

Only Five Interview Questions

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Of all the subjects we cover in career management and job search, the one that seems to cause clients the most anxiety is INTERVIEWING. To ease my clients' concerns, I often simplify the topic by reducing it to a handful of basic elements.

When you boil it all down, job interviews are made-up of only five statements from the interviewer, which include four questions and one sentence. Sure, you'll be asked more than five questions, but they ALL seem to be variations on the items listed below. Each of these questions has to be "nailed" in a job interview, and each has a different strategy to answer it. "Winging it" just won't do!

Here is some simple, sound advice for responding to the five basic interview questions:

No. 1: Tell me about yourself.

This is the open-ended question that on the surface seems harmless, yet how you answer it may spell the difference between landing a job, or being pushed out the door to seek another position. You have to know yourself first - your strengths, your weaknesses, your likes, your talents and your goals. The best way to answer this question is to give your "Positioning Statement," which is a one-paragraph summary of your career background, strengths, expertise and objective.

No. 2: Why do you want to work here?

This question seeks to determine if you know anything about the job and company. The goal here is to connect your talents, contributions and attributes to the employer's needs, problems and challenges. You can only do this if you've done your homework, and have gathered all the necessary research. The best way to respond is to tell several relevant Accomplishment Stories that prove you have the right kind of experience for the job.

No. 3: What's wrong with you?

Of course, the interviewer will not actually use these words. She might couch the question in more polite terms, but what she is actually trying to find out is why you're unemployed, or underemployed, or why you've had so many jobs, etc. As the candidate, you need to acknowledge these sorts of career challenges in advance; then prepare and practice your responses. Your answers must be worded in such a way that they are fully positive, and elicit the responses you desire.

No. 4: What are your salary expectations?

When it comes to "the salary question," you want the other guy to make the first move. Do thorough research in advance to determine what the likely salary range is. Make it clear that the job is not all about pay. Say that you'd be happy to discuss compensation once a mutual interest has been established, and get back to discussing your relevant accomplishments. Tell the interviewer that you want the opportunity, and that you expect the company will make a fair salary offer. This doesn't mean you will necessarily accept that offer, but it means they will have to "draw" first. Once you receive the initial offer, always negotiate up from there.

No. 5: Don't call us, we'll call you.

Take an active stance, not a passive one. Be sure to discuss "next steps" before you leave the interview. Ask the interviewer directly how your qualifications compare to those of the other candidates. Display your excitement about the job and the challenges it poses. Let the interviewer know how and when you'll be back in touch. Don't leave all the power in the hands of the interviewer; this should be a mutual decision-making process.

Since almost every interview question is a variation of the themes listed above, there's no need to worry about the hundreds of questions you MIGHT be asked. If you go into the interview focused on addressing just these five basic areas, you'll feel more confident and less overwhelmed.

The more practiced and articulate you are in responding to these five items, the better chance you'll have of landing the job. But even if you don't get the offer, you'll still be well-prepared for the NEXT interview!

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