



COULDN'T HAVE SAID IT ANY BETTER

How to Tackle the Seven Toughest Interview Questions

Joe Mayne

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By Joe Mayne

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INTRO_{DUCTION}

HOW ARE **YOU** TODAY?

WHY SHOULD WE **HIRE** YOU?

WHAT ARE YOUR **WEAKNESSES?**

HOW WOULD OTHER PEOPLE
DESCRIBE YOU?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO
IN THIS SITUATION...?

WHAT DO YOU **LOVE?**

WHAT **QUESTIONS** DO YOU HAVE FOR ME?

INTRO_{DUCTION}

Everyone knows that job interviews are all about the questions, but not all questions are the same. Some are asked to find out a little about your background, a few are thrown in to test your comfort level with the interview process itself, and then there are the showstoppers. These are the ones that make you twist and squirm in your seat, the ones that don't seem to have any right answers.

Whether it's done intentionally or not, throwing in these questions takes you outside your comfort zone. And for that reason, the answers you give to them speak volumes about your personality, your ability to think on your feet, and your readiness to step in and be a member of the interviewer's team. They make up the interview moments that will determine your future, and they are the focus of this short e-book.

As a veteran interviewer (I've seen more than two thousand prospective employees in my years as a manager or recruiter), and as a presenter to students

from hundreds of different campuses, I've noticed that there is a handful of inquiries that seems to trip up new graduates over and over again. Some of these questions, like naming your biggest weaknesses, are natural stumbling blocks; others, though, are more difficult because they seem so simple. In other words, they seem so straightforward that they are missed, or mishandled, all too often.

I'm going to walk you through these pitfalls over the next few pages. By taking them apart, one by one, you'll get a feel not only for the right things to say in specific situations, but a sense of what to expect as you sit down with prospective employers. You'll also learn some easy ways to set yourself apart from the dozens of other candidates that your interviewers are going to hear from.

Remember, interviews are a chance to show companies what you're made of. The tough questions recruiters ask might seem designed to trip you up, but they also provide a chance for you to prove, without a doubt, that you're the right person to hire. Keep that in mind as you study these questions and answers, and you'll be just fine.

HOW ARE **YOU** TODAY?

As I mentioned in the introduction, many job seekers – and especially recent college graduates – ruin their interview chances by fumbling questions that seem very straightforward. “How are you?” is definitely one of them. That’s because, while the actual answer you give might not be that important, the way you give it speaks volumes about your attitude and confidence.

Recruiters are looking for employees with a positive outlook on life. They want young men and women who are full of energy and ready to take on the world, not folks who sound like they had to be dragged out of bed to face another day. So, when they ask how you are doing, let them get a sense of your enthusiasm. You don’t have to go over the top and sound like you just finished downing a bag of sugar, but try to convey in a natural way that you’re happy and excited to be there.

Treat the other background questions you get in the same way. When your interviewer asks where you were raised, or how many siblings you have, they’re probably

not looking for a specific answer. Instead, they're trying to find out whether you're an honest and engaging person. For instance, you would be amazed at the number of prospective employees who will give false answers to even basic questions about themselves. If I had to guess, I would assume it's because they want to come off looking like better candidates than they are, but the reality is that most mistruths will be quickly uncovered. And even if they aren't, you should be spending your interview time conveying your best qualities, not trying to cover up a bunch of lies you've told.

And finally, when it comes to simple background questions, learn to answer them and then move on. If you have a really great story to tell about your childhood or background, then by all means, share it. But recognize that even the most open-ended questions shouldn't prompt you to talk uncontrollably. The interviewer is trying to find someone who will fit well into the company, not a person who doesn't know when to quiet down.

WHY SHOULD WE **HIRE** YOU?

Interviewers love this question because it cuts right to the heart of the matter. After all, the reason they've set aside an hour or more of their day is to find out whether or not you are the best person for their open position. What better way to find out than by seeing how you handle being asked directly?

Unfortunately, many new graduates misinterpret it, thinking that the interviewer wants to know about their business or industry skills. Certainly, that's part of it; no company wants to hire someone who has no idea how to use a telephone or computer. But the fact that you've graduated from college, and that they've already had a look at your resume, indicate that they already think you have the basic skills you'll need to learn the job.

Notice that I said learn the job. Very few new hires – even experienced workers who move from one company to another in the same industry – are truly ready to contribute right away. That's because, even if they already know all the products, software, and so on, they

still have to learn about a company's policies, get to know their new coworkers, and so on. You're not expected to know everything on day one; your interviewer just wants to know that you have the ability to figure things out.

With that in mind, when interviewers ask why they should hire you, realize that what they're looking for goes beyond how fast you can type or which computer classes you completed. They're trying to uncover what I consider to be one of the most important traits for a job candidate – quiet confidence.

They want someone who isn't going to be a prima donna, but someone who is going to pitch in right away without whining or complaining about what is or isn't "their job." So, when the question of why the interviewer should hire you is asked, make sure you come across as being competent. But more importantly, show that you have a willingness to get involved and do what you can to help your new department or company.

WHAT ARE YOUR **WEAKNESSES?**

This is the classic interview trip-up question. And, if the thousands of new graduates I've spoken to are any guide, it's also one of the most hated. By asking about your weaknesses, interviewers are basically inviting you to give a few reasons why you shouldn't be hired... aren't they?

Actually, believe it or not, they aren't. The big pitfall here isn't in revealing a part of yourself that's less than perfect – it's in avoiding the question altogether. Most people, when asked about their weaknesses in an interview, will give one of a handful of stock answers: I work too hard, I take my work home with me, I'm too driven, and so on. They think they're highlighting what a great candidate they are, but what they're really doing is failing to set themselves apart from the competition. What's more, they're showing that they're not comfortable enough in their own skin to admit to areas where they can improve.

The best way to answer this question, as surprising as it might be, is to be honest. No one's expecting you to blurt out that you're an addict or embezzler, but go ahead and be up front about one of your faults. For example, you might admit that you hate criticism, or that you have a habit of being too direct with other people. Don't stop there, though. Once you've been open about your weakness, tell the interviewer what you're doing to improve it. Demonstrate that you're open enough to tell the truth, and that you're constantly working to become a better employee and person.

When you take this approach, two great things happen. First, you don't come across like just another programmed interviewee who will say just about anything to get the job. And second, you get the chance to make a personal connection with the human being on the other side of the desk. All of us, even your interviewer, have aspects of our personalities that we'd like to change. By sharing one of your challenges, you make it easier for them to see you as a person – one they might like, and even hire.

HOW WOULD OTHER PEOPLE **DESCRIBE YOU?**

This is another question where the urge to give stock answers can really hurt your chances for another interview. Lots of people like to say that they are funny, outgoing, helpful, etc. So what? You just described 90% of the population, not to mention the other dozen people interviewing for the job.

So think long and hard about how you're going to answer this question when it comes up in the interview. You don't have to say anything crazy or outlandish, but you do want to find a thought or phrase that sets you apart from everyone else. For that reason, risk-taking, entrepreneurial, or precise are all better answers than happy, fun, or hard-working. They highlight your best qualities, but do so in a way that isn't completely generic.

Whatever you come up with, though, make sure that it actually does describe you. Your interviewer is looking to see whether the answers you give are consistent with the other pieces of information they have to work with, including your resume, appearance, body language,

and answers to other questions. If it seems like you're offering a description of yourself – even an interesting one – that doesn't match up with everything else they've seen, they may be left with doubts about your honesty and sincerity.

Also, recognize why this question is such an important one to interviewers. Hiring someone, even for an entry-level position, represents a huge investment. If you don't work out, then your new company has just wasted several times your annual salary on wages, training, lost productivity, and so on. With this in mind, they want to be as sure as possible that any new person they bring in will be able to mesh well with their existing team. So, if you give answers that suggest you're hard to work with or won't fit in, that's a big red flag.

Of course, if you have a hard time coming up with the right way to tackle this one, you could always get some outside help. Ask your friends, family members, or professors what words or phrases they would use to describe you, if asked by someone who might want to hire you. Take a couple of the best answers, and you get an easy way to deal with one of the toughest interview questions.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN THIS SITUATION...?

Every interviewer knows that they're probably seeing you on your best day. With your suit pressed, your hair freshly cut, and a crisp resume tucked in your briefcase, you are more prepared than ever to show off your good qualities. But their job isn't to evaluate you on your best day; it's to see how you'll perform in the real world. One of the easiest ways for them to do that, even if it's just hypothetical, is to put you in a different situation. And so, they'll ask you "what would you do if..."

There are endless variations on this question: some interviewers will ask whether you like to be a wallflower or the life of the party, others will want to know what you would do if you saw your coworker or boss stealing from the company, and still another twist is seeing how a you, a prospective employee, would handle a miscommunication or major business mistake. No matter what form it takes, though, this question's aim is always the same – to get under the glossy exterior and see what the candidate has under the hood.

Keep that in mind as you field these questions. The actual setting or situation isn't all that important. What the interviewer really wants to know is how you handle stress, what your personal ethics are like, or whether you are easily frustrated. In other words, the question isn't that important, but how you handle it is.

The first thing to do is stay calm. Resist the urge to jump in right away and speak. Instead, think for a moment about what is being asked and what the interviewer really wants to know. If they are trying to get at your interpersonal skills, then speak to that. On the other hand, if they're trying to find out about your honesty level, put that at the forefront of your answer. Then, try to bring your response around to an actual experience in your own life. Rather than saying what a great employee you'd be, let them see how you've handled yourself in the past.

Questions about hypothetical situations are hard, but if you can use them to talk about times when you dealt with real-world challenges, you'll come through with flying colors.

WHAT DO YOU **LOVE?**

This is my favorite interview question, and it's one that I think you should answer, whether you get it or not. Let me explain: the number one thing that I want to see out of any job candidate is passion. I want to feel like they've made the effort to connect with me as an actual person, and that I'm getting a glimpse of their true self – what they love and admire in this world – rather than a carefully constructed picture that they've put together to get the job. By asking, "What do you love?" I can pull away at all of those layers, and invite them to tell me about what matters most to them.

Ironically enough, I don't really care what the answer is, so long as it's genuine. I've had lots of people tell me that they love their family, or that they are involved in some kind of charitable organization, but I'm just as happy to hear that they enjoy collecting bottle caps. Either way, they've shown me that they've got something deeper to them than what I get from their GPA or letters of recommendation. I've gotten a peek at what they're

really made of, and it makes it that much easier for me to want them on my team.

That's why I say you should answer this question whether you get it or not. A lot of interviewers aren't going to come right out and ask you what your personal passions are, but that doesn't mean you can't bring it up in your other answers, or highlight specific achievements that you're proud of on your resume. I'm not saying that you should derail an explanation of your technical expertise by talking about how much you love deep-sea fishing; what I am saying, though, is that you should take the opportunity to present yourself as a whole person – not just a candidate for a job, but someone who cares about more than a paycheck.

Remember, people hire people, not resumes. Tell your interviewer about what you love and you won't be just another face in the crowd.

WHAT **QUESTIONS** DO YOU HAVE FOR ME?

So, you've answered all of your interviewer's questions, told them all about your background and what a great person you are, and done the whole thing without having a nervous breakdown. It's time to go home and wait for them to call you in for the next interview, right?

Not so fast. One of the greatest things you can do for yourself at this point is turn the tables a little bit and ask a few questions of your own. Interviewers love this, because it shows a level of maturity and interest that they don't see in every candidate. Here are a few things you might want to ask:

"Why has this position opened up?"

"What opportunities for advancement are there in this position?"

"What will be the next step in the interview process?"

"How did you get started working for this company?"

The first two are fantastic questions because they give you more insight into the position itself. They let you know a little more about why they're trying to fill it, who had it before, and where it can take you in the future. These two questions also show that you're not necessarily willing to take the first thing that comes along, and that you have a vision of your future success.

The third question works well because it allows you to set proper expectations. If your interviewer tells you that there are several more candidates to see and several more rounds of interviews to come, then you know you're going to be in for a long ride. On the other hand, if they offer that you'll be speaking to Mr. or Mrs. so-and-so within the next week, you've just found out that you're going to the next stage, and when.

And finally, like many of the tips in this e-book, asking your interviewer how they got started with the company gives them the chance to talk to you about themselves and deepen the personal connection. Every person is his or her own favorite topic, and people appreciate the opportunity to tell their stories. Asking about your interviewer is a great way to help that along, and learn some valuable things about your prospective employer at the same time.

ABOUT THE **AUTHOR**

Joe Mayne is a professional speaker and author from Minneapolis, Minnesota. For more than 15 years, he's been teaching college students from hundreds of campuses across North America how to stand out in the job search process.

From the beginning of his career, when he was hired by a Fortune 500 firm before he graduated college, Joe has been intrigued by the dynamics of the job hunting process. Later, in his work as a recruiter, manager, and consultant, he conducted thousands of interviews and learned how to evaluate candidates from an employer's perspective. He continues to gather and share those insights today through his books, articles, and keynote speeches.

Joe's articles and e-books have been featured nationally online and in the print media, and he continues to give dozens of presentations to colleges and universities each year.

You can find out more about him and his work at www.MayneSpeaker.com

