4 Common Interview Questions

One of the easiest ways to build confidence before a job interview is to prepare answers to questions you might be asked. Whether you're applying for a position as web programmer, accountant, or legal secretary, interviewers often use some general questions to assess candidates, so you'll increase your chances for success if you prepare for them in advance.

Six common questions are listed below, along with insights from several recruitment professionals about how to answer. As part of your interview preparation, take the time to formulate answers to each question, focusing on specific tasks and accomplishments.

"What are your strengths and weaknesses?"
This is one of the most well-known interview questions, and interviewers often ask it indirectly, as in, "What did your most recent boss suggest as areas for improvement in your last performance review?" Lindsay Olson, founder of Paradigm Staffing Solutions, a firm specializing in hiring public relations professionals, suggests tailoring your "strengths" answer to skills that will benefit the prospective employer. Though you may have a knack for building gingerbread houses, it might be of little value for the job at hand.

When it comes to weaknesses, or areas of growth, Olson recommends building on your answer to include "how you have improved, and specifics on what you have done to improve yourself in those areas."

"Why did you leave your last position?"
"Interviewers will always want to know your reasoning behind leaving a company? particularly short stints," says Olson. "Be prepared to tell the truth, without speaking negatively about past employment."

"Can you describe a previous work situation in which you...?"
This question comes in many forms, but what the interviewer is looking for is your behavior on the job. Your answer could focus on resolving a crisis, overcoming a negotiation deadlock, handling a problem coworker, or juggling multiple tasks on a project.

The theory behind this type of question is that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, according to Yves Lermusi, CEO of Checkster, a company that offers career and talent checkup tools. "The key to responding well is preparing real job examples, describing your behavior in specific situations that demonstrate important skills that the job requires."

"What is your ideal work environment?"
This question is not about whether you prefer a cubicle or an office, so think broadly to include ideas about supervision, management styles, and your workday routine.
Bob Hancock, senior recruiter for video game publisher Electronic Arts, says that he uses this question with candidates because it can give "a sense of their work habits, how flexible they are with their schedules, and how creative they are."

"How do you handle mistakes?"
The best strategy for this general question is to focus on one or two specific examples in the past and, if possible, highlight resolutions or actions that might have relevance to the job you're interviewing for. "Employers want to know they're hiring someone with the maturity to accept responsibility and the wherewithal to remedy their own mistakes," says Debra Davenport, a master professional mentor and columnist for the Business Journal in Phoenix.

"What is your most notable accomplishment?"
Paradigm Staffing's Olson suggests that candidates think of three or four accomplishments and quantify what their actions meant in terms of increasing revenues, saving resources, or improving resources. "Being able to quantify your achievements in your career will launch you ahead of the rest," she says, "and demonstrate your ability to do the same as a future employee."