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Common scholarship interview questions and answers

I've said a few times on The Simple Dollar that I've conducted a significant number of job interviews in the past. Although the jobs I usually hire for its technical nature, most of the really telling (and therefore really valuable) interview questions were non-technical questions. A great interview question reveals the type of person you hire – honesty, trustworthiness, the ability to communicate intelligently and quickly, and so on. Over time, I've collected a pretty good stack of questions that I use in almost every interview. Here are twenty-five of the most reliable, along with a tip or two for each that illustrates what makes a good answer – and what makes a bad one. Hopefully, the discussion here will provide some insightful questions for interviewers, as well as some things for potential applicants to think about. If you can easily answer all these questions, you shouldn't have much to worry about in the interview. In the end I give a checklist of homework a potential interviewer should do for a big interview. First, stupid answers to stupid questions. Many questions that are asked at job interviews are really stupid and have clear answers to them. What's your biggest weakness? That's not a question that will ever get a really honest answer, and usually it's just going to pull something fake if I'm a workaholic! Interviewers ask these questions because they are supposed to, but they usually don't provide useful information. Do you consider yourself successful? The answer is always yes. Are you a team player? The answer is always yes. How long do you plan to work here? The answer is always long-term. What's more important, the work or the money? The work is always more important. It's easy to identify a nonsense interview question – is it easy for you to give a very generic and canned answer that reveals nothing about you? If so, don't worry about those who really matter.1 Tell me about yourself. This actually just serves to make the person comfortable and gives me a chance to figure out how they talk. This is a question that every interviewee should be willing to answer, so you should be able to deliver a stable answer here. Have something clear in mind for this before you even go in the door. The best answer highlights aspects of yourself that distinguish you from Joe Average in a positive way. Make a list of four or five of the largest, then that work in a thirty second bit.2 Tell me what you know about us. This question is just trying to determine if the person being interviewed has done their homework. An exceptional candidate will be able to provide a lot of information about the company, but usually this eliminates people who don't even bother to do minimal control – these are people we don't in other words, before you go to an interview, you know what the organization is.3 What distinguishes you from other people who apply for this position? The answer is usually already known to the interviewer based on the resume, but this is an opportunity for you to really sell yourself. Most interviewers will usually sit back and see how well you sell. On occasion, surprises may be good here, but this can be tricky - if it's something that should have been on your resume, why wasn't it on your resume? You're better off knowing what the *crème de la crème* of your resume is and just list it out.4 Describe to me the position you are applying for. This is a homework question, too, but it also gives some clues about the perspective the person brings to the table. The best preparation you do is read the job description and repeat it in your own words so you can do so smoothly during the interview.5 Why are you interested in this position? This is actually something of a trick question, because it's just a way to re-ask the second question (what you know about the company) and the fourth (what you know about the position). It is asked because it tells whether people give flippant answers to questions (things like because I am a people person) or whether they think about things and give a real question. This is a good question to formulate an answer in advance – basically, just come up with a few things that seem intriguing to you about the company and the position and reasons why they interest you.6 Which aspect of this position makes you most uncomfortable? Most people think this is some kind of filter, but it is rarely used that way. This is actually an honesty question. No one on earth will like every aspect of every potential job - it's just not in us. Location? Working hours? People? Is the company too big? Is the company too small? Honesty really works here – I'd rather hear a real reason for discomfort (especially one that comes from the company's real observation) than a platitude that's not really an inconvenience at all. A good way to answer is something like I've never worked in a company so big before or I've heard some strange things about corporate culture or The idea of working for a startup at such an early stage makes me nervous. 7. What was the greatest success you had on your last job? 8. What was the biggest failure you had on your last job? It is usually good to link these questions, but the important one is the biggest failure. The best applicant is usually someone who will admit that they made a disaster out of something (they are pretty honest and willing to admit mistakes) and that they learned from, an incredibly important trait.9. Tell me about the best supervisor you've ever had. 10. Tell me about the worst supervisor you've ever had. These two questions just try to figure out what kind of management style will work best for this person and also how that person probably to manage people. Let's say I work in an organization with a very loose management structure that if that's the case, I want to either hear that the best boss was very hands-off or that the worst boss was a micromanager. On the other hand, if I came from a strict hierarchical organization, I would want to see the exact opposite – a best boss who has strong guidance and a good relationship or a poor boss who basically let the applicant blow in the wind. Your best approach is to answer this as honestly as possible – the interviewer will have a good idea of the corporate culture and, frankly, if you try to slip into a business where you don't match the culture, you have a very hard time fitting in and succeeding. These questions can be formulated as what kind of management style works for you. Another tip: highlight the positives in all the bosses you discuss. Never make the interview a bash-fest of anyone. Your worst boss needs a very small number of specific flaws and they should usually relate to differing expectations of you, not in bad character traits. Bashing someone during an interview just reflects badly on you, so don't jump for the bait.11. Tell me about the hardest project you've ever been through. The interviewer can usually care less what the exact project is. The question is mainly looking to see if you've faced serious problems and how you overcame it. For most people, this is not their greatest success or greatest failure, but something that they turned from a likely failure into some kind of success.12. What do you see as the important future trends in this area? This works well for some positions - technical ones and leadership ones - and not good for others. It should be pretty clear of the type of job you are applying for as to whether this question can be asked. If so, it's easy to prepare – just spend half an hour reading some blogs about the specific areas you're requesting and you've got some food.13. Have you done anything in the past year to learn new financial-wellness/things/improving yourself in relation to the demands of this job? This is a big deer in the headlights look question, as most people just don't have an answer. The best way to deal with this question is just to always spend some time working on your skills in any way you do. Write open source code. Join Toastmasters. Take a lesson. If you make every year effort to improve yourself, you not only have a strong resume, but this question will be a non-issue.14. Tell me about your dream job. Don't ever say this job. Never say another specific job. Both answers are very bad - the first sends the warning flags flying and the second says the person isn't really interested in sticking around. Instead, stick to specific properties - name aspects of would be your dream job. Some of them should match what the company has available, but it's actually best if they don't all match perfectly.15. Have you ever had a serious conflict in a previous job? How did it work? This usually seeks honesty and for the realization that most conflicts have two sides to a story. It also opens the door for people with bad character to start bashing their previous employer, something that leaves a bad taste in most interviewers' mouths. The best way to answer is usually to tell the story, but show within it that there are two sides to that story and that you've learned from the experience to try to see the perspective of the other person.16. What did you learn from your last position? While it's fine to mention a technical skill or two here, especially if your work is very technical, it's very important to mention some non-technical things. I learned to work in a team environment after usually working in solo environments is a good one, for example. There shouldn't be a job where you learned nothing, and the interviewer expects you to have learned at least a few things on your previous employment that will help with your current one.17. Why did you leave your last position? Usually this is looking for conviction of character. A strong, concrete answer of any reasonable kind is good here. I wanted to continue is not a strong answer. Downsizing is a good answer, as is a desire to look for specific new challenges (but be specific about what challenges you want to face). Minimize your actual discussion of your previous position here, because you'll be very close to a great chance of starting bashing your previous position.18. Tell me about a suggestion you made that was made at a previous job. Since these answers are usually heavily involved in the details of the previous position, the details are not really important. What's most important is that you've actually been involved in making a suggestion and helping it come to fruition, ideally with some success story behind it. After this you have indicated that you are willing to do the same at this position, which can do nothing but improve an organization. Not having an answer of some sort here is generally a significant negative, but not a do or die negative.19. Have you ever been asked to leave a position? Tell me about the experience. Obviously it's great if you answer no, but it's usually not a deal breaker if the answer is yes. In fact, a yes answer can be turned into a positive – it's a great way to show that you've made mistakes and learned valuable lessons from them. Be honest here, no matter what, but don't spend time bashing the people who let you go. Only discuss them with respect, even if you're angry about what happened.20. Have you ever had to fire someone? Tell me about the experience. This is a question that is mainly looking to see if you have empathy for others. Take death seriously when answering – it has to be have been an easy choice or an easy experience, but one that you dealt with and survived. Bash not the person you fired, either - as clinically as possible with the reasons.21. Are you applying for other jobs? This is an honesty honesty I'm looking for 'yes', but people who try too hard to give me a nonsense answer no. The best way to answer is to say, Yes, in much the same way that you interview other people. We both try to find the best fit for what we need and what we want. If your answer is really no, then say - No, I'm actually happy with my current position, but there were a few compelling aspects of this job that made me want to follow up on it and list these aspects.22. What do you think this position should pay for? Surprisingly for many, this is often not salary negotiations. In most cases, the person you're interviewing has little control over the final salary you get. It's usually used as a reality check - if you're hiring a concierge and they're expecting \$80K, you're probably bumping the resume right then and there. At the same time, a highly trained programmer selling himself at \$30K is also setting off some alarm bells. A good answer is usually on goal or a bit on the high side, but not really low or insanely high. I would get an idea of the question rate for the position before I ever go to the interview, then ask about 30% more.23. Where do you see yourself in your career in five years? This is something of a junk question, but it's useful in some ways as it filters for people with initiative. A person who answers something along the lines of I'm going to be successful in this position I interview for! is either not incredibly motivated to improve itself or is not entirely fair. I prefer an answer that involves either promotion or a certain level of enterprise – strong organizations thrive on self-starters. The only problem for potential interviewees is that some companies – weak companies, mostly – do not want self-starters and are especially afraid of people who dream of becoming entrepreneurs. Talking about promotion is usually the safest bet if you're not familiar with the culture, but I personally love it when people are interviewing talk about entrepreneurship – that means they're the type that will be intense about succeeding.24. What are your long-term goals – let's say, fifteen years down the road? This is a big late question because it tells you whether the person is a long term thinker or not. People who have long-term plans are usually in a good, mature mental state and will often wind up as stronger employees than those without long-term plans.25. Do you have any questions about this job? Yes, you do have questions about this job. No questions asked is a sign that you're not really interested in the position. So, your job as an interviewee is to have a few questions already in mind when you walk in the door. Most interviewers are happy to answer most of what you ask them – but make sure your questions are intelligent, though. Do you Here are the things you should do in advance of an interview that will help you deal with almost all the questions above. Working on very short description of yourself that you bust out on every interview. The big trick is to name things that are unusual or even unique to you, but stick to the things that are positive or (at worst) neutral – keep the negatives to yourself unless they are tied to a big positive. It's a 30-second spiel. Research the company by visiting their website and finding exactly what they are doing. Good things to read are the company's most recent annual report and their Wikipedia entry (if they're big) or simply by Googling the company's name and location (if they're small). If it's a startup, just try to absorb as much as you get from whatever sources you get, but if it's really a small startup, don't sweat if you don't find much information. Examine the position by reading the vacancy very carefully and looking up all the pieces you don't know. You might also want to refresh yourself on what's cutting edge in the areas covered by reading a bit if you're not already known – blogs and news sites are a good place to start. You also need to get a good grip on the regular starting salary for this type of work by looking around for similar jobs near your location. Know how to match the position by taking the pieces of company information you have found and the vacancy and matching them to your skills. Do about five of these, because these are going to be silver bullets during the interview. Also identify at least one thing that makes you uncomfortable about the company and position and think about why it makes you uncomfortable. Always work to improve your skills by participating in activities that hone the key skills you need for the field you're in. Are you in public relations? Join a Toastmasters group. Are you an administrative assistant? Volunteer for an organization that can use your skills but does things in a different way (the same goes for many professionals). Are you a programmer? Contribute to an open source project. Have a few questions about the position in mind when you walk in the door. This gives a strong impression during the interview that you are actually interested in that particular position, which is a great positive for you. Questions of all kinds are good here, but the best usually relate to company culture and technical details of the job. Don't bash your previous job. If there are specific things about your last job that really, really annoy you, spend some time trying to think positives about it. Know when you're going in that your previous job will probably be discussed at least to some extent, and be willing to discuss it without being negative. Look for positives, and also be able to find the reasons for leaving as clinically as possible Explain. Be honest, above all else. If you make things up in your conversation and you miss out on all of them, the interviewer will throw your application in the trash. Instead, try to focus on the positives of what you already have. If you've created to the interview, there's something the organization likes about you. Don't waste time inventing things to say. Say.

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