

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

This question is not an icebreaker. Sell yourself to the potential employer immediately by naming your greatest strength and giving an example of how you've used it in the past:

"I'm a highly self-motivated professional with a passion for customer service. I've just earned my B.A. at Johnson & Wales University, and have been working for the past three years at the Marriott hotel. At the Marriott, I was able to increase return occupancy by ten percent by establishing outstanding relationships with our first-time clients. I've also earned the "Excellence in Customer Service" award three times in the last two years. My main motivation is to provide excellent service and establish those great client relationships. Now that I've graduated, I hope to pursue new opportunities as a member of your team."

2. Why are you applying for this job/at this company?

Show your interviewer what you know about the company and how its goals and values fit with your own.

"I've done some research on the industry and on this company. You really stand out as innovators; for example, you were the first major franchise to offer a completely vegetarian menu. My long-term goal is to be a kitchen manager at a solid company. What I find so interesting about this one is that you're not afraid to try out fresh, new ideas, and at the same time, you have a long-term formula that really works. I also understand that the company has established career paths, which appeals to me, because I intend to stay with one organization for the next several years."

3. Name a few of your strengths.

Don't be shy. They don't want to know about your modesty. They want to know what makes you a great employee. When you talk about specific strengths, make sure you have stories that illustrate your claims:

"I have excellent leadership skills. As a student at Johnson & Wales, I participated in many group projects and presentations, one of which was a bit more difficult than the others. Our team members all had unique strengths, but none were comfortable speaking in front of a group. I took the initiative to script our presentation, assigning a cooperative role to each co-presenter. I came up with a collaborative way to present our material that took the pressure off of each individual and made us all look good. We ended up getting the highest possible mark!"

4. Why should we hire you? How will you contribute to our company?

This question can be answered like Question 1. Instead of concentrating on a single strength, however, you can talk about a few.

When choosing the strengths that you will highlight, consider the nature of the job. Does it require someone with great time-management skills? The ability to multi-task? Choose skills that your potential employer will find attractive, (if you truly possess them).

5. Describe your working style.

Be concise and to-the-point, and always mention that you focus on the bottom line:

"I work as hard as it takes to get the job done, and I take pride in the results. If necessary, I take extra time and go above and beyond the call of duty to achieve those results."

Then, describe a time when you did, in fact, go beyond the call of duty to get the job done well.

6. Tell me about a time when you had to solve a difficult problem.

Remember PAR: Problem, Action, Result

Problem: “On a class project for my Introduction to Hospitality course, I worked with two other students who just didn’t see eye to eye. (*Remember, never mention a time when you personally quarreled with a colleague or classmate.*) It seemed to me that they didn’t have too many actual differences—they just didn’t seem able to communicate. It was really holding up the project.”

Action: “I had just finished a course on organizational behavior and communication styles, so it occurred to me that I could use my knowledge to figure out why they were having so many misunderstandings. I went back to my old textbooks and even talked to my old professor. He helped me to think of ways to help smooth over the arguments that would arise from time to time.”

Result: “Even though my teammates continued to have differences, we were able to work together to finish our project successfully and with very high marks!”

7. Tell me about a time when you exceeded expectations.

You can use the format explained in Question 6, especially if there was a specific problem you needed to help solve. Otherwise, you can just tell your interviewer what you did that was special:

“I was working on the wait staff at a downtown diner a few years ago. There were a lot of regulars I’d gotten to know who were really nice to me. Around December, I decided to get a few extra holiday cards. When a regular came in, I would sign one (from the restaurant) and hand it to him or her along with the bill. I figure it never hurts to create goodwill by showing a little appreciation! My manager loved the idea, and now we do it for all of our regulars, every year!”

8. Tell me about a time when you assumed a leadership role.

You can answer in the way described by Question 3, or you can use PAR (Problem, Action, Result). Just make sure that you have a good story prepared for a question like this.

9. Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of, and why?

An interview is not the time to be bashful about your achievements. Your potential employer wants to know what you’ve done and what you’re capable of doing. Before you go into an interview, make sure you’ve really thought about your previous accomplishments. People often forget how many notable things they’ve done until they consider all of their life, work, and school experiences, one by one.

When answering this question, use the format described in either Question 3, 6, or 7.

10. What would your last employer/former coworkers say about you?

Always mention what former employers would say about your outstanding work ethic. Beyond that, you can talk about your punctuality, verbal or written communication skills, creative talent, or perseverance—anything that would benefit the company. Never, ever mention any negative traits that might come to the mind of a previous boss or co-worker.

11. Tell me about your weaknesses.

Be very careful not to make yourself look bad. When describing your weaknesses, make them as harmless as possible. For example, you might mention your difficulty with finding your way around new places (unless the position—like a hospitality job—requires you to be good at it). Or you might talk about having a little trouble with names (again, unless your job requires you to be good with them).

When you’ve very briefly discussed your *one* difficulty, always tell a short story about how you’ve worked through that difficulty. For example, you might say that because you care about developing good relationships with your colleagues, you developed a system to help you remember their names. Turn the interviewer’s focus away from your difficulty and toward your strengths! Another example:

"I used to be really afraid of speaking in front of large groups of people. (*Don't mention this if you're looking for a job that requires a lot of public speaking.*) It's something that I work to overcome by making sure I'm thoroughly prepared and confident about my knowledge of the material I present."

Some people like to say that they work too hard, or that they're terrible perfectionists. These answers have become a bit of a cliché, and it's best to come up with something else.

12. Are you a team player?

Always tell a potential employer that you're a team player. Even if you enjoy working independently, you're always part of a team effort. If you're a very solitary person, talk about the pride you take in making an outstanding contribution to the team with the skills you use independently (like writing, for example). And if you're a people person, you might talk about your efforts to build team spirit or to keep the peace.

13. What position do you prefer on a team project?

If you enjoy taking a leadership position, go ahead and say so. If you prefer to stay behind the scenes, working hard on the small details that make a project successful, you can say that, too. There's no wrong answer here, as long as you show enthusiasm for working as part of a team.

14. How do you handle difficult coworkers?

It's important not to fall into a trap here. Your interviewer might be trying to find out if you have trouble working with others. Therefore, it's best to tell him or her that you've been lucky enough to have very agreeable coworkers. Then, say what you would do *if* you encountered a difficult coworker:

"I really haven't had too many problems with coworkers in the past. If I did meet someone whose viewpoint or working style was radically different from my own, I'd do my best to put myself in his or her shoes. I'd try to see things from his or her point of view and to work out any differences with that understanding. I enjoy learning about different perspectives."

15. What irritates you about coworkers?

Again, don't fall into the trap mentioned in Question 14. Instead of mentioning what drives you crazy, talk positively about learning from the differences among people.

16. Have you ever been asked to leave a position?

You must be honest about this. If you were laid off due to circumstances that were beyond your control, tell the interviewer what they were. Then say something positive about what you did with your new free time:

"The recession really hurt the last company I worked for. A lot of positions had to be terminated, including mine. But if it weren't for my layoff, I would never have been able to take a temporary job at the library. I learned so much!"

If you were fired for poor performance, you must also be honest about it. At the same time, you should go into as little detail as possible about the nature of your performance, and talk about your termination as a learning experience. Never try to shift the blame onto somebody else, no matter how much you think it's deserved.

"I was released from my last job—an administrative position—because I wasn't working quickly enough. I decided to use my new free time to take a weeklong typing class, and now I can type 90 words per minute. It was a learning experience. In retrospect, I wish I had taken the course while I was employed. My employers at my recent temporary jobs have already commented on how fast I can type, which is a great feeling. I want to do the best job I possibly can, and if I need to learn a skill that's tough for me, I'm glad to do it!"

17. Why did you leave your last job?

If you resigned from a past position, don't say anything negative about your duties, salary, boss, or coworkers. Instead, tell them that it was the right time to move on in pursuit of your goals. For example:

"I'm working toward my goal of becoming a chef. Since my company didn't have a great career track, and because my job as a prep cook didn't challenge me anymore, I decided to look for a job that would!"

18. How long would you expect to work for us?

It's crucial for an interviewer to find someone who intends to stay with the company for a long time. Tell him or her that you hope to pursue a career track within the company, and that you intend to become a longtime contributor.

19. Are you willing to put the interests of the organization ahead of your own?

Your answer should be "Yes." This doesn't mean that you'll be putting the company before your family or your long-term goals. It means that you will work toward the good of the organization, whether or not your own ideas are used or promoted. It means that if you have an important deadline or project, you will do whatever it takes—even if that means clocking a reasonable amount of extra time—to get your work done.

20. Tell me about a problem you had with a supervisor.

This is a trap like the one described in Question 14. The interviewer wants to know if you're difficult to work with. Even if you had the most awful supervisor in the world, you must forget him or her for now. Tell the interviewer what you do to maintain excellent relationships with your bosses. Then, talk about a hypothetical difficulty you might have with a boss in the future, and how you would go about getting through the situation:

"I must say that I've been very lucky to avoid difficulty with my supervisors. I always do my very best to follow instructions to the letter, and when I don't understand them, I ask questions. If I had a boss with a very different communication style from my own, and if that difference caused problems, I would ask if there was anything I could do to make the situation easier for both of us. I would explain to him or her that I needed a little extra guidance to make sure that I understood his or her needs."

21. What qualities do you look for in a boss?

Don't say that you're looking for a good friend or confidant, and don't list particular personality traits. Instead, tell the interviewer about the kind of working relationship you prefer. If that means you like a fair amount of direction, go ahead and say so. If you prefer to be allowed to figure things out on your own, or if you have a particular communication style that works best for you, it's okay to say that, too.

Steer clear of any answers that suggest you might have had a bad experience with a past employer.

"I really enjoy working under someone who gives me a very clear sense of what they need me to do. I've had the pleasure of working with employers who were very assertive and who didn't mind my asking a lot of questions."

22. Tell me about your ability to work under pressure/deadlines.

If you're being asked this question, it probably means that your job will involve pressure or deadlines. So, hopefully you handle them just fine! When answering the question, be firm about your ability to work productively, regardless of the circumstances.

23. Are you willing to work overtime or on weekends?

This is up to you. If it's impossible for you to work overtime or on weekends, you must let the interviewer know up front.

24. Are you willing to travel? How much?

Be absolutely honest about this. If you're not willing to travel, say so.

25. How do you learn from mistakes?

Say that you view mistakes as an opportunity to grow as a person and to improve as an employee. Then consider how you actually set out to learn from those mistakes--perhaps you write about it in your journal? Maybe you practice doing something over and over until you know how to do it correctly by heart. Whatever your chosen method, tell the interviewer about it.

26. Which job have you enjoyed the most?

Stay focused on the job duties itself, not on your coworkers or on the setting. For example, tell the interviewer that you loved working at a day camp because you enjoyed having a positive influence on kids; don't talk about how much fun you had with the other camp counselors or the fact that the camp was in a beautiful location.

27. Tell me about the most fun you have had on the job.

Like in Question 26, your interviewer wants to hear what you like about working:

"I was a hostess at a steakhouse last year, where I got to interact personally with all our customers. I loved making guests feel welcome and working to meet their unique needs. I even learned to anticipate what guests might need—for example, if people came in with small children, they always liked it if I put a stack of extra napkins on their table, or found some paper and crayons for the kids. Eventually, I got to know the regulars, which made my job even more fun. My old boss tells me that some of them even ask how I'm doing these days."

28. Did you enjoy your major area of study in school? What did you like about it?

Say that you enjoyed your schooling very much and that you learned a great deal. Before your interview, think about a few specific things that you found truly exciting about your major area of study. Then be sure you can talk about them intelligently when your interviewer asks you to describe them.

29. How has your education prepared you for your chosen career?

Outline the skills you learned that you believe will apply to the job you're applying for. Then talk about how your education made you into the kind of valuable employee you are today. Maybe you participated in a lot of team projects that trained you to be a leader. Or maybe your academic studies made you into a brilliant multi-tasker and manager of time.

It's important to outline both the general work skills *and* the specific expertise that you gained from your education.

30. Why did you decide to go back to school/switch careers?

Avoid making any negative comments about previous schooling or employment. It's best to say that you simply hadn't found your calling at a younger age. Then describe what triggered your change of heart; for example, you could talk about a book or a class that opened your eyes to a new, exciting, and more challenging line of work. Tell the interviewer that with greater experience and maturity, you know yourself better and can make more informed decisions about your appropriate career path.

If you decided to return to school for a more advanced degree in the same general area, don't say that you wanted to gain earning power. Instead, say that your line of work had become less challenging, and that you wished to pursue a more advanced career path that was only possible with more education.

31. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Talk mainly about your career goals, and always make them work for the company:

"I see myself in a more senior position at this organization, taking on greater challenges and more responsibility."

32. What is more important to you: money or type of work?

In an interview, you must always stress that you're excited to do the job, and not to earn the money. Even if you're chiefly interested in making a good living, your potential employers must believe that you will be committed to your work, so tell them that you are excited to begin (or continue on) a career path that you care about.

33. What motivates you to do a great job?

You want to convey to the interviewer that you're very self-motivated. In other words, it's not money, rewards, or status that makes you work hard. It's the pleasure of knowing that you've done your best to create a magnificent product or to make your clients happy (for example).

34. Do you have any questions for me?

You do! Ideally, you have 5-10 very thoughtful questions outlined well before the day of your interview. Don't ask every question; choose the three or four most relevant questions that were not answered during the interview.