to handle stress. So answer it from a professional point of view: take it as entirely business related. 'I'm concerned by the normal things a sales manager worries about: meeting targets, eking out the budget, avoiding heavy discounting and so on. But I've handled these issues for a while and I certainly don't let them get me down.'

Here's an idea for you…

Think about a colleague or friend whom you know to have been critical of and disloyal to their boss. What did they say? It might have been very open or it might have been more surreptitious. Now think about the impact that had on their team. Were they sucked into the same opinion and did they also start to express it? Did it contribute to or hinder the team's performance? This brings home the characteristics and behaviour of a person who finds it difficult to play in a team, and their potential impact.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'Some people think that the business term FIFO stands for First in First out; but in this organisation it stands for Fit in or Fuck off.' ~ Speaker protected under the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution

How did it go?

Q I thought long and hard about this because, according to your line of logic, I displayed some very disloyal behaviour when I first joined an organisation. When I arrived, my boss was also quite new and a number of the older members of his team were very critical of him, comparing him very unfavourably with his predecessor. It was easy to join in and I did. The trouble is that they were quite right and he didn't last long. If I'd gone for an interview at the time I was working for him, should I have shown complete loyalty as you suggest

or indicated that I knew what his shortcomings were? After all, not everybody's perfect and the interviewer knows it.

A Think about it from the interviewers' point of view. Your organisation, in its wisdom, put that bloke in charge. If they think their wisdom got it wrong and they change things, that's up to them. Your job was to help your boss, whatever he was like, to succeed. It's certainly not anyone's job to undermine him and make his failure more certain.

Q This stress thing. Don't you think you've gone a bit far? Surely an interviewer wants to believe that you feel something for the company as well as work for them. Surely not being able to sleep at night from time to time is a demonstration of that.

A Look, we're not saying it never happens; but it really shouldn't. If you have a problem at work the company has the same problem. They want you to come in next morning refreshed and ready to hug the monster. You can't do that if you've spent the whole night rattling your worry beads.

4

Do you enjoy hard work?

It's a dumb question; so hit it out of the park. What do they expect you to say? 'Good Lord, no, I've always tried to keep my head down and avoid the real action.'

If they mean by 'hard work' energy and drive, then, yes, you've got it in buckets. This is a closed question, but the answer 'yes' won't do. You'll be surprised how easy it is to take a closed question like this and mould it into some points that you want to make, in almost any area you care to choose. So it's an opportunity to deliver the set pieces that you have so carefully prepared. You could go towards the 'work/life balance' or 'Don't work harder; work smarter' or anything that shows you will be an energetic contributor to their enterprise. We'll look at the question as it is and then at other questions getting at the same thing.

You can always make things better

'I've always been enthusiastic about my work. I've generally been in jobs that I enjoy, so that makes putting the effort in quite easy. This is particularly true when I'm working for an organisation with whose objectives I can easily identify.' You can try balancing an answer like that with another benefit they're after – people who are constantly looking for ways that they and their team can do things better.

'I do regard it as part of everyone's job to suggest improvements. When I've asked people in my team if they can see better ways that they could use to get the job done, it's amazing; in almost every case the answer is "yes". This is

also true if you ask them about their interface with other parts of the organisation. They can always suggest even quite small changes that another department could make that would make their job easier and their performance more effective. So if I or other people in the team are having to work longer and longer hours, it's always worth looking for suggestions as to how we can improve the way the work gets done.'

This could lead to 'How would you deal with a person in your team who complained continuously about how hard they had to work?' To which you might reply, 'First of all I'd take it very seriously. I'd ask them to discuss it with me and perhaps keep a record of their activities over a period of time. We'd look together for ways to reduce their workload or change our systems and procedures in some way. If I became sure that we were making unreasonable demands on the person, I'd raise the matter with my boss and try to find a solution. You have to be careful, though. I've found that some people do work hard, but don't want to change anything – not even the fact that they moan all the time about how hard they have to work.'

Other probes in this area

'How are you at working under pressure?' To which you might say, 'Oh, I've had to handle that in all my jobs and I'm comfortable in that environment. Having said that, I try to plan ahead and avoid deadlines and crises creeping up on the team or me. That way we keep the pressure at a sensible level.'

'Are you most comfortable with fairly regular hours?' Answer this one as usual with a balance: 'I'm well aware that

in a competitive industry such as this you can't expect to work completely regular hours. In fact I'm not sure I'd like to have to do that. But there are some regular parts of my family life that I like to protect. For example, last year my daughter went to ballet every Wednesday evening. It suited us for me to take her and her friend to the class. I therefore agreed with my boss that I would always get away on time on a Wednesday and it worked out well.'

Here's an idea for you…

Find a good example of where you've looked at your or a team member's work and found a really effective procedural change that you got the company to accept. What was the benefit to the organisation of making that change? What was the benefit to the individual? Such an example is sure to come in useful for this type of question or another.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.' ~ C. NORTHCOTE PARKINSON, British historian

How did it go?

Q I tried your advice on this one and I think it made me look as though I'm work shy. I explained how we'd found a way

round some work that a colleague was doing – which gave her much more spare time. The guy in the interview said that it sounded as if she and I were just looking for shortcuts. Did I make a mistake in the way I presented this?

A Well done; shortcuts are exactly what we should all be looking for as long as they don't compromise quality. Perhaps the mistake you made is in the wording 'spare time'. Could you have explained what she was able to get on with in that spare time, like finding new customers or working on the administration backlog? But we think it's bad luck to meet someone who thinks the word 'shortcut' is pejorative.

Q I really liked the idea of setting one day a week when I had to get away on time, and went to my boss to negotiate Tuesdays. She said that I was being unreasonable and that she couldn't give me any such guarantee. She told me that we were in business to make a profit and that meant being open when people wanted to buy. Why didn't this request work?

A We wonder if you were clear enough about why Tuesday was so important to you. And did you try to see it from her point of view before making the request? It would have been good if you could have proposed how it would always be feasible to cover for you on those evenings.

5

Give me an example in your career where you felt like giving up but managed to keep going

This question asks, 'Are you hungry enough?' If you are, then you should look forward to this question in whatever guise it comes. You need a good story. Show them the sticker in you with a tale of grit and determination.

In most jobs there comes a time when it does seem too much. Normally there's a combination of factors that contribute to making your job almost too difficult. Don't hold back on this question; they really do want to make sure that when the chips are down they can rely on you to keep going.

If you can keep your head…

The ingredients of the story are pretty straightforward. The circumstances have to be unpredictable; otherwise you should have seen the situation coming and taken avoiding action. It's quite good if someone else involved did give up and even better if there was an easy way that you could've got out of the situation without looking like a quitter.

'As a fairly raw salesperson I was sent to take over all the defence customers in Malaysia as a specialist salesperson. The customers were in aerospace, missile technology and other quite high-profile and definitely high-spending areas of business. Frankly, I had underestimated just how much resentment there would be from the geographically based salespeople who'd looked after the accounts until then. I got through that and established a reasonable relationship with the whole sales force within about three months. I was heavily

dependent, though, on the two main support staff who knew the customers well.

‘Then four things happened at the same time. We brought out a new product range that all my customers wanted to know about. The French escalated their war in Asia, bringing huge new demands for deliveries from my customers and therefore from my company. The most senior support person moved jobs because he found the workload just too much, and I was asked to coordinate the impending two-day visit of the managing director. I had been working six and even seven days a week for long hours and my wife was telling me to call it a day and get a sensible job. When a big customer complained to my manager that he was not seeing enough of me, I definitely thought about chucking it in.

‘I decided against it. I rather tricked my boss into visiting a customer in KL with me. This gave me ten hours of her time on the flight. I finally convinced her to resource the plan I’d worked out that would get me get back on track. I still worked very hard but quite quickly got on top of the job again. I’m really glad I didn’t give up, partly because it’s against my instincts and partly because, when all was said and done, I made a ton of money in bonuses that year.’

I’m all right; it’s the others

Another way of asking this question goes like this: ‘Tell me about the most difficult situation you’ve found yourself in.’ They may be looking to see if you’ll fall into the trap of blaming other people. It tells them a lot if you talk about a situation where you got into a corner because of the

incompetence of others. Always take responsibility for the situations you find yourself in.

Here's an idea for you…

Select some aspect of your job that's causing you some pain. Now analyse the situation and work out what would need to happen to improve the situation and take some grief off your shoulders. The solution will probably involve more resources of people, money or equipment. Work out what the benefits, preferably financial, would be to your organisation if more resources were invested. This exercise will help you to answer the obvious follow-up question: 'How did you build the plan that convinced your boss to put more resource in?' Be careful. Make sure that you show that you couldn't have got the same result by working smarter rather than investing more resources.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'We shall not flag or fail…We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.' ~ WINSTON CHURCHILL

How did it go?

Q This gives me a problem. The main reason I am applying for this somewhat sideways move in the same organisation is that my current job is really getting to me and I desperately want to get into a position that's easier to manage. How do I handle this question in those circumstances?

A Tricky. Despite the advice above, in your situation you probably do need to blame someone else – your family. Don't show any sign of weakness. On the contrary, express very positive thoughts about the current job – 'I'm enjoying the challenge.' Make sure it doesn't look as though you're leaving behind a huge pile of pooh for the next person to walk into – 'I've got the situation into a state where, with a thorough briefing from me, someone should be able to take over quite easily at this time.' And then hit them with 'I want to spend more time with my family.'

Q Having done what you suggest and shown how I hung on in one situation, will it add to my credibility if I briefly describe another situation where I decided that the right choice for me was to admit defeat and get out of it entirely.

A No.

6

Do you feel your lack of financial knowledge will put you at a disadvantage?

You won't tick every box on their wish list; so you need to know the key ones. Think through what you think they will regard as essential attributes and use the interview to check them out.

Good interviewers will cover a broad range of topics. Researching or second-guessing the key ones helps you to hit the hot buttons and skate elegantly over the thinner ice. Most companies, and probably all large companies, are well organised when they go recruiting. Their managers will have done their preparation aided by HR contacts and processes. They've agreed to talk to you, so it's unlikely that your CV has revealed a deal breaker. You'll have some knowledge of how important, say, financial knowledge is to this job from reading the advert carefully and asking for the job description before you go to the interview.

If they can do it, you can do it

First of all, know where the thin ice is. The chances are you already know where your weak areas lie for this job. But if you're uncertain what their priorities might be, use their own system to work it out. Make a table with three columns. In the left-hand column put down the knowledge and experience you think they will be looking for. Some will be straightforward, such as 'project management'; others softer, like 'motivating third parties'. Now anticipate their weighting of the importance of each of the capabilities you've identified, using a scale of 1–10, and write these in the second column.

In the third column use a scale of 1–10 to record candidly your position right now. The best thing to do next is to check your opinion with someone who knows you and your work well. Now you should know what questions may be raised. How should you answer them?

Turning a vice into a virtue

First, admit the weakness and show enthusiasm about fixing it. 'Yes, I know that's a bit of a weakness, but it's one I want to put right and this job is a great opportunity to do that. My view is that I can do that in time to avoid any risk to achieving the goals of the job.' Their response to this will give you come clues as to whether there's a real problem or not. If they say, 'Yes, you're right,' you've not only answered the question but removed the obstacle. In any case make sure your answer exhibits 'good self-insight' here. At least you know your weaknesses.

Another way of handling this is to say that in the past you've found that often a new person in a team who does lack experience in one particular area may actually come up with a new angle that the team, used to operating in their usual way, might have missed.

Incidentally, if your weakness is in an area such as finance – a weakness mainly of knowledge – take heart. It's a lot easier to mug up such knowledge from a book than to earn the trust of you team or to manage difficult people. Point that out in the nicest possible way.

If they're still showing some concern it's a good idea to have already done something about the weak area. In this particular

instance try ‘I knew that finance was a weak area so I took some advice from a financial controller on which book I should read. She suggested one so I bought it and I’m cracking on with it.’

Another useful technique here is the parallel answer – ‘I haven’t done that, but I have done this’:

Them: Tell me about your experience in mergers and acquisitions.

You: I haven’t been directly involved with M&A; but I have handled complex projects where I had to rely on outside people for their particular expertise.

Here’s an idea for you…

Make sure you’re applying for the right jobs. If the same lack of knowledge or experience keeps stopping you getting jobs, you’ll have to do something radical about it or work out an alternative route to getting where you want to be. It’s never a good idea to keep banging your head against a brick wall. The best people to help you understand the real problem are those who’ve interviewed you and not selected you. Ask all of them for feedback in the specific area where they felt your knowledge and experience let you down. Talk to them about whether and how you could put it right.

Try another idea…

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Defining idea…

‘He had read Shakespeare and found him weak in chemistry.’
~ H. G. WELLS

How did it go?

Q OK, did the table and found it quite helpful, thanks. There is, however, one area where I think they’re looking for ‘8’ on the scale and I’m kind to myself if I mark myself ‘4’. Should I try to ignore this finding at the interview?

A Everyone’s different, but we’d suggest you might bring this issue up early in the discussion. If you try to ignore it you might look nervous or not do yourself justice because you’re sitting there hoping the topic will not be raised. Secondly, it’s more impressive for you to have realised that you have this deficiency, and be prepared to so something about it, than to be found out by an awkward question.

Q There’s a technical area in the job I’m applying for that they’ll think is important but I happen to know is actually old hat and easily got round in other ways. What if I can’t persuade them that they’re out of date?

A It would be better not to try if you really think they’re going to stick to their guns. Listen carefully to how they talk about the subject and ask questions about how receptive they would be to doing things another way. Then make a decision either to advocate the new technique or to abandon that tactic and use the weakness mitigation process instead.

7

Is there anything you want to ask me?

This often comes near the end of the interview. If everything's gone well then make sure you don't at this point snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. On the other hand, if you think there's a problem, here's a good opportunity to go back into an area where you think they have doubts about you.

The worst answer here without any doubt is 'no.' It can look as though you're not much interested in the job, and it can indicate poor preparation.

By this time you ought to be having a sensible and interesting discussion with good rapport. So give two answers to this question: an open question that keeps the discussion going and a closed or more specific question that will elicit more insight into what it's like working for these people. After all, there are two decisions to be made here: they make the first decision, whether to offer you the job; then you have to decide whether to work for them.

More about the industry and their position in it

Start by illustrating your preparation. Use something as up to date as possible. 'I'd like to hear a bit more about the industry and your position in it. There was an interesting piece in The Wall Street Journal about this Christmas being the worst for the retail industry for ten years, despite the fact that overall sales increased by 2.5%. Can you explain that and how do you see the next few years for retail generally?' You may think that question a bit too specific if, for example, you think

they might struggle with the first bit. So go even more open. ‘This industry has been very successful for a while now. How do you see it maintaining that progress?’ This should get one or two of them going and you will listen and show that you’re learning.

Another good area to probe around at this time is their competition. It’s good to join an organisation that recognises it’s in competition and that most companies in their industry have strengths and weaknesses. (Be careful here. Don’t let yourself down by looking as though you know nothing about their industry. If you’ve prepared this question, don’t ask it if the ground has already been covered.)

‘Who do you regard as your main competition and who do you see becoming a bigger threat in the future?’ It’s a great idea to ask a question that’s broader then the job itself. For example, if the job’s in Europe, ask something about global performance or strategy. The point is to show your interest in the future as well as the present.

And specifically…

Be careful. Silly as it may seem, this simple question has sunk more strong interviews than many more sinister-sounding salvoes. Don’t focus too much on salary reviews, promotion prospects, type of car you get, parking spaces and so on. If there are important questions you want answers to, by all means ask them. Make sure, however, that you don’t look as though these things are all that’s important to you: ask some softer questions about the environment in which you’ll be working. ‘If you had to sum up in a few words the type of

person who likes working here and the type of person who gets on well, what would they be?'

You can always turn a dual question back on them: 'What would you say are the main benefits of working for your organisation and the main frustrations?' 'Can I ask you if you have any reservations about my suitability for the job which we could discuss at this stage?' 'I am applying for other positions; but I'm particularly keen on this one. Is it possible to tell me when you'll make a decision?'

Final note: don't look as though your one and only reason for wanting to join them is to make money!

Here's an idea for you…

You can strengthen most of the questions you want to ask by using your research. If, for example, you've read the recent press about the company you can ask the competition question much better. 'I understand your main competitor is X. Is that right and who do you feel are the main players making progress in the industry?'

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'Holding hands at midnight

'Neath a starry sky,

Nice work if you can get it,

And you can get it if you try.' ~ IRA GERSHWIN, songwriter

How did it go?

Q This chapter emboldened me. It made me feel that in previous interviews I'd been too meek in questioning them about why I should go and work for them. So when they asked this question I simply said, 'Why should I come and work for you?' One person spluttered a bit and then went over some ground that we'd already covered. The other one said, 'Isn't that a bit of an arrogant question?' I backpedalled madly, saying that I hadn't meant to be arrogant and that maybe I'd phrased the question a bit wrongly. It was OK in the end, but I felt I'd given way when perhaps I shouldn't have. Anyway I got the job. What do you make of all that?

A You probably overstepped the line a touch by asking the question so brusquely. Always remember that they are in the driving seat because they're doing the hiring. Ask the same question with a softer touch: 'What would you say are the main reasons why people like working for your organisation?'

Q Listen, with the best will in the world I'm not going to read the Financial Times every day on the off-chance there will be something useful in it. What can I do instead?

A You can search the website of a financial newspaper or any investment website that tracks the performance of the company you're interested in. That way it'll take only a

couple of minutes to find the latest published news about a company.

8

How important to you is your work/life balance?

The answer to this is important, as much to you as it is to them. Make sure you do know what that balance should be before you go in. Here's a way of working that out – plus some suggestions to make them love your answer.

There's no point in just being a safe pair of hands for the job. That just puts you up with the others. Add some flair and evidence to your answers and you'll stand out.

Everyone is going to say that they're indeed looking for a balance and that their partner/children/interests blah, blah, blah are important as well as their career. Here's a quick process that'll help you to know what you really want and at the same time give you an interesting way of answering the question.

Work out your starting point

There are 168 hours in the week, of which you spend 56 in bed. This leaves 112 for living in. Draw a three-by-three matrix of nine square boxes and write an activity heading in each of them. The headings will include some of the following: friends, relationships, family, alone time, personal development, health, hobbies, leisure, creativity, work and any other areas of life that you enjoy or endure. If you need more squares just add them. Don't forget to add areas in which at the moment you do nothing but which you wish to get involved in.

Now list the number of hours in a typical week you spend in each of these areas, convert it to a percentage of 112 and write the percentage in the appropriate box.

That's your starting point. You may wish to check what you have written with your partner and a work colleague to make sure you're not indulging in wishful thinking. If the percentages are just what you want, well done; you just have to think through how to tell the interviewer this.

One person who did this exercise decided that he was spending too many hours watching television and too many hours working. The box that suffered from this was the one marked 'wife and family'. He resolved therefore to switch the TV off between Monday and Thursday. He told his boss he was only going to work late three evenings a week and that he was leaving each Wednesday and Friday at five o'clock. He started to take his wife out for dinner once a month and told his two sons that every other weekend they could have half a day of his time to do anything they wanted to do provided it didn't cost more than twenty dollars. He actually implemented a plan that was OK with his boss and delightful for his family.

Plan the situation for the future

Now look at the areas where you want to make adjustments. For every area whose percentage you increase you have to make a choice about which area you are going to reduce. Add in any activities that currently you don't do but have resolved to get started on. Now convert the percentages into hours and see if you believe you have a feasible plan.

That's the exercise. Now turn it into a brilliant answer to the question. It's probably a good idea to suggest you've gone through such a process. Tell them what the answer is. Watch their faces, though; some of them may be workaholics and think that's the only way for an ambitious person to be. Add a safety-first rider like 'I think that when anyone starts a new job they probably have to work a lot of hours to get it under control; if necessary during that time I'll work all the hours God sends.' You can also point out that people who achieve a good work/life balance tend to be more effective at work. It's not just the hours you work; it's your attitude to getting things done.

Here's an idea for you…

We're going to come across a number of questions where your research will be much improved if you have a friendly contact in the organisation you are interviewing for. This is one of them. Question them about the culture of the organisation and its attitude to work/life balance. It's very valuable to have that information before you go in.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'It is impossible to enjoy idling thoroughly unless one has plenty of work to do.' ~ JEROME K. JEROME, British essayist

How did it go?

Q I'm trying to change my work/life balance away from work. That's why I'm applying for this new job. I'd like to work less than forty hours per week – thirty-five if possible. Is this an acceptable reply?

A It has to be really. If they don't know and appoint you, then either or both of you are going to be disappointed. Careful how you word it, though. You're trying to look like a person who makes a good contribution at work but has other important things to do, not work-shy.

Q I'm trying to get a promotion in a company I already work for. The team I'm trying to join are in the habit of going for a drink after work most days. Quite honestly, I don't fancy that and would prefer to use that time in other ways. Should I tell them?

A Ah, no. When you join you'll find it easy enough to join them from time to time without its becoming an uncomfortable habit. We would put this time firmly in the work part of the matrix, join them to keep up with the internal politics and slip out when it becomes idle chatter. But there's no need to explain all that in the interview.

9

May I pass you over now to my colleague?

Aha, you're in a panel interview. There are special techniques for handling a group of people in a more formal environment.

The difficulty in panels is maintaining the interest of all the members at all times. As an example of panel interviews, we'll take a type that many organisations use. They put a hurdle in place that all potential managers from all parts of the business must jump if they are to move into management at all. This is not an interview for a specific job, but a check to ensure that you have what it takes to make the first rung of the corporate ladder. You need to pass such panels first time and preferable easily and unanimously.

Keep everybody interested

The panel interview is a more formal process and less of a conversation. Prepare thoroughly and try to be precise in your answers rather than more conversational. Use questions to establish quickly the role of each panel member. Try to make all the members of the panel speak, and then listen to what they say. All the clues will be there. The HR person will know when in interviews it's right to hold their tongue, but the line managers will often respond, particularly if they have already listened to a number of enthusiastic talkers who listen very little.

Let's look at possible pitfalls. 'How will you go about the technical side of a project?' This one could take you into your comfort zone and make you go into too much detail. It's always possible to check that you're at the right level: 'Is this

answering your question or do you want more detail?' should get an honest response from the chairperson. If you're answering a technical question that one panel member is interested in, still check on the others: 'I'm conscious that I'm going into some detail on this. Is that OK?'

'Why do you think this is the right time for you to go into management?' Square away your current job, and then show your ambition: 'We're coming to the end of the second phase of my current project; so it's good timing from my boss's point of view. Rather than moving on to another project, I feel that I'm ready to go up a gear. I think I've shown that I'm at my best when I'm given more and more responsibility and that's what I'm looking for in my next job.'

They're almost certain to ask about poor performers, since managers have to deal with some tough situations: 'What would you do if one of you team members was really not performing?' You need to show you have the authority to handle such a situation, but don't jump in with 'Well, sack them.' Know the rules and procedures for what has to be done. Your answer needs to show them that when you've exhausted coaching, training and all the HR procedures, you will have the assertiveness to do what needs to be done and move the poor performer on if it's necessary. 'In the end it's not just me and the team who are in a bad situation; it's also the poor performer. It's in their interests as well to resolve the problem once and for all.'

Remember you body language

How do you keep in with everyone? First and foremost is eye contact. Keep it flowing across the whole panel all the time. It

keeps everyone involved in the conversation and gives you the chance to pick up on their reactions. It's very tempting to limit your eye contact to the person who asked the question you're answering, or, probably worse, to speak almost exclusively to the senior person in the room. And there's a sex trap here. Some men dodge eye contact with the women on the panel and concentrate on the men. Nothing can be more guaranteed to make a female manager seethe, and quite right too: it's bloody rude. And it works the other way too. Some women interviewees keep more eye contact with women panel members. The men may take this as a sign of weakness – you're obviously looking for feminine support.

Here's an idea for you…

As part of your preparation speak to a wider section of people than just your boss. The latter will be helpful, true, but their experience of these matters could be out of date. You'll gain more from speaking to people who've recently passed a panel and, if you can find one willing to help, someone who's recently failed. Make sure that in the interview you display the preparation you have done; that puts you ahead of the crowd.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'The function that distinguishes the manager above all others is their educational one. The one contribution they are

uniquely expected to make is to give others vision and ability to perform. It is vision and more responsibility that, in the final analysis, define the manager.' ~ PETER DRUCKER, management consultant

How did it go?

Q I really think that my husband's support allows me to work more effectively and without stress. Do you think it's a good idea for me to include my stable home environment among my strengths?

A Probably, but be careful to whom you're talking. I know someone who used this line to a panel that included a woman on her third husband, a man who had recently replaced his wife with his secretary and a manager whose messy divorce was still getting the occasional mention in the gutter press. It was a good story, just the wrong audience.

Q I've been told that panels like to hear that you've read some management books and are aware of some of the latest management techniques. Is this true?

A It can be, yes. Try to offer a sentence in this area. Don't be too clever. Some of the panel members may not know what you're talking about – in which case they may resort to dismissing it as 'management-speak' and not practical. In this regard 'holistic' is dangerous and 'e-synchronous supply chain' only for those who can explain it simply with references to examples from their organisation.

10

What's your style of influencing people?

This is a slightly trick question. The good team leader can change their style of influencing to suit the person they're working with. You're likely to have a core style. Illustrate that and then illustrate how you can change it when necessary.

There's another angle to this question, like the Russian doll within the Russian doll. When you're in an interview, you are at that time trying to influence the interviewer. So make sure that the way you present the answer to this question reflects the demeanour and behaviour of the person you're addressing.

It's what you say

Tell them outright why no single style will do for everyone: 'The main thing I've learned about influencing people is that they're all subtly different and, though most people have a natural style, everyone has to fit horses to courses. I naturally have a consultative style, influencing people by discussion and joint planning. But it comes out differently for different people. For example, my influence over one member of my team consists almost entirely of listening to her as she works out what needs to be done and how to do it. With another person I find I have to spell things out much more, making suggestions and giving advice. Then there's another person who's very process oriented. I motivate and influence him by facilitating a decision-making or other business process.'

A bit of theory might come in handy: ‘A lot depends on the circumstances as well. Some people talk about “push and pull” management styles; “push” being the “Do what you are told” or autocratic method, “pull” the consulting democratic way of leading people. I naturally lean towards pull, but when the chips are down I can switch into being more directive if events demand it.’

Then look at why people do things: ‘I always try to remember that people work for money but do a bit extra for recognition, praise and reward. If I think someone is doing a good job I never forget to tell them. I show appreciation often. I find it best not to wait for the end of a task to say thanks. I don’t find this too difficult. I’m genuinely interested in how people tick and can normally work out how to get the best out of them.’

What about creativity: ‘Sometimes I like to hold back from influencing the team about a decision they’re making. If I’m too involved in getting them to do what I think is best, I run the risk of stifling their creativity. If I let them get on with it, they do come up with the most amazing insights.’

And how you say it

We’ve said that you’re trying to influence the person on the other side of the desk. You have very little time to make up your mind how to do it. Some of it is quite obvious. If they behave rather formally, going dryly through a logical process and asking clipped questions, it’s plainly inappropriate to slouch, crack jokes or comment widely outside the answer to the question. If the person is very informal you can be more relaxed and converse with them on their terms. (Don’t go too

far; you're trying to look like a professional businessperson not a stand-up comic.)

It's obviously much easier to get the formal/informal balance right if you've found out about the person before the start of the interview. In all cases it's hugely important to smile, thank them for what they say and do, thank them for good questions and use their name a lot in your responses.

Here's an idea for you…

Another angle upon this question concerns learning styles. Some people learn by jumping in at the deep end and doing something; others prefer to reflect long and hard before they act. Some people look very pragmatically at what works and doesn't work, while others want to understand all the theory behind what they're learning. Look around and think about the learning style of the people you work with. You could get some useful insights into how to manage them and a strong answer to questions about management style. There's lots of material on this: just search the web for 'learning styles'.

Try another idea…

If you like this tip there are 40 more on Kindle at the UK store and the US store.

Defining idea…

'When Mike Brearley, the Captain of England's cricket team in the 1980s, felt that he needed to gee up his fast bowler, he would signal to me to do some stirring. I had to go up to the bowler with a message, "Mike says that you're bowling like a

girl." I'd then almost pity the poor batsman who faced the next ball from a seething bowler. If he'd used the same words with me it would have destroyed me, and Brearley, of course, knew that.' ~ BOB WILLIS, English cricketer

How did it go?

Q My natural style is very low key and consultative. I'm going for an interview with a bloke who makes Ghengis Khan look like a counselling therapist. He is highly autocratic, to say the least. Should I say what I feel, or say that I'm more directive than I really am?

A A bit of both, really. Your low-key and consultative answer will still work, but you need to put a bit more emphasis on your ability to get people to take direction. Take as an example a situation where you have to take control fast, like a fire or a furious customer. Remember that the guy might actually want someone with a very different style from his own. You never know.

Q I had two people in the interview, one very stiff and formal and the other rather slovenly and very friendly. Should I have treated them differently?

A Yes, it's quite possible to alter how you answer a question according to who asked it. But it's probably safer to err on the formal side. The more relaxed person is more likely to understand that you're doing it to stay onside with Mr Formality. Mr Formality may take against you if you're too friendly with the other person.

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