

HIT HOME RUNS FROM HARDBALL QUESTIONS

By Eugene Raudsepp

Expect to be asked several probing, hardball questions during your next job interview. In fact, if you aren't asked a few stress questions, your interview probably isn't going as well as you might think.

Difficult, unsettling questions have become part of most interviewers' repertoires as they try to eliminate bad hires by screening candidates more carefully. The trick to fielding such clever queries is to realize why they're asked: primarily to gauge how fast you can think and how well you perform under pressure.

If you practice answering tricky career-related questions, you'll be more apt to respond to them confidently. The following are 10 typical stress questions and strategies on how you might answer them. Boning up before your next interview can put you ahead of other job seekers who try to wing it.

Tell Me a Little About Yourself?

This seemingly innocuous, open-ended question can be intimidating. If you aren't prepared, you won't know what to say or how long to talk, especially since the interview is just beginning. Realize that most interviewers use this question not only to gather information, but also to assess your poise, style of delivery and communication ability. Don't launch into a mini-speech about your childhood, schooling, hobbies, early career and personal likes and dislikes. Instead, cite recent personal and professional work experiences that relate to the position you're seeking and that support your resume credentials.

"Everything you say about yourself should fit together to form a cohesive pattern that conveys the message: I have unique qualities that make me the right person to fill this position," says Kathryn Petras, co-author with Ross Petras, of the book, "The Only Job Hunting Guide You'll Ever Need" (1989, Poseidon Press). One caution: This question is a great opportunity to sell yourself. At this stage of the interview, however, it's best to remain concise and low-key.

Why Are You Leaving Your Present Job?

You don't need to give a long-winded answer, but don't be defensive, especially if you left due to problems with your boss or co-workers. Career experts agree that it isn't wise to air your frustrations about a previous or current job or co-workers during interviews. You may be perceived as a chronic malcontent or difficult to work with. Don't fudge on information about why you left your last job; it can be checked easily. If you're less than honest, all of your answers will be regarded with justifiable suspicion. Perhaps the best answer is that you're seeking greater opportunity, challenges or responsibility. Don't use "more money" as a reason. It's usually obvious that if you're changing jobs, you hope to obtain a better salary.

What Are Your Greatest Strengths?

This question allows you to describe your strongest attributes and skills. Be sure to mention assets that are directly related to the responsibilities of the open job. Briefly summarize your work experience and your strongest qualities and achievements.

Mitchell Berger, president of Howard-Sloan Professional Search Inc., a New York recruiting firm, advises job seekers to include four specific skills that employers value highly: self-motivation, initiative, the ability to work in a team and a willingness to work long hours. Additional qualities employers admire include good communication skills, loyalty, reliability, integrity, promptness and self-confidence. Pause before answering so it doesn't seem like you're reciting a rehearsed list. Illustrating abstract qualities with examples from your last job also helps personalize your answer.

"Interviewers, like all people, remember examples, so be specific," says Ms. Petras. "Don't say that your greatest strength is your 'attention to goals,' and that you're 'motivated by challenges' and a 'perfectionist' unless you have memorable examples to prove it.

What Are Your Weaknesses?

This question is potentially more harmful than helpful and can also intimidate applicants. Realize that most interviewers don't expect you to be perfect or reveal your true weaknesses. They're just probing for soft spots. You may win points for honesty by admitting to a major weakness, but you'll also reduce your chances of getting hired. Conversely, if you give a flip answer, or respond with, "Well, I don't really have any weaknesses," you may be perceived as arrogant or lacking in candor or self-knowledge. Most career advisers recommend turning this question around and presenting a personal weakness as a professional strength. "Your objective isn't to discuss your weaknesses as much as it is to discuss how and why even your shortcomings make you an ideal candidate," says Ms. Petras.

Assume that you're detail-oriented, a workaholic and that you neglect friends and family when working on important projects. You can turn these weaknesses around by saying that you're very meticulous and remain involved in projects until you've ironed out all the problems, even if it means working overtime. This way you've cast your weaknesses into positives most bosses would find irresistible.

What Type of Salary Do You Have in Mind?

Interviewers usually ask this question to determine whether the company can afford you. If possible, defer your answer until the end of the interview when you'll know if you're a serious candidate. By answering too quickly and stating a salary that's too high or too low, you may be disqualified from consideration. If the interviewer still insists that you name a figure, ask about the position's salary range. If you don't receive a satisfactory answer and you can't stall further, cite a figure that meets your requirements and the standards within the industry. It's better to err a little on the high side since the final offer is invariably going to be lower than you requested. Then, say that it's the job, not the salary, that interests you. Be honest if the interviewer asks what you're currently earning, or earned previously, because the amount can be verified.

What Do You Like Most and Least About Your Present Job?

This question allows the interviewer to gather clues about the type of environment or corporate culture that suits you. Concentrate your answer on areas that are relevant to the position and be specific. Don't say, "I liked the atmosphere." Instead, say, "I enjoyed the camaraderie of being part of a team."

When discussing least-liked aspects of your present or previous job, try to mention an area of responsibility that's far removed from the functions of the job you're seeking. But be sure your answer indicates that you either performed the assignment well or that you learned something useful. This shows that you stick with tasks that don't particularly interest you.

Are You Applying for Any Other Jobs?

Hardly anyone expects you to say "no" to this question in today's job market. If you do, the interviewer may think you're either naive about business conditions or not serious about job hunting. Instead, say you're exploring several openings that might fit your talents and potential. Don't say that you're already weighing job offers, however. You may be viewed as uninterested in the job. "Interviewers are drawn to job candidates who really want to work for their company," says Mr. Berger. "Candidates who say, 'I think I'm interested,' usually lose to those who know they are and say so enthusiastically." On the other hand, don't wear your enthusiasm on your sleeve. You might inadvertently convey that you're desperate for the job and have already been turned down by other employers.

Why Should We Hire You?

This question entices job seekers to really sell themselves. However, many don't realize why it's asked and answer ineffectively. It's a mistake, for example, to say what you hope to gain from a job. Instead, to borrow from a famous phrase, "Ask not what the company can do for you, ask what you can do for the company."

"The interviewer who asks you this is really probing your readiness for the job, your ability to handle it, your willingness to work hard at it and your fitness for the job," says Manan Faux, a New York-based author who has written about executive interviews. Show your readiness by describing how your experience, career progression, qualities and achievements make you an asset. Highlight your ability by discussing your specific skills and accomplishments. Your willingness to work will be evident in your commitment to whatever challenges you undertake. To show fitness, say you're reliable, have integrity and will accommodate yourself to any difficulties the job entails.

Where Do You Hope to Be in Five Years?

The worst answer to this question is to say that you want to be president of the company or have the interviewer's position. These responses are too flip or threatening. Instead, "talk about what motivates you, especially what will motivate you on this job," says Ms. Faux.

"Without saying you want the boss's job, describe where you would like to be in your career in five years, as well as what you hope to have accomplished," she says.

Employers prefer candidates who think in terms of the future and set realistic goals. Saying that you're not sure where you want to be in five years may undermine your chances of landing the job. "Answers like this are a turnoff," says Annette Robson, professional employment manager at Unisys Corp. in Philadelphia. "I'm looking for people who know what they want to do and who believe that their goals and the company's are in sync."

Do You Have Any Questions?

Don't say "no," or that everything has been thoroughly discussed. The interviewer isn't likely to have uncovered every critical qualification you have for the job. Even if nothing crucial was omitted, you should try to restate why you're the most logical candidate for the opening.

If you think the interviewer has any doubts, now's the time to cast your candidacy more positively. While you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, a bad interview can sometimes be turned around by countering any misconceptions that have emerged. By saying you don't have any questions, the interviewer also may assume you're not interested in the job. Have some intelligent questions ready that show you're knowledgeable about the company and the opening. This presumes that you've done your homework and read articles about the company in trade magazines or professional journals.

Having a positive attitude and practicing in advance can help you to field tricky questions with ease. Your calmness under fire will show that you can handle crises on the job just as easily.