

Sample interview questions

Questions about your experience and accomplishments; strengths or weaknesses; and what you can bring to the job.

What are your strengths as an employee?

Review the description of the position for which you are interviewing. Clarify each specific job requirement in your mind. Now, match your strengths and accomplishments directly to the requirements of the job.

What were the most memorable accomplishments at your last job?

Focus on your most recent accomplishments, in your current position or the job you had just prior to this one. Make sure they are relevant to the position for which you are interviewing. It is also wise to think about why you were able to achieve these accomplishments in your job. (Example: I really stopped to listen to what my customers wanted, rather than just trying to sell them.)

What is the biggest failure you've had in your career? What steps have you taken to make sure something like that doesn't happen again?

In this situation, it would be unwise to produce a detailed log of your every shortcoming, misstep, and misdeed. However, don't pretend you're perfect and have never experienced failure in the course of your career, education, or life. So, compromise. The best approach is to admit to one weakness or failure, and then talk about the steps you are taking (or have taken) to make sure that you avoid that mistake in the future.

What feedback does your supervisor give you about your performance?

This is another way of framing questions regarding your strengths and weaknesses. Do you recognize your strengths or areas in your work where you can improve? Consider feedback you received to point out your strengths, and for areas where you need improvement, the steps you took to improve.

What does success mean to you?

You should offer a balanced answer to this question, citing personal as well as professional examples.

If you could start your career over again, what would you do differently?

This question is designed to get you to think on your feet. You can admit you may have had a few regrets but make sure you can show that you have learned from them or were able to turn them into a positive experience.

Why should I hire you?

Summarize your skills relevant to the job's requirements, include accomplishments and skills that facilitated those accomplishments. Be sure of yourself and enthusiastic.

Tell me about your current job.

List your duties and responsibilities. Talk about your accomplishments.

Give an example of a time you went above and beyond the call of duty to get the job done.

Give an example that demonstrates how you can be counted on to pitch in and do your best when there is an important job to be done NOW.

What methods do you use to ensure that your work is error-free?

Your work represents not only you but your boss and your agency. Taking the time to ensure that you're putting your best effort forward shows that you are conscientious about the work you do.

What do you like most about your current job?

This is a chance for them to get to know you and what you enjoy about your job.

What would you change about your current job?

Don't say anything negative about your job, your co-workers or your supervisor; you don't know who the interviewer may know! Talk about changes that are positive and reflect your work ethics.

What motivates you to do a good job?

"Money" is not a good answer. A good answer would be something like, "contributing to the agency's mission and being acknowledged when the job is done well".

Who are your heroes? Why?

Employers want to hear the positive traits you admire in others and how you strive to embody those traits.

What kind of training have you received in the last three years?

Employers want to see that you have taken steps to expand your knowledge, especially with training directly related to your job. However, if your current employer does not allow you to attend training, say so politely, adding that if you were hired for this job, you would like to take any training that was offered to you.

Of the jobs you have held, which one have you enjoyed the most and why?

This question is designed to get to know you. Talk about your duties, challenges, responsibilities, accomplishments and the people you worked with.

Out of the jobs you have held, which one did you like the least and why?

Don't speak negatively about the job, your co-workers or your supervisor; you don't know who the interviewer may know! Talk about what you disliked but add a positive note. (Example: I think the workload could have been better distributed.)

What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?

Talk about a process or procedure that you initiated on your own that was adopted by your employer; or when you pitched in to help a co-worker on a big project without being asked or told; or when you came up with an idea that saved your employer time or money.

What role do you like to take in an assigned project?

An employer wants to hear that you can, and would, be capable of taking on a variety of roles, such as leader, team player or observer.

Why are you thinking of leaving your current job?

Do not appear negative or speak badly about your current employer. Refer to potential growth and how change can be positive. (Example: There is a great deal I enjoy about my current job, but my potential for growth in this area is limited.)

How many employers have you worked for in the past five years?

If you have worked for many (over 5) be prepared to explain why.

Working with Others

Tell me about the people you have trouble getting along with or who have trouble getting along with you.

Be careful of how you answer this question. If you say “none,” the interviewer will assume you’re being vague or avoiding the question. Think about the position you are interviewing for. Every job has challenges and a variety of people you may work with. Ultimately the interviewer wants to know that you can work professionally with anyone to accomplish a goal. Discuss a situation where you worked with challenging situations or personalities, and how you were successful.

Do you prefer to work by yourself or with others?

Depending on the job, the interviewer probably wants to see that you can do both – that you can work as part of a team, and can work independently. You may want to discuss the benefits of both.

How would your co-workers describe you?

Answer in the positive. Are you easy going, a good team player, responsible?

Your supervisor left an assignment in your in-box, then left for the week. You can’t reach him and you don’t fully understand the assignment. What would you do?

The interviewer is attempting to measure whether you utilize any available resources and if you have an appropriate respect for hierarchy and deadline demands. If there is truly no way to reach your boss and there are no other resources, then you need to approach your boss’ supervisor. Of course, you would do this in a way that would not reflect badly on your boss by explaining that you and your boss simply missed the chance to discuss the assignment before he had to leave the office. You want to be sure that you understand the assignment, so you can start on it as soon as possible.

Your supervisor tells you to do something that is against policy. What do you do?

Tough question. There may be times and special circumstances where there are exceptions to policy. You would want to discuss the current policy with your supervisor to ensure you have a complete understanding of it, but convey that you would follow their direction.

Can you take constructive criticism without feeling upset? Give an example.

When used correctly, constructive criticism is a tool which will allow you to do your job better. An employer wants to know that you are open to learning new things and that you don’t get defensive or upset.

Define cooperation.

Cooperation means different things to different people, so an employer could be looking for several different answers. They want to know if you can get along with others.

Was there ever a time where you had to deal with a difficult or argumentative person? How did you handle the situation?

Employers want to hear that you can stay calm and cool in a tense situation; that you don't inflame the situation by arguing back. And, if the situation warrants, you know when to step away and get a supervisor.

Tell me about a situation where you and another person disagreed and resolved your disagreement. How did you reach that point?

Employers want to hear that you can stay calm and cool in a tense situation; that you don't inflame the situation by arguing back and that you were able to use logic and reason to reach a mutually agreeable resolution. They want to hear that if you are unable to reach a mutually agreeable decision, then you would agree to consult a supervisor.

What do you feel an employer owes an employee?

This is not an invitation to discuss the employee benefits package you would like to have. Don't get into legal responsibilities either. Keep your answer short and sweet. (Example: I think an employer owes its employees the opportunity to develop new skills and to be thoroughly trained in the job they are expected to perform).

Organizational Skills and Time Management

How would you describe your organizational skills?

Talk in detail about the organizational skills that you have developed: time management, project management, prioritizing, delegation and how those skills have made you more effective.

Do you manage time well?

Hopefully you can be truthful and say yes. Give an example to show your time management skills.

Tell me about the last time you failed to complete a project (or assignment) on time?

Be specific in your answer. Here's what happened, here's what I did, here's what I learned.

How do you take initiative when requirements on the job are slow?

This question is designed to figure out your time management skills and initiative. How do you fill your time when there is a lull in work requirements? Do you volunteer to assist in other projects or possibly assist in other duties where there is a need?

On a typical day, tell me what you do in the first and last hour at work?

This question is checking for honesty and a good use of your time.

Describe a time where you had what seemed like a million things going on at once. How did you prioritize your workload? Were you successful?

You're never going to have only one thing to do at work, so being able to organize yourself and your priorities is essential. Give an example of how you handle multiple tasks.

Tell me about a time where you used your organizational skills to solve a problem.

Perhaps your organizational skills alone did not solve a problem, but they may have helped to avoid a problem or assisted you in solving a problem.

Problem Solving Skills

How do you go about making important decisions?

Think in terms of the interviewer's main concerns. Will you need to be analytical? Creative? Willing to call on the expertise of others? If you are interested in a management position, you will also want to take this opportunity to convince the interviewer that your relationship skills have made you management material – or set you on the way to achieving that goal. You may be asked to talk about the last important decision you had to make, how you went about making it, and the results you achieved.

Do you anticipate problems well or merely react to them?

Wherever possible, anticipating problems is best so disruptions to work are avoided. Describe an example where you anticipated a problem, and how you addressed it. If you had to react to a problem because it could not be foreseen, describe how you addressed this.

How do you generally handle conflict?

Answer this question positively and give an example of how you effectively handled a disagreement or other conflict.

Did you initiate new procedures in your previous position? Tell me about them.

You do not have to be a department head to answer this question. The interviewer is seeking industriousness, creativity, caring about the organization and its success. So, this is the time to describe the changes or improvements you were responsible for making and identify how they helped the department.

Tell me about an improvement you independently made in your work process. How did this improvement help you or others?

Employers are looking for creativity, organizational skills and innovative thinking. If you modified a process in the office that streamlined the workflow in the office; if you merged two computer systems to create one; if you created a process that improved customer service, etc.

What was the biggest change you have ever faced at a job and how did you adapt?

Employers want to hear that you can deal with change without it causing trouble or creating difficulties. How did you adapt to the change? They also want to see that you are open to new challenges or processes in your work environment.

Tell me about a project for which you were responsible, but needed the help of others to complete the project. What did you do?

Sometimes the hardest thing to do is ask for help. Employers want to see if you are able to determine when a task is beyond your ability to do it alone; how you ask for help; and how you work with the newly formed team. They also want to see if you just let a project fail because you didn't ask for assistance.

Management Skills:

Have you ever fired anyone? Why?

Even if you had a good reason, you know that firing someone is never pleasant. Let's say you fired someone for not meeting productivity goals. You do not want to express your personal feelings about the individual but keep it focused on their work product. You could say something like: "Yes I fired someone who continually fell short of his productivity goals. His shortcomings were documented and discussed with him over a period of months. But in that time, he failed to show any real improvement. As a supervisor, I want everyone in my department to work out, but I have to acknowledge when it is not a good fit."

Describe your management philosophy.

Most agencies want someone who can demonstrate a desire and ability to delegate, teach, and distribute work – and credit – fairly. In general, you probably want to come across as neither a dictator nor a pushover. A successful candidate should convey that he or she has the ability to succeed and work with a team of employees to accomplish a goal.

How do you motivate people?

A good answer will include the words, "it depends on the person," and then offer one or two concrete examples. A poor answer will imply that all people are motivated by the same thing or can be motivated with the same approach, a kind of "one-size-fits-all" philosophy.

How do you deal with subordinates who are becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution?

The interviewer is trying to identify the leaders who work to solve a problem, and to ascertain whether your particular style will work well within the organization.

You are a supervisor of a busy payroll office. Two of your employee just called in and will be out sick for the next two weeks. How do you deal with this unexpected event?

Discuss how you must immediately reprioritize your assignments and pitch in to get the job done.

Communication

How do you “stay in the loop”?

How do you keep yourself informed of what is going on in your bureau or department? How many meetings do you schedule or attend per week or month? Do you spend a lot of time asking your subordinates questions or do you wait for them to come to you with problems?

How would you rate your writing skills in comparison to your verbal skills?

Discuss how both skills are important in the work environment, and that while (one or the other) may be your strong suit, you are working to become strongly proficient at both verbal and written communication.

Do you have any questions?

You should never answer this with a no. If you have asked questions along the way you would answer this with “I think you have answered all of my questions. I truly appreciate the time you have given me today”.

If you have not asked any questions, see Appendix 10 for a listing of questions you could ask at the interview.