Business Interviews

Frequent Questions

Acceptable Answers

by David P. Boyd

After participating as a partner in the evolution of a small company to the point where it could be profitably sold—a process which took three years—I ventured into the job market in an attempt to sell my supposed entrepreneurial skills. It soon appeared 40 corporations over a period of 6 months. I observed that certain questions were asked repeatedly by interviewers. An examination of these questions and the ways they may be answered should acquaint the neophyte jobhunter with the principles that seem to govern a business interview.

In the first place, obtaining an interview may be an achievement in itself. Resume blitzes result in a surprisingly low response. Even if receipt of a resume is acknowledged, too often there is the familiar clause about "retention in the active file." How many applicants have resumes activated from the "active file?" Newspaper ads also have a low yield. Such notices are often phrased to describe the person already chosen for the job; the position is advertised to comply with certain federal regulations. Search firms can be equally disappointing. They appear to specialize in ego-building tactics. Lines like the following abound: "The moment you walked through that door, I knew you had executive potential." In my experience, genuine opportunities for employment from this source proved to be few. These standard but unreliable avenues underscore the importance of personal contacts. Friends may not place you, but they can arrange a meeting.

Below are listed the ten most frequently recurring questions. The figure in parentheses indicates the number of interviews during which the particular question was asked.

1. What are your major strengths? (40)
2. What are your major weaknesses? (35)
3. How is your previous experience applicable to the work we do here? (37)
4. Why did you leave your former job? (33)
5. Is there someone we can contact who is familiar with your activities? (13)
6. Where do you see yourself in this company ten years from now? (27)
7. What are your interests outside of work? (22)
8. What do you want to be remembered for? (16)
9. Are you applying to other companies? (27)
10. What kind of compensation are you looking for? (40)

In recommending a study of these questions, I do not intend to offer pat answers. Even when familiar with the issues, one must preserve an air of spontaneity. The primary purpose of this paper is pragmatic. It has the positive value of being based on actual experience.

1. What are your major strengths? Self-evaluation is obviously difficult. Equally difficult is revealing this evaluation to others. The stark nature or the question might prompt you to chew a short cigar or bark your replies. Clearly some form of assertiveness is invited. This seems to be necessary because "he's our hustler" or "she's our hotshot" were frequent comments by interviewers—and comments not meant to be derogatory. Such remarked suggest a correlation in the interviewer's mind between the incumbent's energy and the company's growth. Even in staid firms there is a palpable emphasis on bringing in new accounts and finding new markets. One New England corporation makes a point of recruiting athletes, especially football players. Heroes of the gridiron are not reluctant to knock on the President's door—and, as a well known head hunter commented, "not only knock, but knock loudly." Of course, constitutional energy by itself is not sufficient. But it is a vehicle by which personal skills may be conveyed to the interviewer.

What specific skills are being sought? One is surely the ability to communicate. This phrase means many things. There is an oral aspect—command of the spoken word—which will presumably surface at the interview. There is a written dimension which can in some cases be substantiated by publications. Publication, incidentally, is an excellent way to profit from experience since it requires a clear statement of what has been learned. Writing forces one to be analytical; it enhances powers of observation and expression. Finally, communication involves a human dimension—relating to people and, especially influencing them. To say "I enjoy dealing with people" is ineffective. Who would say otherwise except a misanthrope? To declare "I don't have adjustment problems" sounds defensive. To announce "I get along with all kinds of people from chief executive officers to custodians" assumes an elitist posture since you are ranking people according to socio-economic criteria. A more forceful comment would emphasize your ability to assess the effectiveness of a group. Some indication of the capacity to present alternatives quickly and to direct others would be persuasive.

2. What are your major weaknesses? Weaknesses are a double jeopardy issue. If nothing is said, you will appear wanting in both humility and insight. If something serious is revealed, you may destroy your chances. To find a safe refuge, it is a temptation to retreat behind vagueness. Witness the following: "I feel that my weaknesses are not so much persistent and recurrent as they are related to a given situation and context. On some occasions, I reach a threshold of tolerance more quickly than others." Mellifluous language cannot substitute for a stand taken. Crisp, tightly knit answers proved to be most effective.

The best strategy is to present a strength as a weakness. No deceit is implied. Take the following: "I show a certain restlessness if things are not completed within my timetable." Who can fault such a "fault?" Or, "I am unhappy in an environment where I can't see the end result. I don't like things piecemeal. I need a sense of total design." This "failing" is an essential characteristic of an executive! Of course, moderation must prevail. If you fault yourself for excessive
3. How is your previous experience applicable to the work we do here? Slant your experience toward the present opportunity. For instance, I owned a business jointly with my brother. Intimations of a family business aroused suspicion. Apparently the family concept introduced a new factor-the possibility that performance might not always have been judged objectively. Emphasis on personal business initiative produced a far more favorable atmosphere; it evoked the image of a self starter rather than a habitual of a leather chair. Even while slanting experience in a subtle yet truthful manner, one must beware of appearing circumscribed. For example, a job objective on a resume might exclude you form positions for which you might well be qualified. More detailed specifications can always be given in a supplementary letter. Spare your listener. Be parsimonious with your words and economical with his time. Some basic numbers are a simple and effective way of reinforcing the points you are making. For example, statistics concerning increases in gross sales or product diversification carry more meaning than a lengthy discourse. In short, behave as you might on the witness stand. Answer the question; then stop. Remember, you don't have to explain what you don't say.

Finally, if previous experience seems a liability, emphasize what you got out of it in spite of its defects. Do not try to justify shortcomings. The key is to anticipate possible prior deficiencies-real or fancied-which might surface as embarrassing questions. You will then have the opportunity to dispose of them. You may even be given credit for astute observation. To cite another example from personal experience: I have a higher degree in sociology. This fact, and indeed the subject itself, was greeted with dismay. "Sociology," growled one interviewer. "We've had a few of them in here. Really messed up the place." Another interviewer exclaimed: "Sociology doesn't exist. It's a nonsubject." But even an apparent liability can be transmuted. After agreeing with the prevailing premise-for sociology has made titanic blunders-I pointed out that my work was in applied sociology. This area, at least, has the advantage of researching issues and attempting to answer specific, pragmatic questions. I also stressed the quantitative nature of the work and hinted that a similar design could be applied to many corporate problems.

The question itself-that is, the applicability of prior experience-is double-directed, toward previous responsibilities and future aspirations. Know something about the company to which you are applying by studying its annual report carefully. In addition, learn something of the industry as a whole. This information may come from prior interviews. These early interviews can be charged to research as well as job-hunting. Such sessions thus serve two purposes: opportunity for gaining background knowledge and development of contacts which may be useful later.

4. Why did you leave your former job? Since this is a personal question, not too much can be said. One point should be stressed: Beware of shortcomings that may apply to your next position. Cite weaknesses relating strictly and, if possible, uniquely, to the situation you left. Presumably, you are applying to the new company because it does not share these defects. This is, of course, one more reason to familiarize yourself thoroughly with the new company before the interview.

5. Is there someone we can contact who is familiar with your activities? Sometimes this is an expression of interest; other times it is an attempt to learn if you departed on amiable terms. At every major affiliation retain a few friends who will write for you and keep them aware of your current activities. In selecting references, remember the importance of both title and terminology. Your family doctor of bosom buddy may lack not only a corporate position but also the ability to write about functions in your field. In a general way, skilled interviewers seemed to be interested in four areas: character, competence, personal stability, and a catch all that might be called special gifts or attributes. Writers of reference letters should be chosen with these interests in mind.

6. Where do you see yourself in this company in ten years from now? The old joke used to be "occupying your chair." Any such reply seems brash rather than bold and conceited rather than confident. Say nothing about the position you expect to hold in another ten years. In the interviews, ambivalence was often expressed toward "golden degrees" and "whiz kids." Yet employers still seem to welcome an approach featuring a master plan based on expertise. There are questions your interviewer will want answered: "Have you fixed in your mind some set of objectives? Have you given thought not just to next year but to the long term?" Thus you must try to relate your vocational interests to the specific company. Otherwise, you could be asked why you are applying. But for reasons of diplomacy, emphasize your interest in problem solving rather than in the problems themselves. To the question "What do you expect to be doing in ten years?" an answer such as the following, if sincere, cannot be faulted: "I want to be the best, or one of the best, at whatever I am doing at that time. All the things I could possibly desire would follow."

7. What are your interests outside of work? Most of us have special interests. We are assessed and in part defined by these interests. Interviewers try to construct a profile of the "whole man or woman." One quality seems especially valued: is the "real you" people-oriented? Certain affiliations and civic involvement help establish this point. An official capacity is good, but not to the degree where it might interfere with a responsible job. "How do you spend your free time?" was a recurrent question. While this may be an infringement of privacy, the motivation is apparent; in today's world industry is expected and, in turn, expects employees to participate in community activities of all kinds. On the other hand, when volunteering information, a measure of caution is in order. When I listed tennis as an activity, the interviewer asked me who had won a recent tournament. The lesson here is clear.

8. What do you want to be remembered for? This question touches on a philosophy of life, though one is not being asked to outshine Aristotle or even to be able to tell Figaro from Plato. It is thus a variant of questions six and seven. In a way you are being asked to balance corporate against personal life. The prudent course is not to opt too overtly for one over the other. In your answer include the importance of both. Nor does the wording of the question always have a philosophic bent. In an interview at a products firm, I was asked: "What epitaph do you want inscribed on your tombstone?" After a few whimsical remarks about cremation, I realized the
questioner was in earnest.

9. Are you applying to other companies? Here a direct answer is in order—an honest "yes." The simplistic approach (your company is the only company) does not work. Moreover, pluralism can work to your advantage by encouraging an interested interviewer to name a deadline; if one is not forthcoming, you can legitimately inquire so that you can align prospects. It is not necessary or advisable to identify other companies.

10. What kind of compensation are you looking for? This is not always a negotiable item; it is sometimes set. Where there is leeway, aim slightly above realistic expectations. You will never get more than you ask for. Intelligent inquiries about fringe benefits are always in order. What about health coverage, pension plans, and profit-sharing schemes? Such interest carefully phrased implies financial acumen rather than sheer materialism.

In closing, some final thoughts are offered. Your interviews may seem unrewarding in the beginning. In spite of disheartening experiences, increasing exposure enables you to enjoy interviews as sociological adventures. Familiarity breeds confidence. Second, insist on your privilege to question the questioner. Your interrogation should be searching, based on homework relative to the company and your own growing interview experience. Be adroitly explicit and decorously forceful. Convey the impression that you, too, have criteria. If you project a sense of self-worth, you are more likely to be well regarded by others. After conducting a grueling interview, one executive looked at his watch and announced: "Well I guess that takes care of things." Docile up to this point, I replied: "From my point of view, there are one or two things that are still unsettled." I proceeded to ask polite but firm questions on this particular company's new capitalization venture, including benefits that might possibly result for me if I was hired. The interviewer reacted not with hostility but with a degree of paternalism, apparently impressed by my knowledge of the firm's activities and my enthusiasm for them. I had somehow managed to put the interviewer on the defensive—resulting in the latter's desire to explain and justify his company's business policy.

Third, make sure you leave with a clear understanding of who will initiate the next step—and its timing. Offer some expression of enthusiasm, implying that your interest has increased during the interview; this remark will be welcome for it is the interviewer who has aroused the interest. Yet remember that a certain detachment enhances your appeal. Do not convey tension about unemployment.

The dynamics of some interviews may be unpleasant, and yet abundantly instructive to the discerning tyro. Excessive criticism from the other side of the desk, particularly when uttered by a person with little knowledge of you experience, may be warning that the job is not for you. Recall Disraeli's injunction that "it is much easier to be critical than to be correct." You may not be happy in such a setting. After all, you will be in contact with these people every day.

Finally, much of the foregoing has been directed to the man or woman who is currently between jobs. It is equally applicable to those entering the market place for the first time. Perhaps it is easier to be placed if you already have a job but, even then, hints of impending trouble may appear on the horizon for any of us at any time. The principles spelled out here still hold, so when the darkness deepens, it's time to start preparing answers, with these ten questions as a guide.