



TOUGHEST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Think back to the previous interviews you've had. The typical interview includes anywhere from 8 to 18 questions. The "Toughest Interview Questions" gives you answers and strategy for over 115 of the toughest and most frequently asked interview and follow-up questions.

1. What are your long-term career goals?

What are your career goals?

What do you want to accomplish in your career?

Where do you want to be in five years from now?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is the interviewer trying to see how you are in making long range plans and if you have goals that mesh with the organization's goals. One way to answer this question is to look back on your accomplishments to date:

"I started out in my profession as a junior clerk while I completed my college studies during the evenings. Once I had my degree, I applied for a transfer to a more advanced position, citing my on-the-job training. This has been my pattern for my career with my past 2 employers. I learn quickly on the job and am willing to take classes and workshops to augment my experience. I have been able to assume greater responsibilities and add more value to the organization. I do not think in terms of titles...I think more in terms of "How can I solve this problem? Since this has been my career style to date, I do not imagine it to change. In five years, I feel I will have continued to learn, to grow into a position of more responsibility and will have made a significant contribution to the organization."

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Here's another option:

"I'm looking forward to a position of greater responsibility. I'm preparing for that position by volunteering for as many different and challenging work assignments as possible in my current position, taking advantage of training opportunities, and working on my degree in the evening. My current assignments include I've looked into the career opportunities in your organization and I'm confident that my work ethic and experience will enable me to contribute to the success of the organization."

Focus on goals that are appropriate for the company and the job that you're applying for. For example, if you're applying for a trainee position in the healthcare industry don't tell the interviewers that your career goal is to become an attorney specializing in consumer affairs.

Don't say, "Five years from now I want to be in your job." Or "Five years from now I see myself supervising you."

Follow-up Questions

What have you done to prepare yourself to accomplish your goals?

What have you accomplished to date?

The first question addresses your preparation. Preparation may include following a career plan that you developed; participating in on-the-job training programs such as supervisor training and mentoring, education and training opportunities that you pursue outside of the job including certifications and degrees; and learning specific skills on the job by volunteering for difficult work assignments or making lateral moves. Certain jobs such as law enforcement and firefighting include a physical training component.

The second question addresses what you've achieved of your goals. The question also provides you with an opportunity to address your preparation.

"My career goals are to earn my CPA and to advance to a management position. I earned my CPA two months ago. I've prepared for a management position by working towards a Masters' in

Business Administration. In my current position, I've performed as the team leader for an audit team. As the team leader, I've been building the skills for a management position."

2. Why are you interested in working for our company?

Why do you want to work for us?

Why do you want this job?

What interests you most about this position?

Why do you want to work here?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This question is the flip side of the ever popular "Why should we hire you?"

Interviews are two ways...you need to have some idea about the organization, the job opening and 'match' them to your skills and experience. Answering this question with specifics that relate to your background as well as showing insight into the organization will show that you have done your homework and given the matter some thought.

How can someone else know all the details of your past experience, your skills as well as the requirements of this job? You ---and only you---know why you are applying. This is a question that you should be answer to your own satisfaction before any meeting with any organization for a job. There should be clear, unfiltered, genuine reasons that you feel are strong indicators of interest if selected. You should consider volunteering the answer even if the question is not raised.

What made you apply in the first place? Make it a short answer from the many points that you considered before the interview. Perhaps the requirements fit you perfectly, the company is dynamic (Go Brown!), it is time to move on from your current position (it was great but you have so much more to offer)? What are NOT good reasons to state for wanting a position are: money (you need more), you hate your boss/job/co-workers, you want better benefits. The organization may have a reputation for being a great place to work. It may be involved in activities that strike a responsive chord with your own values. It may be an organization where employees are continually challenged and you love to work hard and get rewarded.

Always remember you are selling yourself as a solution to THEIR problems (even though this company or job will be a great problem solver for your life). Play to their needs. There is no one best answer...it always has to relate to the candidate and to the job opening.

"With my experience dealing with many of your competitors as well as my understanding of the local markets, I feel that your expansion plans would be a great utilization of my skills as well as affording me an opportunity to not travel as much as I have in the past few years. Additionally, _____ has a reputation for really training their sales staff well and I would look forward to working with such an excellent staff."

Here's another sample answer:

"With my background in design and your plans to roll out a new product line over the next 18 months, I feel that I can be of immediate service to _____ Company. It is exciting to be part of a major product launch and my experiences with _____ have prepared me to be a valuable team member."

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Your key is to focus on the positive. Don't get into the negatives of your current job – "I don't like my current job". Also, don't be vague – "I've heard good things". What "good things?" Focus on strong positives including:

"Your company is recognized as an industry leader"

"You have a reputation for emphasizing teamwork."

"I'm particularly interested in your management development program. Having just earned my MBA, I'm looking forward to applying classroom knowledge in the operating environment."

"Reputation for developing employees and promoting from within the company."

"In researching your company, I became interested in the wide range of career opportunities. I've spoken with a number of people in the Human Resources Office during this process and I'm particularly impressed by the fact that people feel so strongly about your support for employees and their development."

If you haven't done your research and if don't have a convincing reason to work for the company, then why should they hire you?

Follow-up Questions

What don't you like about our company or the position that you're interviewing for?

You shouldn't point to a major company characteristic or to one of the major duties of the position. Think about the company and the position and consider the following:

"I've been spoiled in my current position in that I'm just 15 minutes from home. The work location for this position is 45 minutes from my home. I'm looking forward to an opportunity to work with your company so distance is a non-factor."

"The position is a great fit with my career plan. The only apprehension that I have is the typical apprehension when someone begins working for a new employer."

"In my current position, the company offers on-site childcare. I noticed that childcare is not available on-site in this position. This position is important to me and I've already identified and contacted a number of childcare facilities between here and my home."

3. **Why do you want to leave your current position?**
What don't you like about your current position?
Why are you changing jobs?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

When asked why you want to leave, do not downgrade in any way your prior/current employer...leave the interviewer with the feeling that you have only been associated with winners! If appropriate, point out that you are not just 'looking around' but are sincerely interested in working for this particular company and that you are not a 'job-hopper' but are interested in a long-term career move. Use your research to put forth several points about the company that you're applying to that will make you a great match (for the company) and suit your particular skills and experiences. Emphasize the fact that this opportunity to work for them is 'just what you have been looking for' because....and then go into several ways you can add value to the organization.

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Questions regarding your current job provide the interviewers with an insight into how you'll view your new job. The essential duties of the new job should not be the one of the dislikes on the old job. For example, if the new job requires working in teams, then you'll only raise questions if the change in your current job that you seek is to work more by yourself. Also, the essential duties of the new job should be one of the more desirable qualities of the old job.

"I'm interested in changing jobs because I prefer the team-based table service that the XXX restaurant chain emphasizes. Based on my previous experience, team-based service leads to higher customer satisfaction."

I enjoy my current position, but your company is larger and has more opportunities for advancement. I am particularly interested in your management development program.

4. Tell us about yourself.

Tell us about your qualifications.

Take us through your resume.

How does your current position qualify you for the position?

How are you qualified for this position?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is a killer question that more often than not is raised by an unskilled interviewer who does not know what else to ask. When raised by a skillful interviewer though it may be a very effective question that will provide more information than any other single question (or even a series of them). The problem is that when the question is raised you don't know which your interviewer is.

Since you know you will get a version of this question, prepare a 1-minute 'infomercial' about yourself. Start off with words to the effect, "to be brief" or "Here is the short version" letting the interviewer know he/she is not going to get a 15 minute discourse on your life and times. Then, state concisely who you are professionally:

"Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated with things mechanical and this fascination revealed a talent for mechanical engineering...."

"The first time I visited my aunt's office at Time magazine when I was a teenager, I knew that I wanted to be involved in the business. Taking various writing and journalism classes in high school and college reinforced that belief. I volunteered to work at a local newspaper while attending school and took a succession of more challenging positions after graduation...."

Try to highlight those elements of your professional experience that 'tailors' you to the organization and the position. Conclude with a strong closing statement of how all this led you specifically to this interview.

"With my prior experience and your current involvement in _____, I felt that we would be an ideal match. . . . Since your firm is highly regarded, I was very interested in learning more about the opportunities here."

You can end it with, "Is there anything specific you would like me to elaborate on?" and then be silent. Do not feel compelled to rattle on, adding more detail than is needed. Listen carefully to the feedback to see if your answer was not sufficient, so that you might learn what specifically the interviewer would like you to add.

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Keep your answer focused on job-related facts. Typically, your most recent experience provides the strongest case for your qualifications – start with your most recent experience.

- Review your resume or application.
- There is no right or wrong answer regarding experience. Your experience is your experience for better or worse. How you relate your experience to the job that you're interviewing for may make the difference in getting hired.
- The most qualified person to do a job is someone who has already done the job. If you were to hire someone to fix the plumbing in your house, whom would you hire? Someone who has never fixed the plumbing or someone who has? As you answer the interview questions, cite your work and life experiences as examples to reinforce to the interviewers that you've already done what they're looking for, and you've done it successfully.
- Many candidates make the mistake of emphasizing the number of years they've been on the job without providing detail as to the quality of their experience. Without the detail as to the quality

of your experience, all else being equal, a candidate with more years on the job will be more qualified than you are.

Follow-up Questions

What additional training or experience will you require to meet the requirements of the position?

This follow-up question is a variation of "What is your greatest weakness?" Note that the question assumes that you don't meet the requirements of the position.

"I'm confident that I can successfully meet the requirements of the position. The only additional experience that I'll need is that of learning the corporate culture in your company. I'm looking forward to meeting my new co-workers and working with them to accomplish the company's objectives"

5. How do you deal with difficult people?

How do you deal with conflict?

Give us an example of your ability to work with difficult people.

Tell us about a disagreement you've had with either a coworker or customer.

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Since interpersonal relationships are a major source of employee separations, having good skills in this area are crucial to many positions. Good way to answer is to give an example. Remember a time when you had to deal with someone who was difficult...ideally, on the job but do not limit yourself to those areas alone. Explain the situation, why it was important for you to be effective and how you were able to accomplish your goals while working with someone perceived as difficult.

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The names and faces may change, but you'll always encounter difficult people. Virtually all jobs require you to work with people, and in most instances, your career success depends on working effectively with people. It's important for you to give a positive and constructive answer. Points to remember include: maintaining professional behavior; keeping focused on the goals as opposed to personalities; not taking issues personally; and how you learned from your experience and have been able to apply it to other situations.

Follow-up Questions

Looking back on the example you've given, what would you have done differently?

What did you learn from that situation?

What did you learn about working with difficult people or conflict? Be specific and then provide an example from your subsequent work experience that illustrates how you applied what you learned.

6. What area do you like most to work in?

What interests you the most about the position that you're interviewing for?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Do you like to work with people or things? Do you prefer a hectic pace or a steady pace? If you are primarily interested in working for a particular organization--at any level--that is perfectly acceptable to indicate in an interview. It is best to go into an interview with knowledge of the organization, the job requirements for the position(s) and a firm handle on what skills you can offer the employer.

Do a worksheet for yourself...list the areas that you are proficient in, cite an example of when/how you obtained these skills or used them, and what you like/dislike about each. See if this sheds any light on your preferences. And then consider the organization...where do you think you can add the greatest value? You are selling yourself as a problem solver.... what can you do for them? If there are no great differences and the chances seem equal for growth, then state that you are flexible. You enjoy doing..... and cite examples of what you have done in each area. Or, go with where you have the most experience if you truly have no preference. I think making a judgment call as to where the organization

has the greatest needs matched to your skills is better than..."I do not have a preference." which may come off as sounding disinterested.

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We can never over emphasize the importance of matching your qualifications to the organization that you're interviewing for. Here's another situation where you should research the organization that you're interviewing for and matching your qualifications to their needs. Your answer might include:

"My preference is to work in _____. Based on the information provided in your annual report, your strategy is to expand your efforts in _____. In my current position, I've successfully handled increasingly challenging projects in _____. I've been able to _____. I'm confident that I can contribute to your expansion efforts."

If you're early in your career, you might not know which area you'd like to work in. In this instance your answer might be:

"I'm interested in gaining experience in as many areas of the company's operations as possible. I'm looking forward to handling a variety of assignments."

"At this point of my career, I'm willing to work in any area that will broaden my experience while providing the greatest benefit to the organization."

Follow-up Questions

What area do you like the least to work in?

You shouldn't point to one of the major duties of the position. Think about the position and consider the following:

If the position requires you to work independently –
"The area I like least is to work in a structured environment."

If the position requires teamwork –
"The area I like least is to work on my own. I'm a people person and I enjoy working with others particularly in a team-oriented environment."

If the position is high stress -
"The area I like least is routine work. I enjoy working in a dynamic environment where every day presents a new challenge."

- 7. How do you handle stress?
Tell us about a stressful situation in you current job and how you handled it.
How do you deal with pressure?**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Accept it and use it to work for you.

There are two areas that we all deal with. Those we can control and those we can't. The more we concentrate on the "controllable" factors the more we will be able to deal with those we can't. By unbundling we get to see it is not as difficult as when everything is bunched together. A great book that addresses the matter of stress in a very practical manner is "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Steven Covey. Give it a try. You will find it well worth your time and attention.

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Not only should you focus on what you can control, but also keep everything in perspective. Now more than ever, reflect on the positive aspects of your life – friends, family – the people and experiences that bring joy to your life.

Employers need and want employees who can maintain their focus and perspective in the dynamic work environment. Maintaining a focus on the controllable, a good sense of humor, not taking things personally, and knowing when to take a break are all valuable workplace tools to handle stress. It may be as simple as keeping photographs of your family in your office or taking a ten-minute walk. Which tools do you use?

Another option is give the interviewers an example of a stressful situation in a current or past job. As much as possible select a situation similar to what you will face in the job that you're interviewing for. Describe how you handled the stress.

- 8. How do you determine your priorities?
How do you prioritize your work?
How do you decide which assignments to complete during your typical workday?
How do you set priorities?
Assume that you only have 20 minutes at your desk tomorrow. What will you do?**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

The real question underlying this dilemma is "How do you handle priorities?" or, "How do you react to pressure?" One way to answer this is to look at the priorities of each person's request and determine which request is more crucial to the mission of the organization. Obviously, if the CEO asked you to do a favor and pick up flowers for a staff member and your immediate supervisor needs a report ASAP because a client is waiting for the information to place a large order--you have conflicting political and profit agendas. I would make immediate efforts to meet the supervisor's request and, in between, make some quick telephone calls about floral deliveries or use an online resource.

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A general checklist for prioritizing work are legal and regulatory requirements where the consequences would include civil or criminal penalties (for example OSHA, DOT or EPA), who the work is for (the CFO versus a department head), what your supervisor/manager says, due dates and what can you complete versus doing piecemeal. Tailor the checklist for your profession. Other considerations might include life threatening situations or customer service.

- 9. What is your greatest strength?
What do you find easy to do?
In what area are you the most effective?
What can you contribute?**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Now, this is one of those questions that you hoped they would ask. In your research into the company and into the job opening, what are the prime requirements? What are the skills, traits and/or experiences most needed? Looking into your own experiences and work history, as well as skills developed, what can you match up with what the organization most needs? What are the problems that you are looking to solve for them? What is it that you are bringing into the equation?

Do not limit yourself to those 'verbs' used in your resume (delegating, organizing, budgeting...whatever you used) but look beyond into adjectives such as calm, level-headed, passionate, enthusiastic...what words would describe you? Target your response to what is needed and what you can provide; be prepared to provide a short example or story to illustrate.

"My strength comes in my inquisitiveness...I am always wanting to look beyond the surface of the everyday transactions. This really came to be valuable in my last job. I was curious about all the different file folders being used...there seemed to be no obvious reason for the colors. So I asked. It turned out; it depended on who went to the supply room last. Based on my suggestions, we started a phasing in a color-coded system and in 6 months, it was easy to stop what work was need to be done and what files were ready to be completed. I think we saved both time and money doing things differently."

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Focus on strengths that are skills and abilities vital to the job that you are interviewing for. If the job requires strong project management skills, emphasize your project management or project management-related skills. Strengths should be reinforced by work and real life examples.

For example:

"I was the Chairperson for my daughter's school fundraiser. The event consisted of a fair and charity auction. Over 100 volunteers were involved and we were able to raise \$100,000 for the school. . ."

10. What is your greatest weakness?

How would you improve your effectiveness at work?

In which area will you need to improve in carry out the responsibilities of the position that you're interviewing for?

What do you find difficult to do?

What are some of the things you find difficult to do?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

The interviewer is looking to determine how well you know yourself, how you react to difficult situations/tasks and credibility. Look back over your work experience for examples of challenges...speaking in public at a meeting, disagreeing with a manager over an important issue, being asked to use a software program you have not had an opportunity to learn... These 'stories' should illustrate a lesson learned, a problem overcome or a weakness being dealt with.

"I always seem to need a day or two to prepare myself to give a presentation to department heads. When I know I have to give a report on my projects, I plan out all the details in advance and rehearse. One time, there was a problem with a supplier and I was asked to update senior management...immediately. The supply chain was crucial to the completion of an important project we had been working on for 5 months and decisions had to be made based on the information I had to prepare and present on a moment's notice. I gathered the information and presented it simply and in detail. It was much easier than I thought without the hours of concern and practice. The facts spoke for themselves. Since I understood the situation, I was able to make it clear to management and get a rapid decision. I still prefer advance notice but I know I can deliver when asked to."

This is also a chance to damn yourself with faint praise, turning what may be a weakness but is actually a strength. For example:

"I cannot leave a job half-done and usually find myself thinking of possible solutions to problems while I am driving to work or in the shower. Some may think I take it too seriously, but I have found keep ideas on the 'back burner' usually saves time and effort in the long run."

Another tactic is to remember a true weakness...and relate how you have overcome it. It should be a small weakness...not a major character or work-related flaw. This is not the time to go into details regarding personal problems.

"I was being flooded with paper and I could not keep up until I requested we try for a paper-less department, relying on email for the bulk of our communication. This not only cleared my desk considerably, improved my work rate it also greatly improved office communications."

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Your weakness should not be the same as the essential skills and abilities for the job that you're interviewing for. For example, if the job that you're interviewing for requires strong customer service skills, don't emphasize the fact that you like working with equipment more than working with people. Weaknesses may be further addressed by what steps you've made to improve yourself and an example of your improvement. Steps to address your weakness may include being more aware and focusing on improvement; training; asking a supervisor or role model for advice; or outside education.

Here are a couple of examples of how you can answer this question in a more positive way or address the weakness in the past tense:

"One area I'd like to improve in is"

"My weakness is that I demand too much of myself"

"Until recently, my weakness was that I recognized this as the team leader in a high profile project. I addressed my weakness by taking courses and by trying harder to . . ."

Follow-up Questions

What have you done to address this weakness?

How have you tried to improve on this weakness?

Address your weakness by specifying what steps you've already made to improve yourself and give an example of your improvement. Steps to improvement may include being more aware and focusing on improvement; training; asking a supervisor or role model for advice; or outside education.

11. When is it justifiable to deviate from program policies and procedures?

What is the difference between the "letter of the law" and the "spirit of the law"?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

It is a good idea to have some idea of the corporate culture before an interview to have a point of reference when faced with open-ended questions like this. Some companies are very conservative---everything is by the book. Others are more open to innovation, to change.

Obviously, no employee should deviate from procedures when it would cause harm to an individual or an organization...smoking in a hazardous zone, for example or NOT reporting someone who was putting everyone at risk of a fire. Another category would be one where it would be motivated by personal gain--raising the price on something and keeping the 'extra' or giving someone a more favorable deal to gain a personal advantage. I cannot give you absolutes to this question---it really involves your personal ethics and lifestyle. Would you never break a rule? Or only for a very good reason? What kind of reasons would allow you to transgress policy?

Think of possible scenarios that could occur on the job that might prompt you to cross the line? Has this ever happened before? Relating a response to something that is applicable to the job or organization would be helpful. Review this sample answer:

"If the situation was such that it meant keeping the customer without causing the company a loss, I might stretch the rules. In fact, this did happen to me early in my career. I was a cashier in a boutique and there was a 'no receipt, no return' policy. One customer was a regular and I remember handling a particular purchase for her. She came in a few days later claiming the item was defective but had lost the receipt. Given her record with the store, I took the initiative to give her a refund and wrote an explanation that satisfied the store manager. And, the customer continued to shop in the store."

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The question is not only about your personal ethics and lifestyle, but also about your judgment. Your answer should be within the context of the job. Policies and procedures in the intensive care unit of a hospital versus a boutique are very different. Safety and the law are areas for most jobs where there is little room for deviation. The example of the boutique from the DeLuca's is an excellent example where "the spirit of the law" as opposed to the "letter of the law" provides an opportunity to demonstrate good judgment to the benefit of the customer and the benefit of the company.

Follow-up Questions

Tell us about a situation where you deviated from the company's policies or procedures.

Provide an example that demonstrates your good judgment. The most relevant and most recent example should be used. The example provided by Matt and Nan DeLuca above is an excellent illustration of good judgment.

12. What do you expect your starting salary to be?

What is your current salary?

How much should we pay you?

What salary do you think you deserve?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Discussion of salaries and compensation should not be held until an offer is about to be made. With that said, let's look into the real world when this is not the case most of the time. Employers are shopping, trying to guess your price tag. This is one of those screening questions used to either screen in or screen out so a response is important. Have you done your homework? What is the price for this job in the marketplace? Have you checked out classified ads or online ads for similar positions? Are you within the range, given your level of experience? Pegging yourself mentally to the right price is the first step. Second step is sharing this information correctly. Do you have enough information about this new job to determine your salary? If not, state it and ask for the information that is needed.

"Before I can discuss salary, I would like to know the reporting requirements and how many people I would be supervising. In addition, what are the skill levels and experience of my staff?"

You can also ask "What are others in similar positions being paid?" When you can no longer stall or seek additional information:

"Based on what you have told me and exclusive of other compensation elements I feel that the position would warrant a salary range of \$_____ to \$_____".

Name a range such as \$40,000 to \$45,000 to give both sides some wiggle room and allow for some give-and-take when benefits and other compensation is considered. If you know what you are willing to accept as salary and what the market pays, using a salary range should permit you to be negotiable.

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Your first step is to research comparable salaries in your area. Review the classified ads and salary sites such as Salary.com. This establishes the salary range for you to negotiate from. Step two is to review the your qualifications and determine where you should fall within that range along with how you would justify your placement. Your answer would include:

"Based on my research of comparable positions, my salary range is from \$_____ to \$_____. I'm confident that given my experience in _____, _____ and _____, I warrant placement at the high end of the range."

Your answer should state the specific experiences or qualifications that meet the needs of the position. For example, if the position requires retail management experience, then not only should you refer to your retail management experience, but you should specify your profit/loss responsibility, annual revenue, marketing initiatives and number of staff.

Follow-up Questions

How would you justify the salary that you're asking for?

What research have you conducted to arrive at your salary request?

What did you find in your research? Highlight your findings focusing on the findings that are specific to your experience and qualifications.

13. Describe your most significant work related set back and how you overcame it?

How do you deal with adversity?

How do you deal with failure?

Tell us about a situation where you failed.

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is an insightful question that the interviewer uses to determine three things at the same time. First, the scope of your activities. Second within that context what the boundaries of challenges and adversity that you had to face. Third, what you consider a solution. Your answer should be a three-step approach.

1. Describe the situation in which the setback occurred.
2. Identify the setback being sure to indicate what made it a setback.
3. Present the action step you took to respond to the setback.

Consider this example.

"When we were looking for a vendor for the 401(k) plan, the CFO made his very strong opinion known that he wanted Bank A to be given the account since there already was an ongoing corporate account relationship with the bank. As head of the HR function I wanted to put the issue on the table for bids to ensure that I professionally could make the best decision for the organization by going to the marketplace. The fact is though that the decision had already been made. Even though that was true I performed a vigorous due diligence on Bank A to be sure that service quality would not be compromised and put our organization's fiduciary responsibility at risk. Then when I was certain that the plan was acceptable even though not my first choice by far, I embraced the relationship and encouraged all on the HR team to do so as well because if Bank A was the organization selected we needed to show solidarity with each of our providers including this one."

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Adversity and failure come with every job. The most desirable employees are those that deal with adversity constructively, learn from the experience, and move forward without dwelling on failure. Your answer should include a strong statement as to not only how you overcame the setback, but also what you learned from the setback and what steps you've taken to prevent or better prepare for similar setbacks.

"My first job was in retail. I was working on the sales floor at XYZ. A customer came up to me and asked if we had Product A. My reply was, "I don't think we carry Product A." I watched the customer leave XYZ and walk across the way to our competitor and minutes later walk out with Product A. My supervisor had overheard me and watched me. She came up to me and asked, "What reason did you give that customer to come back to us? By the way, Product A is in Aisle 5." My failure to provide the best possible customer service taught me a lesson. In my current position as a Building Manager, I work with my staff to insure that each and every tenant and visitor to my building is treated professionally and with superior customer service. There are a number of service businesses in my building and I consider my staff as an extension of their business. The majority of tenants have been in the building for over seven years."

Often the most significant moments of our careers happen early in our careers. The moment may revolve around an incident or in working with an individual. These are the moments that lead us to significant insights or career decisions.

Follow-up Questions

What did you learn from your failure?

What would you have done differently?

What lesson did you learn? Be specific and then provide an example from your subsequent work experience that illustrates how you applied what you learned. Use the most relevant and most recent example from your work experience.

14. How do you deal with ambiguity?

Do you work best in a structured or unstructured environment?

**How do deal with uncertainty?
How do you feel about doing routine work?**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

By answering the question before the interview, you can assess the type of organization and position in which you would be most effective. If you prefer a highly structured environment -- "just tell me what you want me to do" -- then a governmental position or a job with an established company in the financial services industry or in health care are just three examples that you should consider. If on the other hand you prefer to "wing it" and be constantly in uncharted waters, then a start-up in any industry, high tech or even a dot-com (remember those? some are still around) would be a more attractive alternative.

By addressing the question before the interview, you accomplish two very important things. First, you have decided in advance the preferable choice for you and second having done that beforehand you will speak confidently and to the point when answering the question during the interview.

During the interview, seek clues that will indicate what the interviewer thinks her/his environment is. If you're not sure try to hedge slightly when the ambiguity question is raised with a comment like, "With a great team I will be effective in either environment." Then follow with a recent work example that demonstrates your effectiveness in both types of environments.

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The workplace is black, white and gray. The black and white are those highly structured jobs where processes and procedures dictate most of your everyday activities. Gray is where you are required to meet the everyday challenge of analyzing data or situations, interpreting and acting upon your analysis. If you don't deal well with ambiguity, you should think twice about applying for a job in an unstructured environment. If you deal well with ambiguity and the job that you're interviewing for involves ambiguity, your answer might include:

"I deal with ambiguity everyday in my current position. I enjoy the challenge of knowing that the success of the team depends on my dealing with different problems that can't be solved with a cookie cutter approach. Just recently, my supervisor asked me to conduct a site visit for an important customer. I visited the customer site, listened to the customer's staff, gathered information and data, and then analyzed the information and data back in the office. My analysis included soliciting input from the members of my team . . . I'm confident that my skills and proven ability to deal with ambiguity will assist me in contributing to your company. "

15. What do you consider as your main achievement in your career?

What is your greatest accomplishment on the job?

What "legacy" will you leave in your current job?

What career achievement are you the most proud of?

What have you accomplished?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Look over your history (work, personal, educational) and consider those situations that required skills or abilities that might relate to current job opening/organization. This should be part of your interview preparation---seeing how you can 'match' yourself to the job, the organization. You have to cast yourself as a solution to their problem(s). Choose something recent...not what you did 10-15 years ago unless it was a major turning point in your career.

The most important aspect of your response is to make it relevant... to be able to explain (if asked to elaborate) what the problem was, what you did, what the results were. Being able to tell these little 'stories' livens up interviews and gives the interviewer an insight into your 'reading' of yourself and the job.

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Ideally, your main achievement, accomplishment or "legacy" from your work history is tied to one or more of the critical knowledges, skills and abilities (KSA's) for the job that you're interviewing for. Any

opportunity to address positives should be tied to the critical (KSA's). For example, for a supervisory position:

"My legacy in my current position at XYZ as an administrative manager is the development of the administrative function. Working with the production and customer service departments, we established a series of policies and procedures to support and facilitate operations. In addition, I've hired four subordinate supervisors in those four years. Two of those four supervisors have been promoted to prominent positions at XYZ and have reinforced the use of these policies and procedures. Administrative overhead has been reduced from 18% to 6% during this same period of time."

**16. What has been your most challenging work assignment and why?
Tell us about your greatest challenge and how you met the challenge.**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

The interviewer is looking to learn from this open-ended question the depth and breadth of your experience. What you need to do during your interview preparation is identify the position that you have occupied that was the most exciting and identify what challenges it provided for you. Think about positions with supervisors who really left you alone to complete your tasks and you will recall opportunities to excel. Another situation that lends itself to challenge is one at a remote location. One more is dealing with internal or external customers or the public where you need to think on your feet. Practice your answer before the interview so that you are able to determine how interesting you sound. A key is not only in the situation you describe but your tone as well. You should be genuinely stimulated by sharing your experience. The listener should be able to easily detect your enthusiasm in the sharing of the story.

One word of caution. Beware of telling too much. If you thrived in a fast-paced environment, but the organization you are dealing with is more slow and deliberate in its decision-making, if you talk about "fast-paced" and the excitement that comes with it, they may get concerned that they will be unable to provide that same environment and you may be bored or frustrated as a result. One more reason to listen to what you are saying both before and during the interview. Going back to this example, tell the same story (especially if it is your best), but just don't mention (or emphasize) the swift decision-making aspect.

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Whether the question refers to our current position or your work history, use the most current example most closely related to the position that you're interviewing for.

"My most challenging work assignment was to make the transition to supervision. I had been with my work team for four years and then was given the opportunity to supervise. I thought that popularity and being well liked led to team effectiveness as a supervisor. I was wrong. I had to learn to separate work from friendship, to be consistent and to delegate effectively. I signed up for company training classes, bought references, attended a university for a supervision certificate and finally talked to a number of experienced supervisors for advice. I learned from my mistakes. As a confirmation of my success, I've been recently nominated for my company's fast-track management development program. In each of the supervisory positions that I've held, I've been able to either improve or maintain productivity levels."

17. Tell us about a situation where you persuaded others follow your preferred course of action.

Matt & Nan DeLuca

You need to be careful here because if you are seen as too aggressive, you may be ruled out. On the other hand, if the situation you portray demonstrates soft persuasive skills, you may be ruled out for being too soft for the organization that is considering you.

Practice in advance telling yourself the story that demonstrates this point -- when you are practicing your other questions. You may have more than one instance ready so that you may vary the story to best

match the organization and the person with whom you are meeting. In every instance keep it brief. This will give you the opportunity to determine if you need to provide follow-up answers that can either soften or strengthen the tone of the example.

"I inherited an unfinished project that was over budget and two years late. When I realized no one on the task force was willing to suggest a completion date, I selected one for them. The project was completed with three weeks to spare."

This story may be very effective except in situations where it may be perceived as too heavy-handed.

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The key word is "persuade". Focus on an example where the method that you used can be readily seen by the interviewers as transferable to the position that you're interviewing for.

"I was a member of a task force to implement a new system. Unfortunately, there were a number of task force members who apparently had personal or political agendas. I asserted myself and shared my opinions with my fellow task force members. I listened carefully to everyone's views and then stated my views with factual examples and data. I also had separate discussions with the task force members between meetings. A number of the key recommendations adopted by the task force were from my ideas. One of the key skills I learned from my experience was that people will listen to me when I listen to them. Another skill was that the most compelling arguments are those that are stated factually without making points personal or emotional. These skills have helped me participate in a number of other successful projects."

- 18. What are your expectations of management?
What do you expect from your boss?
What type of boss do you work the best with?**

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A meaningful question that demands a thoughtful professional response. One example may be:

"To give a receptive hearing to HR issues and be attentive to consideration of alternative policies, programs, and procedures so that they express a genuine concern and realization that without the employees who got them to where they are, there would be no successful organization."

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Be careful with this question. If you were a manager, what would you look for in an employee? Typically, managers are looking for employees who are self-motivated, work independently, and work well with others. Managers don't want employees who will need to be micro managed, who can't work well with others or who bring problems without solutions. Studies have found that the one characteristic that employees seek in a manager is support. Here's a sample answer:

"My expectation is to have my manager's support. I'm able to work independently and I enjoy taking on new assignments and challenges. I'm at my best when I have a good rapport with my manager and when I'm confident that he or she is going to support me in taking on these challenges."

- 19. What is your ideal job?
How would you describe the perfect job?
How would you describe an ideal job and an ideal job environment?
Describe your dream job.**

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This is a question intended to draw you out so that the employer gets to see what you value and determine if what they are able to provide an environment and opportunity in sync with what you seek.

As part of your preparation in the quiet of your own thoughts, you should come up with the answer to this

question and based on your answer then seek out employers where you would be able to find your ideal job.

You want to 'paint yourself into the picture' without being too obvious. Think of the elements of the job/organization...what are the requirements, responsibilities? Then, think of those experiences in your past that complement/support those same points.

"I have had many opportunities that were ideal for me at that particular time in my career. Through these experiences I have come to realize that I appreciate and function best in a fast-paced environment; I am able to think on my feet and come up with creative problem-solving solutions. Additionally---I like to plan, to consider what changes might be needed to operate more efficiently. A team-based environment, such as you have outlined here at ____ Corp. is very similar to my other work teams---where I felt I was very effective as both a team member and, when needed, as a team leader."

Determine what your hot buttons are when looking for the next job. During the interview, filter your answer so that it is being given to one who is looking for great employees. If you are there because they have great benefits and challenging work, emphasize the challenging work.

In any instance, remember to evaluate your next supervisor because the research shows that that relationship will be your most important regardless the organization. There is no 'one answer fits all' for these types of questions---they must be geared to the job, the organization, your experiences and your expectations.

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After careful analysis and consideration, you should find that many of the characteristics of your ideal job are present in the job that you're interviewing for. Include the major characteristics in your answer.

"My ideal job offers responsibility, formal skills development, a dynamic work environment in a changing industry, and an opportunity for further advancement. These are the same factors that interested me in the position that I'm interviewing for. Your company is one of the recognized leaders in the _____ industry. I've worked with a number of your employees in the past and have heard positive comments on your sales training programs. . . ."

20. Describe a situation in which you responded positively and with flexibility to change.

How do you deal with change?

Give us an example of your ability to work in a changing work environment.

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Questions of this type...where interviewer is seeking specific information...can only come from your experiences and background. Obviously, responding positively and flexibly to change are important to the interviewer/organization/job opening---can you understand why? What aspects of the job do you think make these attributes important? Have you had similar experiences? What did you do?

Tell a short story---what was the project or situation...why it was important to the organization...what happened to require a rapid response...what did you do/not do...why...and what was the outcome. These particular details can only come from your own history.

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Are you seeking a dynamic or static work environment? Research the industry and position carefully to insure that the position is appropriate for you.

Assuming that the position is appropriate:

"The best example of my ability to work in a changing environment is my current position. I was hired into my current position as the Accounts Payables Manager just prior to the company going public. The company grew quickly and I was given the additional assignment as Purchasing

Manager. I didn't have prior purchasing experience, but I worked closely with my internal customers and expanded on my relationship with the vendors. I listened, I learned and stayed focused and patient. I continue to manage both functions with 20% fewer staff than when I was first given the assignment."

21. Why do you think that you are the best candidate for this job?

Why should we hire you?

What do you bring to this position?

Why are you applying for this job?

After our interviews are completed, what should we remember about you?

What makes you the best-qualified candidate?

Why would I want to work with you?

Why would I want you on my team?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

This is an opportunity to show that you have done your preparation and are not just going through a superficial job search. Prior to the interview, you carefully reviewed your qualifications and aspirations and after completing that process. After your review, you concluded that this is one job you are seeking because of the job and your knowledge of the organization. The key is to review in advance what value you bring to the table that will make you successful in this job. Glean from the job posting and from any comments you have received key skills that you bring that will address specific aspects of the job you seek. Use examples from recent experience to show you have thrived performing a variety of relevant activities that led to certain accomplishments and having done it before is an indication of what you will be able to do.

"I feel that XYZ Company needs an experienced sales manager with a proven track record and ability to motivate a selling team to not only satisfy the current customer base but to expand into new markets. With my previous experience at _____ I supervised a 12 member sales team that consistently met and regularly exceeded sales quotas. Working together as a team we developed a new approach with the marketing department that added 12% to the revenue and 10% to gross profit in under 8 months since launching this new selling program. This is the motivation and skill level that you need to have in this position and I have proven that I can meet expectations consistently."

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This is similar to Question No. 4, but provides your best opportunity to tie your strongest qualifications to the position that you're interviewing for. Your answer should demonstrate that you have carefully considered your qualifications versus the essential knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) for the position that you're interviewing for. The most effective answer is to match the critical KSA's of the position to specific experience or strong examples in your job history. As always, the strongest examples are those from similar/identical jobs and those examples that are the most recent.

"I'm the best candidate for the job because in my current position I'm already performing many of the responsibilities that are required. In addition, given your requirement for staff that excel in a team-based environment, my experience with project and customer service teams will enable me to quickly contribute. . . For example, in my current position I was the team leader for the company's Customer Care program."

22. How would you rate yourself as a _____ on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the best?

How would your co-workers rate you?

How would your supervisor rate you?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Playing the ratings game is tough. Being honest with yourself, where would you rate your skills? Exactly why would you give yourself that rating? Be very specific: consider all the skills needed to be an excellent (#10) programmer including personal qualities (attention to detail, interpersonal skills, motivation). Name the skills and give an example of how you have shown you have the skill (Team leader - developed project and assembled team to complete it on time).

Now that you have proved your rating to yourself, how can you sell it to another? I do not think the number is as important as why you came up with that rating. The ability to self-assess speaks of good judgment and credibility---two qualities esteemed in virtually every work environment. Of course, if you rate yourself a very low number, the interviewer will wonder why you are applying (assuming it is for a programming spot).

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Where do you rate yourself? Typically, this question is directed at one of the essential knowledges, skills or abilities of the position that you're interviewing for. If you don't rate yourself highly, you don't provide the interviewers with a compelling reason to hire you. Conversely, the higher you rate yourself, requires that you provide clear and specific reasons for your rating. Use the most recent example from your job history to justify your rating.

Second, don't expect the interviewers to evaluate you favorably if you cannot honestly evaluate yourself with confidence and in a positive manner. For example:

"I would rate myself a "10" on being a team player. I have worked in team-oriented positions in my past jobs and I prefer to work in teams. The qualities that make me a "10" include As an example, in my current position our team was assigned to establish inside sales customer support for a Fortune 500 client. The team leader had emergency surgery and I assumed the position of team leader. Our team was comprised of a veteran employees and new employees. I insured that everyone on the team was focused on the goal and understood their respective roles. Constant and consistent communication was especially important for the new employees"

Follow-up Questions

What would you do to improve your rating?

What is the one area that you would work on to improve your rating?

What is the single factor that if you improved would increase your rating?

A common pitfall is to name more than one area that you could improve on. Listen to the question. This question is a variation of "What is your greatest weakness?" The area that you identify should not be the same as the essential skills and abilities for the job that you're interviewing for.

For example, if the job that you're interviewing for requires strong customer service skills, don't emphasize the fact that you need to improve in your ability to deal with difficult people. Address your area of improvement by specifying what steps you've already made to improve yourself and give an example of your improvement. Steps to improvement may include being more aware and focusing on improvement; training; asking a supervisor or role model for advice; or outside education.

23. What motivates you?

What interests you?

What excites you?

What does it take to motivate you?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Other than looking into your past experiences identifying the times when you were motivated and the times when you were not, no one but you has this answer. Find concrete examples when you had to pull it all together and get motivated to get the job done. What does it for you?

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Think about what has motivated you in your current and past jobs. Is there a specific area? Are you motivated by working in customer service, auditing, or teaching math? Are you motivated by something more general, such as a having a variety of assignments, challenging work, pressure, opportunity for advancement, working with people, or being part of a successful team?

One of the aspects of the job that you're interviewing for should also be something that motivates you. Why would you apply for a job that doesn't interest you? Why should they hire you if you're not interested or motivated? Your answer to this question is an opportunity to reinforce your interest and fit with the job that you're interviewing for.

"I'm motivated by being part of a successful team. In my current position, I was a member of the team responsible for implementing a new tracking system for the parts inventory. The team was given the goal of implementing the system within six months at the same time operations were ongoing. What motivated me was the opportunity to work with others who were also motivated to get the job done. We did what we had to do to get the job done and the sense of accomplishment was exciting and gratifying. I've researched your company and my understanding is that this position will offer a number of similar challenges. I have a number of friends who work here and I know they're highly motivated. In addition, the same inventory system that we implemented in my current position is the system that you are considering for implementation."

Follow-up Questions

**Tell us about the last time you were motivated. What were the circumstances?
When was the last time you were excited about your job?**

A good starting point is the last time you had a sense of accomplishment. Can you cite an example involving a challenging assignment, solving a critical problem, developing a creative solution or satisfying a difficult customer?

"I'm always motivated because everyday is different and provides different challenges. Recently, a key supplier was unable to deliver the tiles needed to complete our construction project. Working with the supplier, I was able to obtain other clients who had recently received delivery of the same tiles. I contacted a number of the other clients and was able to obtain enough of the tiles to keep our project on schedule. At stake was a \$50,000 progress payment."

Here's another reminder that every answer that you give is the basis for a possible follow-up question. For every answer be prepared with an example from your work experience that is similar to the position that you're interviewing for. Remember - use the most relevant and most recent example from your work experience.

- 24. Give us an example of a risk you took to achieve something important.
Tell us about a situation in which you took a risk.
Give us an example of your ability to take handle risk.
How do you handle risk?**

Matt & Nan DeLuca

The interviewers are not looking for your experiences sky diving or trying new recipes specifically. They are trying to determine your flexibility, your creativity, and/or your willingness to think on your feet.

Think over your prior work experiences...has there been a time when there were not 'rules' to guide you, when you had to 'invent' a solution or try something new? Then tell the story:

*What was the situation?
Why it was important?
What action you took?
What the outcome was?*

It is easy for them to listen to a short story (and easy to remember you by it). The closer your story comes to something that actually might happen on the job you're interviewing for, the better it will be.

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When have you stepped out of your comfort zone to accomplish an important goal for the team or the company? How about a situation in which you took the initiative on an important project? Have you had

the opportunity to perform the duties of a higher position? Have you stepped in during an emergency or a high-pressure situation? The rule is to cite the most relevant and the most recent. Here are a few sample answers that you can expand on with your own experience:

Early in my current job, I volunteered for a new project before I had completed my probation. I wanted to demonstrate my project management skills and prove that I was a valuable member of the team.

Just recently, our team leader retired. Although others on the team were more senior and at the risk of being perceived of "stepping on their toes", I assumed a leadership role on the next major project. Through mutual respect and setting an example, I was recently promoted to the position of team leader.

An important new client visited the office when my manager and the client's account executive were still at an offsite meeting. The client had a number of questions regarding our technical support capabilities that I was able to answer. When my manager and the account executive returned to the office, the client stated that his outstanding questions regarding the proposed project had been answered and he wanted to get started immediately. I was comfortable in taking a risk because I pride myself on always being prepared for the unexpected.

25. Would you rather work alone or in a group?

Are you more comfortable working by yourself or with a group?

Are you more productive working by yourself or with a group?

Do you work better working by yourself or on a team?

Matt & Nan DeLuca

Does the job you are interviewing for require a lot of work on your own? If so, then answering that you need to work in groups would NOT work for you there. You need to have some insight into what the job and organization requires AND knowledge of what your experiences have been. It may be that they are not looking for what you 'like' but for your experiences and where you do your best. In order to achieve a situation where the interviewer can 'see' you in the job, you need to have some insight into how they run the organization. Is it 'team based' or is it autocratic, one leader and everyone gets their marching orders and is expected to work on their own? How does this mesh with your experience?

"In my past job it was a mix of the two that really seemed to work. We worked on our own to develop products and strategies and had weekly team meetings to discuss progress and what support was needed to meet completion dates. Even when we worked 'on our own', we seemed to know each other's strengths and 'bounced' ideas or problems off each other. I thought it was a great system and I found that I was comfortable being on my own as well as discovered that a team environment was one where I could be a supportive member and, at times, a leader."

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Keep in mind the culture of the company that you're interviewing for and tailor your answer.

I'm comfortable working alone as I did at the company prior to my current job. My ability to successfully work alone is evident in that I promoted within three years. One of the most attractive aspects of the position that I'm interviewing for is your company's reputation for team-based account management. My current firm just migrated to the team-based model and I've found the team emphasis is more effective and accelerates my skills development.

Follow-up Questions

Give us an example of your ability to work effectively alone.

Tell us about a situation that would demonstrate your ability to work effectively in a group.