

## Commonly Asked Interview Questions

### 1. Why do you want to work in this industry?

- **Bad answer:**

“I love politics. I a huge fan of Obama and find his message for change very inspiring.”

  - Don’t just say you like it. Anyone can do that. Focus instead on your history with government and especially in that agency, and if you can, tell a success story.
- **Good answer:**

“I am fascinated by the way government works with lawmakers to accomplish change. In light of recent political events and the Obama Administration’s movements, we are already seeing how much the government can accomplish when the right people and resources are utilized. This is especially true for energy conservation efforts with the Department of Energy. When I worked at my previous employer, I initiated efforts to create a more “green” office – decreasing paper and electricity use by 25% after three months – saving the company \$10,000 that year. Working in the administrative office of the DoE, with its resources, I know I could take this type of project to the next level. I would find career and personal fulfillment in that.”

### 2. Tell us about yourself.

- **Bad answer:**

“I graduated four years ago from the University of Michigan, with a Bachelor’s in Biology – but I decided that wasn’t the right path for me. So I switched gears and got my first job, working in sales for a startup. Then I went on to work in legislative affairs for a law firm that worked with the Feds. After that, I took a few months off to travel. Finally, I came back and worked in government and legal work. And now, here I am, looking for a more challenging legislative role.”

  - Instead of giving a chronological work history, focus on your strengths and how they pertain to the role. If possible, illustrate with examples.
- **Good answer:**

“I’m really energetic, and a great communicator. Working in sales for two years helped me build confidence, and taught me the importance of customer loyalty. I’ve also got a track record of success. In my last role, I launched a company newsletter, which helped us build on our existing relationships and create new ones. Because of this, we ended up seeing a revenue increase of 10% over two years. I’m also really interested in how companies can use web tools to better market themselves, and would be committed to building on your existing platform. This is especially important as the government moves into more Web 2.0 initiatives.”

### 3. What do you think of your previous boss?

- **Bad answer:**

“He was completely incompetent, and a nightmare to work with, which is why I’ve moved on”

- Remember: if you get the job, the person interviewing you will one day be your previous boss. The last thing they want is to hire someone who they know is going to bad-mouth them some day. Instead of trashing your former employer, stay positive, and focus on what you learned from him (no matter how awful he really was).
- **Good answer:**  
 “My last boss taught me the importance of time management – he didn’t pull any punches, and was extremely deadline-driven. His no-nonsense attitude pushed me to work harder, and to meet deadlines I never even thought were possible.”

4. Why are you leaving your current role?

- **Bad answer:**  
 “I can’t stand my boss, or the work I’m doing.”
  - Again, stay away from badmouthing your job or employer. Focus on the positive.
- **Good answer:**  
 “I’ve learned a lot from my current role, but now I’m looking for a new challenge, to broaden my horizons and to gain a new skill-set – all of which, I see the potential for in this job.”

5. Where do you see yourself in five years?

- **Bad answer:**  
 “Relaxing on a beach in Maui,” or “Doing your job.”
  - There’s really no right answer to this question, but the interviewer wants to know that you’re ambitious, career-oriented, and committed to a future with the company. So instead of sharing your dream for early retirement, or trying to be funny, give them an answer that illustrates your drive and commitment.
- **Good answer:**  
 “In five years I’d like to have an even better understanding of how this agency works. Also, I really love working with people. Ultimately, I’d like to be in some type of managerial role at this agency, where I can use my people skills and department knowledge to benefit my employees, and the agency as a whole.”

6. What’s your greatest weakness?

- **Bad answer:**  
 “I work too hard,” or for the comedian, “Blondes.”
  - This question is a great opportunity to put a positive spin on something negative, but you don’t want your answer to be cliché – joking or not. Instead, try to use a real example of a weakness you have learned to overcome.
- **Good answer:**  
 “I’ve never been very comfortable with public speaking – which as you know, can be a hindrance in the workplace. Realizing this was a problem, I asked my previous employer if I could enroll in a speech workshop. He said “yes.” I took the class, and was able to overcome my lifelong fear.

Since then, I've given lots of presentations to audiences of over a 100 high level executives – I still don't love it, but no one else can tell!"

#### 7. What salary are you looking for?

- **Bad answer:**

"In my last job I earned \$35,000 – so, now I'm looking for \$40,000"

- If you can avoid it, don't give an exact number. The first person to name a price in a salary negotiation loses. Instead, re-iterate your commitment to the job itself. If you have to, give a broad range based on research you've conducted on that particular role, in your particular city. If the role is with a non-independent agency and therefore must use the GS Pay Schedule, think of ways to [talk yourself up the scale](#).

- **Good answer:**

I am familiar with what this position has to offer - based on my research. That said, I'd be satisfied with the appropriate range for this role, based on my five years of experience. I also think a fair salary would bear in mind the high cost of living here in New York City. Further, I think my education and background can make me at the highest Step in my Grade. And if salary becomes an issue, if hired, I would be willing to negotiate to a mutually agreeable amount.

#### 8. Why should I hire you?

- **Bad answer:**

"I'm the best candidate for the role."

- A good answer will reiterate your qualifications, and will highlight what makes you unique.

- **Good answer:**

"I've been an Executive Assistant for the past ten years – my boss has said time and time again that without me, the organization would fall apart. I've also taken the time to educate myself on some of the software I regularly use (but didn't really understand the ins and outs of). I'm an Excel wiz now, which means I can work faster, and take over some of what my boss would traditionally do. What's good enough for most people is never really good enough for me."

#### 9. What is your greatest failure, and what did you learn from it?

- **Bad answer:**

I never finished law school – and everything that's happened since has taught me that giving up, just because the going gets tough, is a huge mistake."

- You don't want to actually highlight a major regret – especially one that exposes an overall dissatisfaction with your life. Instead, focus on a smaller, but significant, mishap, and how it has made you a better professional.

- **Good answer:**

"When I was in college, I took an art class to supplement my curriculum. I didn't take it very seriously. I had assumed that, compared to my Engineering classes, the art class would quite

easy. My failing grades at midterm showed me otherwise. I'd even jeopardized my scholarship status. I knew I had to get my act together. I spent the rest of the semester making up for it and ended up getting a decent grade in the class. I learned that no matter what I'm doing, I should strive to do it to the best of my ability. Otherwise, it's not worth doing at all."

10. How do you explain your gap in employment?

- **Bad answer:**

"I was so tired of working, and I needed a break," or "I just can't find a job."

- Employment gaps are always tough to explain. You don't want to come across as lazy or incapable. Find a way to make your extended unemployment seem like a choice you made, based on the right reasons.

- **Good answer:**

"My work is important to me, so I won't be satisfied with any old job. Instead of rushing to accept the first thing that comes my way, I'm taking my time and being selective to make sure my next role is the right one."

11. When were you most satisfied in your job?

- **Bad answer:**

"I was most satisfied when I did well, and got praised for my work."

- Don't give vague answers. Instead, think about something you did well – and enjoyed – that will be relevant at this new job. This is an opportunity for you to share your interests, prove that you're a great fit for the job and showcase your enthusiasm.

- **Good answer:**

"I'm a people person. I was always happiest – and most satisfied – when I was interacting with people and patients, making sure I was able to meet their needs and giving them the best possible healthcare experience. It was my favorite part of the job, and it showed – I was rated as "Good or Excellent" 95% of the time. Part of the reason I'm interested in this job at Human and Health Services is that I know I'd have even more interaction with patients, on an even more critical level."

12. What did you like least about your last job?

- **Bad answer:**

"A lack of stability. I felt like the place could collapse around me at any time."

- Try and stay away from anything that draws on the politics, culture or financial health of your previous employer. No matter how true it might be, comments like these will be construed as too negative. Also, you don't want to focus on a function that might be your responsibility in the next role. So think of something you disliked in your last job, but that you know for sure won't be part of this new role.

- **Good answer:**

"There was nothing about my last job that I hated, but I guess there were some things I liked less

than others. My previous role involved traveling at least twice a month. While I do love to travel, twice a month was a little exhausting – I didn't like spending quite so much time out of the office. I'm happy to see that this role involves a lot less travel."

13. Describe a time when you did not get along with a co-worker.

- **Bad answer:**

"I'm easy to get along with, so I've never had any kind of discord with another coworker."

- Interviewers don't like these types of "easy out" answers. And besides, they know you are probably not telling the truth. Think of a relatively benign (but significant) instance, and spin it to be a positive learning experience.

- **Good answer:**

"I used to lock heads with a fellow nurse in the INCU ward. We disagreed over a lot of things – from the care of patients to who got what shifts to how to speak with a child's family. Our personalities just didn't mesh. After three months of arguing, I pulled her aside and asked her to lunch. At lunch, we talked about our differences and why we weren't getting along. It turned out, it was all about communication. We communicated differently and once we knew that, we began to work well together. I really believe that talking a problem through with someone can help solve any issue."

14. What motivates you?

- **Bad answer:**

"Doing a good job and being rewarded for it."

- It's not that this answer is wrong – it's just that it wastes an opportunity. This question is practically begging you to highlight your positive attributes. So don't give a vague, generic response – it tells them very little about you. Instead, try and use this question as an opportunity to give the interviewer some insight into your character, and use examples where possible.

- **Good answer:**

"I've always been motivated by the challenge of meeting a tough deadline – in my last role, I was responsible for a 100% success rate in terms of delivering our products on time and within budget. I know that this job is very fast-paced, and deadline-driven – I'm more than up for the challenge. In fact, I thrive on it."

15. How would your friends describe you?

- **Bad answer:**

"I'm a really good listener."

- While being a good listener is a great personality trait, your employer probably doesn't care all that much. It's unlikely that they're hiring you to be a shoulder to cry on. You'll want to keep your answer relevant to the job you're interviewing for – and as specific as possible. If you can, insert an example.

- **Good answer:**

“My friends would probably say that I’m extremely persistent – I’ve never been afraid to keep going back until I get what I want. When I worked as a program developer, recruiting keynote speakers for a major tech conference, I got one rejection after another – this was just the nature of the job. But I really wanted the big players – so I wouldn’t take no for an answer. I kept going back to them every time there was a new company on board, or some new value proposition. Eventually, many of them actually said “yes” – the program turned out to be so great that we doubled our attendees from the year before. A lot of people might have given up after the first rejection, but it’s just not in my nature. If I know something is possible, I have to keep trying until I get it.”