

The Only Five Questions
(You'll Need for the Interview)

by Ellis Chase

Frequently, job seekers worry about the long, long lists of possible interview questions out there, and books to match, like those books with titles such as “The Five Hundred Questions You ABSOLUTELY Need to Master for that Next Interview!!!!” Of course, books with titles like that sell. Unfortunately, they only add to the anxiety that is already present, the last thing you need. If you actually read these books, you may get even more confused than when you started. Interviewing is tough enough. You’re on the line. You’re being judged. It’s worse than dating. But good preparation should solve most of that. (I wish I could help with the dating issue as easily...)

I believe that there are really only five questions that you need to be able to answer. Preparing for those questions should, along with the preliminary organizational and industry research plus networking, enable you to go into the interview with much more confidence.

I’ve presented this assertion to a wide range of clients and groups in nearly every conceivable profession over the past 25 years or so, and have found that the five generic questions can be applied to almost any employment situation. Many years ago, I was challenged about this by the director of modeling for a leading “intimate apparel” (one of the great euphemisms) corporation. She said that she asked all of her job applicants a question that couldn’t possibly fit into the five questions: “Would you please remove

your blouse?” That was about as unusual a question as I’ve heard (and a great title for an article on this topic that I wrote back then), but by the end of our conversation, she saw that it really was a basic content question, and fit nicely into “#3.”

Question #1: Tell me about yourself (or, The Two-Minute Pitch)

This is the most common opening question, and, unfortunately, the most difficult. Variations on it may include, “Let’s run through your resume” (asked by the pedantic interviewer), or “Why don’t we review some of the major aspects of your career?” or “Could you give me a brief overview of your work background?” A 90-second to two-minute self-presentation module could make the difference between a successful job search and an ordinary, drawn-out meandering search. This presentation would be a well-organized – but not scripted! – statement of skills, experience and major strength areas, and will set an applicant apart from the majority of job seekers. Most interviewees will respond to such opening questions with a boring, and ultimately pointless, litany of a list of jobs held since high school or college. Of course, an interviewer can easily find that information by looking at a resume, so why repeat what is already known? Think of your pitch as a well crafted advertisement.

A pitch is also critical because most hiring decisions are made in the first five minutes of an interview. Ask people who do a lot of hiring. This doesn’t mean you can’t recover from a bad pitch, but a good one will set up the rest of the interview quite nicely. Think about what goes into that first five minutes. The pressure is on. Small talk. Great handshake (the “dead fish” will kill any interview, so give up on all those grand career

aspirations if you can't manage a good business handshake), good eye contact. And "Tell me about yourself". If you find yourself in one of those interviews where the question isn't asked, or the interviewer likes to talk a lot, make sure you get the pitch in, maybe by saying at some point, "Let me make this easy for you by giving you a thumbnail of my experience and skills..."

A great pitch will also form the basis of most self-marketing activities in a job search, such as informational networking, phone screenings, unplanned meetings, social occasions, approach letters, ad responses, and follow up letters. This is why I am focusing much more on this. Ideally, the pitch should be prepared as an outline or a series of bullet points, which should make it easy to follow and clear for any audience. Assume that your listener(s) know little or nothing about you. Try to avoid lists, chronologies, and jargon. Too much detail is not likely to be assimilated, particularly at the beginning of a meeting.

I mentioned earlier that it's not a good idea to script, as it can lead to some potential problems in pitching. A memorized speech will be perceived as both too crafted, and often not targeted to the specific interview. At a recruiters' meeting where I spoke a few years ago, many corporate recruiters told me that applicants frequently sounded overly prepared, lacking in conversational tone and almost robotic in their pitching. Practicing a pitch from an outline or bullet points should not only solve this problem, but enable you to adjust the pitch to the specific job or organization. Think of the pitch, along with the rest of the interview, as consultative selling. You're taking what the interviewer tells

you, or what you've learned before the interview, and giving the interviewer what he/she needs to know.

The following is a suggested model for the two-minute pitch:

- 1) A label or positioning statement. What are you? How do you want people to see you? Make sure that the listener immediately understands what it is that you are communicating, or what your goals are. If you can't label yourself precisely (maybe you're trying to change careers), your "positioning statement" will describe a combination of roles that would position you for your target.
- 2) Two or three experience/skill areas. What do you want to highlight? These probably will change from situation to situation. Expand on one of these with concrete evidence (maybe three sentences). What was a significant accomplishment in your career that you want to emphasize for this listener? What are you most proud of that will show you off to best advantage?
- 3) A "unique selling proposition." What makes you different from your competition? This is usually a combination of skills and experiences that add up to a professional who has something different to offer. This is probably the toughest part of a pitch. Obviously, "unique" is a bit of an overstatement, something tough to achieve. What you want to get across at this point is that you should be seen as different from the majority of applicants.
- 4) Settings or branding. Where have you worked? Figure out if naming the places will help you, or pigeonhole you, or confuse the listener. Sometimes "leading financial services institution" works much better than "JP Morgan Chase," depending on your target. Sometimes, the listener will not know the name of the company you worked for, say, in the dotcom era, so mentioning the function will work much better. You may want to combine the two, perhaps the name of the brand name company along with the dotcom function.
- 5) Summarize. You should create a synopsis of all that you have said so far. Make sure that the listener not only has heard the points stated above, but hears them in a different way. This is pure self-marketing – your personal advertisement.

Sometimes, you might have a highly marketable skill, but don't necessarily want to continue featuring it as a major part of your professional presentation. In this situation, it is a delicate operation to effectively balance the two considerations. You may end up

dropping the highly marketable skill because you just don't want to be perceived in that way.

Question 2: Why are you looking for a job? Why did you leave your last one?

This is frequently too personal and complex an issue to be addressed in a general way.

There are too many variations to cover in a short article like this one. However, there are a few points that should be stated. One is that the interviewee should not volunteer or overstate information that could be negatively construed. Don't offer information like, "I left the company because I didn't like the way the company was run, and wanted to be proactive," or "I was bored and wanted a new challenge." That could create the perception that perhaps something was seriously wrong with you, not the company, something you definitely want to avoid. It's fine to offer some explanation, but only when asked. If you bring it up, it sounds like you might have something to hide.

But you do need this explanation, what I like to call your "rationale." In the case of a downsizing/organization layoff/restructuring/merger, etc., be sure to point out that a group of people was let go. This is the easiest explanation of all. A potential employer will understand that you were caught up in that, that you hold no real grudge against the company for it, and were only somewhat disappointed, because it had been a great experience due to your opportunities for...(fill in the skills and experiences right now!).

Here's where you can turn this issue into a series of selling points.

Whenever possible, point out that it was your decision to leave - even though you might have been asked to leave. It's important to understand that losing a job is not a career

killer, contrary to the popular mythology. Many of my clients have difficulty getting past that, and see themselves as damaged goods. If you take a look at the general statistics about employment, you'd see that people lose jobs more than once in their working lives, and are not adversely affected in their ability to find a new job – except when the job seeker has trouble with a rationale for having left the job, or feels somehow that there's a stigma.

I recommend strongly that you adhere to one of the main rules of self-marketing: Never speak ill of your former employer(s) or any previous work situations. This is not only a basic tenet of sales and marketing, but an imperative aspect of presenting yourself positively. Speaking negatively about any other work situations creates the perception that you're a malcontent. Not exactly the perception you want to create!

You never have left a job for “more of a challenge.” That implies to a prospective employer that you'd leave them, too, the first time you get bored or feel underpaid. One explanation for looking for a new situation is that you're seeking to put together a combination of skills from several settings, your education, and interests, and aren't able to see a path where you could do that at your current job. You want to utilize what you know. Always make it clear that the next step is a logical one, not because your last boss threw something at you, or that there were ethically questionable activities going on around you, or that you didn't like the people you worked with. The move should seem that it's part of your overall plan, even though it may not be. Keep in mind that

interviewing, like in all other aspects of job search, is marketing, and that creating the right perception is just as important as possessing the right skill set.

QUESTION #3: Why should we hire you?

I hope that no one is quite so abrasive as to phrase this kind of question in that way, but it is the gist of most interview questions. These kinds of questions are the content questions, the bulk of any interview, the questions that ask about your skills and experiences. “What are your strengths?” “What did you do best at your last position?” “What gave you the most difficulty?” “How well do you adapt to rapidly changing technologies?” “Do you know how to...?” “Have you had experience in...?” “What kind of management style works best for you?” And, of course, the dumbest interview question – “What are your weaknesses?” (But more about that one later.)

This is the time when you get to show what you know and prove to the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the job. Your goal should be to attempt to turn questions into “war stories,” which will clearly illustrate your successes.

Part of the preparation for interviews is setting up your war stories. In some of the organizations where I’ve worked, they call them “PARs” (Problem/Action/Result), or “CARs” (Context/Action/Result), or in one unfortunate consulting firm, they were called “SARs” (Situation/Action/Result) until the disease with that acronym appeared on the international scene, and they were compelled to change many of their printed materials...

You should prepare at least five or six of these war stories before every interview, perhaps adapting some of the bullets off your resume. But you need to make sure that the stories match what you think the organization is going to want from you. Don't just walk into the interview with a generic batch of examples, assuming that they'll work in every situation. As with the two-minute pitch, you should not script these stories. You want your interview to sound like a conversation, not a prepared script.

A good interview should include at least two or three of your war stories. The key to getting those into the interview is how well you perfect "the art of the segue." That is, for all you non-musicians, how well you work your stories into the conversation by directly connecting them with a question asked. For example, if an interviewer asks you to talk about a specific skill, you wouldn't answer with "Yes, I am very organized." That will end a conversation fast, and then the interviewer will have to come up with another question, and the interview might take on an awkward tone. The better answer is, "Yes, I'm quite comfortable with organizing complex assignments. FOR EXAMPLE, when I was working at ABC Corp, we were working on..." and then you're off and running into a nice two or three minute war story. The advantages of being prepared with war stories are that you get to illustrate the skill they're seeking, and you take charge of the interview. It's important to realize that most interviewers are not very good at interviewing, and would much prefer if you offer information that will make their jobs easier – in both the interviewing sense and in the sense that you're going to fill their requirements. They don't want to have to drill for information. What you want is for the interviewer to not only walk away from the interview with the sense that you're an

interesting, energetic, charming, smart person, but also someone who has demonstrated skill and experience in the key areas of the job. With the war story response, the job applicant has presented examples of concretes, not just broad generalizations.

But what about those negative questions? It's important to remember what self-marketing is all about. Try to stick to this proposition – your career has been sunshine, light, and success. There are no negatives. Negatives raise problems. You have no problems. So what do you do when you'll inevitably get that silly “What are your weaknesses?” question?

I call the question silly because it's a no-win for the person who's being interviewed, a trap question. In most circumstances, it doesn't really show the interviewer much; it's the sign of an inexperienced or poorly prepared interviewer who can't think of good skills-based questions. If you stick to the concept that there are no negatives, then you're not going to directly answer the question, obviously. Many interviewees have reported to me, over the years, that they feel obligated to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” I never encourage anyone to lie on an interview (it doesn't usually work), but I certainly don't think that you should answer all questions with full, unfiltered responses.

The best response to the weakness question is to have a couple of prepared war stories ready, which illustrate how you turned around a negative – five years ago. You want some distance from that negative. For example, maybe you had some difficulty learning

how to delegate when you had your first management position. A great way, then, to answer the weakness question is to illustrate how you overcame that issue, and how you have subsequently turned what you learned from that experience into strength. That strategy should be used as much as possible with other negative questions as well. If you can't think fast enough, some stonewalling will suffice, i.e., you can't think of anything at the moment where you had that particular difficulty. For example: "I can't think of anything right now...Although I have shortcomings, as most people do, nothing major has been pointed out to me in this regard so far in my career. My appraisals have been very good." Stay away from the "too good to be true" statements, like "My co-workers think I take my work too seriously." No one ever believes those.

QUESTION 4: Where do you see yourself in five years?

This one is almost as pointless as the weakness/negative question. But it's asked frequently. A time filler. Sometimes, it's ok for a recent college graduate (they might not have a lot to talk about), but not for experienced professionals. Consider the real subtext of the question, which is that most interviewers are not particularly interested in applicants' overall career plans, unless they're about to make a job offer, and are really asking, "If offered this position, will you stay committed to us and to your field of interest? Or are you using this as a stepping stone to something else?" Of course, most of us don't really plan our careers so concretely, or, sometimes, we really are using the job as a "bridge job" or a stepping stone to something else. But we certainly don't want to say that.

It would be best to answer these “Just what do you want to be when you grow up” questions with a plan for future growth within the same discipline (not what your promotion ambitions are), demonstrating a strong enthusiasm for what you do and your commitment to it. Organizations like to hire employees who are excited about what they do. Indicate that this is all part of a plan that has been evolving throughout your career, even if you’re transitioning between toll collector and nuclear physics. There’s always a connection between all that you’ve done, and you want to describe that. Part of this could be lifted straight from your two-minute pitch, which is your statement of how you want to market yourself. Of course, this response needs to be prepared in advance of the interview. Even when applicants are making radical career changes (like the toll collector), it is always possible to demonstrate consistent themes in one’s career.

QUESTION 5: How much did you earn at your last job? / What are you looking for in this one?

Negotiations start at the very second an interviewer or screener asks about money, long before an interview might even take place. This could even be a human resources phone screen. The most important thing to know is that in this, the first step of salary negotiation, it’s important to try and avoid the issue. Of course, there are two types of interviewers who will not let you get away with this – recruiters and human resources professionals. That’s what they’re paid to do, which is to screen you out and pre-package the compensation issues prior to interviews with the decision makers.

This is why you want to avoid human resources and recruiters in an effective job search. Yes, it's true that it's less work to get a job this way. They do all the work, refer you to the right place (if there's a fit somewhere), and you're all packaged and ready to go. Unfortunately, the current employment statistics all show that getting jobs through recruiters and direct human resources contact is roughly somewhere around a 5-6% probability. I would never say that job searchers should not utilize these resources, but they certainly shouldn't depend on them or spend much energy in trying to get a new job that way. Pay attention to those statistics! And, of course, avoiding those resources will enable you to negotiate more effectively.

Why avoid the issue?

- You will position yourself too low; and the prospective employer will then feel free to eventually offer you less than market value.
- Your salary will be considerably lower than the employer's range, and you won't be taken seriously. Some employers actually value a prospective employee that way, which, of course, is usually ridiculous.
- Your salary will be too high for the employer's range, and you'll be automatically eliminated from consideration. You don't want that to happen, because you won't know the total compensation package at this point.
- Your compensation will place you in the "right" range, which will then limit your negotiating stance later on, when you've determined that you might be worth more than you thought to them.

Usually, if you're able to defer money conversations, your value will increase as you have more time to build value. There are two thoughts to consider: The person who gives dollar figures first usually loses out in the long run, and the longer the conversations go on without money conversations, the higher the price goes.

It's not always possible to defer salary discussions. But you should try. One possible way would be to say, "I hate to rule myself out because of a too-high or too-low figure. Certainly, I want to be paid well, but right now the fit is my key issue. So, if it's ok with you, could we defer the conversation until later on when we've figure out if it's a good fit?" And, if that doesn't work well, you might want to try, "Could you give me an idea of what your range is?" Or, "I'm sure we'll be able to work something out, if your company's salary structure is within the usual market levels." Be aware of the interviewer's reactions to your attempts. If you sense annoyance, after a couple of tries, give a wide salary range.

What about applications? I suggest you keep the salary area blank, and if questioned, you try some of the responses above. Sorry to say, I haven't yet figured out how to avoid this issue on online applications, because these will not allow you to complete them without the information. Let's hope that filling out applications comes more towards the end of a process, if at all.

An overall strategy of interviewing would be – to paraphrase President Kennedy – ask not what the employer can do for you, but what you can do for the employer. Or,

perhaps, think like a consultant, which is to figure out what it is that the employer seeks, and fit your responses to his or her needs. This concept will focus your interviewing on what I think is the key, namely marketing yourself directly to the potential employer. Evaluating a possible offer, sizing up the organization, or contemplating career growth only clouds the main issue, which is to build the prospective employer's interest – and get asked back for the next round. I frequently advise my clients to defer all of their self-interest issues until after the point of offer. Without extraneous thoughts, it's far easier to concentrate on the major task – getting the offer.

Preparing the five questions carefully for the interview, along with thoroughly researching the organization, will help you avoid surprises. A surprise question, for example, might've been the "Please remove your blouse" request that I mentioned earlier. It fits perfectly into the "#3," or "CAR" category, because the answer would provide evidence to the interviewer that the candidate can do the job. In this case, it's an unusual, visual "war story," but it is the evidence that the interviewer was seeking.

Having ready responses to these basic interview questions will significantly reduce the stress that almost everyone feels in an interview (including the interviewer) – and will help ensure a successful outcome.