Interview Questions: What They Ask Vs. What They Mean

By Barbara Safani

Have you ever wondered why an interviewer asks certain interview questions? Some of the questions seem so vague and random that it can be hard to figure out the logic behind the interview process. What's right? What's wrong? What does the hiring manager really want to hear? Below is a quick guide to the translations for some of the most common interview questions.

Question: Tell me about yourself.

Translation: Why should I hire you?

Recommended response. Don't take the question too literally. Hiring managers don't want to hear that you grew up on a small farm in Kansas or that you enjoy world travel. Furthermore, they don't want to hear that you are a great communicator, team player, and fast learner. They want you to show tangible proof of why you would be a good fit for their organization. Outline two to four of your key competencies and couple each competency with proof of success. For example a customer service representative might showcase one of his/her competencies by saying, "I have strong research skills and can quickly resolve customer inquiries. For example, in my last job, I resolved 98 percent of all pending customer inquiries within 24 hours which was 50 percent faster than the company's expectation for problem resolution.

Question: What is your weakness?

Translation: We know what your weakness is. Prove to us it's not a liability for this position.

Recommended response. Before your interview address any potential obstacles that the hiring manager may pick up on. Perhaps it is your lack of knowledge with a specific software or your lack of experience in a particular industry. Show how you would overcome these obstacles or demonstrate how you have overcome similar obstacles in the past. For example, if you apply for a position that requires PowerPoint skills and you have limited experience, give an example of another software you are proficient in and how you gained that proficiency to prove that your current limited knowledge is a minor liability that can be quickly overcome.

Question: Where do you see yourself in five years?

Translation: Do you have a realistic perspective on what this job/company is about?

Recommended Response. Craft a response that makes sense for the employer's business environment. If it is a small company, don't say you expect to have a position with increasing responsibility -- that may not be feasible in their organization. If you are taking a job as a bookkeeper just

to get a foot in the door of the company but really want to be a sales representative, don't bring that up during the interview. The hiring manager needs to know that you are committed to the job you are applying for, not already thinking about a new job. You can mention that you see yourself in a position where you can continue to learn and contribute to the company's bottom line and give an example of how you were able to successfully do that at a previous organization. This answer will help managers feel confident in your level of commitment to the current job and your future commitment to the organization.

Question: What have you been doing since your last position ended?

Translation: Why have you been out of work so long?

Recommended response. Discuss any volunteer or consulting assignments you may have had in the interim. If you have been actively interviewing but haven't been extended an offer, you can mention that you have been interviewing but haven't found the right fit yet. If you have had limited activity, you can let the hiring manager know that you have been using this time to evaluate your skills, craft your resume, conduct informational interviews, and network within professional circles. Obviously saying you've been watching re-runs of 20 consecutive seasons of 'Law & Order' won't go over well, so stick to discussing the professional activities you have been involved in.

Question: Are you interviewing with other companies?

Translation: Are you worth investing some time in or are you about to take another offer?

Recommended response. Generally it's best to be somewhat vague in your response, particularly if you are at the beginning of your search. If it is early on, let the employer know that you have just begun the interview process. If you have been in search mode for awhile, let them know that you have been actively searching but haven't found the right fit yet.

Question: Tell me about the accomplishment you are most proud of.

Translation: Is your past experience similar to what we need you to do here?

Recommended response. The accomplishment you are most proud of might not be the one that is most relevant to the organization's needs. Showcase an accomplishment that proves you have the specific competencies to do the job they need you to do. The story you select may be different for different interviews. That's OK. You can be proud of more than one accomplishment, and it is more important to showcase the right accomplishment than it is to bring up the achievement that brought you the greatest personal satisfaction.

Question: Tell me about a time when you lacked the appropriate resources to do your job and how you handled it.

Translation: We are severely understaffed *or* we don't have a budget for anything.

Recommended response. Give an example that proves that you have been in this situation before and that you can do more with less. But if you notice this is a running theme throughout the interview, proceed with caution. You could be setting yourself up to assume an impossible role with very limited support.

Question: How many golf balls can fit in a school bus?

Translation: Are you analytical, how do you solve problems, *or* do you mind if we just want to mess with your head?

Recommended Response. This type of question is often referred to as a brain teaser. Interviewers don't expect you to know the answer, but they will want to see how you tackle figuring out a strategy to come up with an answer. These questions tend to be most popular in high-tech companies, but job candidates in other industries sometimes get them as well. For more tips on handling them, read How to Answer Brain Teaser Interview Questions.

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