

How to Master Five Key Job Interview Challenges

By George Matson

What do you do when you face unusual job interview challenges? How you respond to awkward situations or off-the-wall questions in a job interview likely will determine whether you get the job offer or not. Be sure you're not a casualty by following these five guidelines to diffusing some potentially explosive job interview situations:

1. A flippant or insulting comment. A recent college graduate was interviewing for a job with the regional manager of a large company. The interview went well until, as the recent graduate was putting on a flashy overcoat, which was fine for a 21-year-old, the manager said, "That's quite an overcoat. Do you wear that to a racetrack?" The young man calmly responded, "No. Why? Does it remind you of your bookie?" Both men just smiled at each other.

Some interviewers want to see how interviewees will react to an embarrassing or challenging situation. Therefore, you should go into a job interview on your mental tiptoes so, when the interviewer throws a verbal punch, you can throw a quip back and not wind up on the canvas.

2. What salary are you seeking? If someone opens an interview by asking what you want for a salary, or if this question is asked too early in the interview, you should not give a figure because you have not had adequate time to sell your strengths to the potential employer. As you expand your qualifications, you gain leverage in salary negotiations. Most companies have flexibility in salary ranges. The proper response to an early inquiry about your salary requirements is: "I'll be glad to discuss that with you later, when we've had a chance to explore the position and my qualifications in more detail." Also, don't forget to do research on the salary parameters on the position and the usual hiring range. Sometimes you can research salary ranges online.

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3. Be humble in your confidence. Successful executives are assertive and, if we believe a recent survey, even aggressive. If potential employers ask you a question that you may perceive as irrelevant or ridiculous, don't panic. It is ok for you to learn how the question may be relevant to the position. The use of humor and honesty, while being respectful is always the better approach. If you were asked if you were married, one possible response is, "I like keeping my personal and professional separate. Do you see being married as having an impact on this position?" Be humble in your confidence as you inquire about the connection between the question and the position and responsibilities of the position.


4. The unresponsive interviewer. Unfortunately, there are some people who have to conduct interviews who are ill-suited for the task either by temperament or training or both. You, yourself, are the Chief Resuscitator of the interview. The interviewer's terse and sparse comments may just be fatigue, if you're the last interview in a busy day. Or the brief perfunctory grunts you hear may also be a reflection of the interviewer's permanent state of mind. Maybe the interview is introverted, angry, depressed, frustrated, overworked (likely in today's business environment), just plain cantankerous, or who knows what else? What you need to do is unlock his or her mouth to establish a rapport so you can get the information you need. To get the person to open up, ask open-ended questions (especially "how" and "what" questions) that focus on the job. If necessary, try repeated attempts to get the person to talk more. If you find the responses are still terse, ask yourself if you would be comfortable working for this person if he or she were your direct supervisor. If the answer is no, trust your instinct and look elsewhere.

5. Getting back to business. The opposite of the terse, blunt interviewer, of course, is the talkative, ego-centric interviewer. You'll get to know more than you'd like about the person very quickly in the interview. Often, this loquacious individual will quickly delve into inappropriate levels of self-disclosure. Don't feel obligated to do the same. If you want to tell the interviewer your life story, save it until after you've received the job offer and established a friendship with your employer. Otherwise, be discreet in your responses, and trust that the professional will respond in kind.


In an employment interview, you want to have a good bal-

ance of conversation: ideally, 60 percent interviewee and 40 percent interviewer. If the interviewer is talking too much about irrelevant matters, the interviewee should get the interview back on track by redirecting. The interviewee should wait until the interviewer takes a breath (everyone has to breathe sooner or later) and immediately change the

subject. For example, the interviewee might say, "It's important that you know another strength that I have for the position is xyz," etc. If the interviewee wants the job, it's necessary to have ultimate, if not apparent, control of the interview.



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