

Four Classic Interview Questions — and How to Prepare for Them

by Bill Radin

Experienced job seekers know there are four basic types of interview questions — and they prepare accordingly.

First, there are the resume questions. These relate to your past experience, skills, job responsibilities, education, upbringing, personal interests, and so forth.

Resume questions require accurate, objective answers, since your resume consists of facts which tend to be quantifiable (and verifiable). Try to avoid answers which exaggerate your achievements, or appear to be opinionated, vague, or egocentric.

Second, interviewers will usually want you to comment on your abilities, or assess your past performance. They'll ask self-appraisal questions like, "What do you think is your greatest asset?" or, "Can you tell me something you've done that was very creative?"

Third, interviewers like to know how you respond to different stimuli. Situation questions ask you to explain certain actions you took in the past, or require that you explore hypothetical scenarios that may occur in the future. "How would you stay profitable during a recession?" or, "How would you go about laying off 1300 employees?" or, "How would you handle customer complaints if the company drastically raised its prices?" are typical situation questions.

And last, some employers like to test your mettle with stress questions such as, "After you die, what would you like your epitaph to read?" or, "If you were to compare yourself to any U.S. president, who would it be?" or, "It's obvious your background makes you totally unqualified for this position. Why should we even waste our time talking?"

Stress questions are designed to evaluate your emotional reflexes, creativity, or attitudes while you're under pressure. Since off-the-wall or confrontational questions tend to jolt your equilibrium, or put you in a defensive posture, the best way to handle them is to stay calm and give carefully considered answers.

Remember, your sense of humor will come in handy during the entire interviewing process, just so long as you don't go over the edge. I heard of a candidate who, when asked to describe his ideal job, replied, "To have beautiful women rub my back with hot oil." Needless to say, he wasn't hired.

Even if it were possible to anticipate every interview question, memorizing dozens of stock answers would be impractical, to say the least. The best policy is to review your background, your priorities, and your reasons for considering a new position; and to handle the interview as honestly as you can. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so, or ask for a moment to think about your response.

