Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions

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You may give this guide to everybody you feel it may help, but not change it in any way.
Introduction

This mini guide is designed to help you answer those really tough interview questions.

The competency based interview is fast becoming the most popular style of interview for large companies, often combined with some form of psychometric or personality testing. The thinking behind this approach is that under pressure people will react to type, meaning you have inbuilt characteristics and behaviour which you will have exhibited in previous experience.

It's like saying that you have typical behaviour almost built into your DNA. Interviewers would really like to find this information out about you, and will try and do this through the interview.

Therefore the questioning will focus on your past experiences, on the basis of; if you did something previously you are most likely to do it again in the same way.

The questions you will be asked will be open (requiring more than a yes or no answer) competency based along the lines of:

- “What was the last major problem you encountered at work, and how did you resolve it”?
- “What area of your professional skill-set are you concentrating on improving, and can you give an example of how you are doing this”?
- “Describe your finest achievement”?
- “Describe the most stressful task you have had to undertake”
- “How do you react when someone in the team is not pulling their weight”?

These questions are looking to uncover the skills (competencies) you have used and the behaviour you have shown.

Tough questions, but nothing to be afraid of if your prepared.
How Successful People Behave

Before we look at how to compile answers to these types of question, let's just spend a moment to consider how successful people behave.

I want to sow the seeds of some of the behavioural and competency characteristics that you will need to demonstrate in order to succeed through interview.

In the next chapter I suggest that you take a free personal motivation test.

If you have never taken one of these tests, I think you will find it fascinating, as it will provide you a printable report that will highlight, your personal work related motivational preferences.

These tests give an accurate and insightful overview of what motivates and fatigues you at work.

And is a great help in both searching for the right roles, and in articulating your behavioural skills and motivations on your CV / Resume and during the interview.

In my experience these reports can also be highly uplifting, as many people have a slightly negative perception of their skills and value.

These reports often highlight that your performance is not hampered by any lack of skill, but simply by doing work that contains a high component of tasks that don't motivate your core drivers.

This can be life changing information.

Behaviours and Competencies of Successful People

Employers are looking for behaviour and personality characteristics that have been proven to work successfully in the past, and these tend to break down into the following:

Note: They are thankfully not expecting you to have all of them. But you must demonstrate the ones you do possess.
I like Robert Lawrence’s ebook “Killer Interview Secrets”, and his acronym “STAPLES” for putting these into a memorable form.

S – Skills and competencies

Personal Competencies:
Adaptability
Risk Taking
Flexibility
Decisiveness
Independence
Integrity
Tenacity
Compliance
Stress Tolerance

Decision Making Competencies:
Numerical Analysis
Problem Analysis
Judgment
Creativity
Vision
Entrepreneurial

T – Team Player

Interpersonal Competencies:
Sociability
Oral Communications
Teamwork
Written Communication
Listening
Persuasiveness
Interpersonal Sensitivity

A – Attitude

Motivation Competencies:
Commitment
Energy
Work Standards
Self-Motivation
Initiative
Service Orientation
Resilience
Tolerance of Ambiguity

P – Professionalism

A subjective description for a coming together, of a number of characteristics and competencies that the interviewer will be looking for. You are a reflection of the entire company. Employers want the best to represent the company, and are looking for individuals who are mature, articulate, and have good people skills. Being “professional” means that you know how to “handle yourself” as an employee of the company. You show up on time, do the work to the best of your ability, and respect your co-workers.

L – Leadership

People & Organisational Competencies:
- Delegation
- Task Leadership
- Management Control
- Planning & Organising
- Staff Development
- Organisational Sensitivity
- Organisational Process Design

E - Ethic

Having a good attitude, being proactive, and possessing a willingness to do whatever is needed to get the job done.

S - Security

Employers are looking for people who truly want to be part of the company. They want individuals who desire to be active participants for the long-term.

It's vitally important that you interpret and highlight the specific behaviors and competencies that the role you want demands. (details on how to interpreting job ads and job descriptions here).
And then align this knowledge with your personal behaviors and competencies. The free personality and motivation reports will highlight these beautifully for you.

The other major benefit to taking the free versions of these tests now, is that it's likely you will have to sit one of these tests as part of your interview. It must be helpful to know what they will say about you so that you can prepare in advance.
Know Yourself

Having listed most of the behaviour and competencies that employers are looking for in the previous chapter.

This chapter is about using the great free personal testing services that are available on the Internet to help align your key motivations and competencies with the desired role.

I would suggest taking MAPP personal motivation test, and the Peoplemaps personality test.

The MAPP test (Motivational Aptitude and Personal Performance) is 71 questions where you pick the most relevant answers for you.

This is done on line, and will take you between 20 to 40 minutes.

You can start and save your test, for completion later, if you don't have a clear time period.

No study is required, the questions don't have a right or wrong answer, simply pick the answer that resonates strongest with you.

Once you have completed the free test you get a 12 page report which you can print out or leave on the site, and return to via your own password whenever you want.

The report highlights your motivation in 9 key areas

- Job Content - tasks you want to perform
- Temperament - how you prefer to perform tasks
- Aptitude - how you like to express your performance of tasks
- People - how you relate to people
- Things - how you relate to things, materials, processes etc
- Data - how you relate to data and information in your work
- Reasoning - how you relate to reasoning and decision making
- Math - how you relate and apply the use of math
- Language Capacity - How you use language
And gives you a summary and breakdown against each of the above 9 areas

The screen shot below shows a clip of my report as a brief example.

The report further suggests your top career areas, and graphical feedback of you most motivational career content.

The reports also highlight areas that are extremely low in motivational value as my extract below highlights.

This helped me restructure my working day, to complete this type of important but dull
work (unfortunately I cannot avoid some of this work), when I'm fresh.

This small insight has given me huge benefits in productivity.

The free MAPP reports gives you a great deal of insightful, powerful information, well worth the 20 or so minutes required to complete the questions.

However if you want to uncover all the information (you can see the above extract obscures some of the information) you can pay $20 to reveal all.

The reports suggest tips for including this information into your CV / Resume.

Everybody who I know has taken the test, has created a far stronger CV / Resume:
- Focused on motivational tasks
- Focused on motivational skills
- Motivational Behaviour

This knowledge can then be taken to improve your interviewing performance.

You now have a better knowledge of your strengths and weaknesses, and can prepare your answers for those tough interview questions you know are coming!

I would also suggest taking the free Peoplemaps personality test, though I doubt it will provide the same level of unexpected feedback, it will highlight your personality traits, in a positive way, that can be used in building your CV / Resume and interview preparation.

My recommendation would be to do both the Peoplemaps personality and MAPP tests both are free, and available online.

It will take you about 45 minutes in total to complete them, you get password access to them so you can do them a few questions at a time if you wish, save your work and come back to them later.

Both companies offer a paid in-depth report as well, which is great, but you should only pay the extra if you want the additional insight.
STAR Stories

This is now the time to prepare your technique for answering these questions.

You should also use some of these principals for how you organise your content in your CV / Resume, cover letter or any other marketing collateral you may choose to use.

STAR is another acronym. Yes, I like acronyms!

S – Situation, background, set the scene

T – Task or Target, specifics of what's required, when, where, who etc. Use specific quantifiable business language where possible. values, percentages, budgets etc.

A – Action, what you did, skills used, behaviours, characteristics, how you did it.

R – Result – Outcome, what happened, again using specific quantifiable business language.

I cannot stress how valuable learning this question answering technique will be for you. It works in all situations where you want to compellingly make your point, in a likeable style.

It's not telling, it's demonstrating.

This is so much stronger than saying “I can do that”.

Because it says “I've done it before, and I did it like this, and this is what happened”

Wow!

People like hearing stories, facts are easier to remember if wrapped in a story, stories tend not to get interrupted; basically stories are an ancient proven method of getting a message across!

Listeners will remember more of your answers, and the messages within them, yet your message will be delivered in a friendly likeable style.

This technique is designed for answering tough competency based questions.

With this under your belt, your success ratio will go off the scale.
How to build a STAR Story

A Star story should be about 2 minutes long, and delivered with energy and enthusiasm about a real experience you have had (it does not have to be a work experience, as long as it describes a relevant skill, behaviour, experience).

Time for an example:

**Question:** “Have you ever lead a team before”?

This is another reason why the STAR method is so powerful. The above question is a terrible closed question.

You could answer “yes” or “yes, on three separate occasions” and move quickly onto the next question.

But Leadership is an important skill, and you must not miss this chance to shine.

A lot of folks would give the easy answer here; but you have a great chance to impress, and basically do all the interviewers work for them.

Let's build a STAR story answer

**(Situation)** “Yes; for example at my last company, where I was initially a software developer, in a team of 6 developing a new finance module for our core accounting product.”

**(Task)** “The project was critical as launch dates had been set with a lot of sales and marketing investment riding on the product being ready. However the project was behind schedule, when our team leader unfortunately became ill, and had to leave.”

**(Action)** "I had been sports team captain at school, where I loved the challenge and responsibility of leadership. So I volunteered to stand in, and by using my technical analysis skills, spotted a few small mistakes made in the initial coding, that were causing sporadic errors, and slowing us down. I then negotiated with our product director a small bonus incentive for the team, and budget for two pizza evenings, so we could pull a couple of late night shifts to correct the coding and catch up with the critical project landmarks.”

**(Result)** “Though this took us 1.5% over budget the software was delivered on time with 20% a better than target fault tolerance. The project was seen as a great success as the additional project cost was minimal compared to the costs of delaying the launch, and the negative affect on our product branding. The team where delighted with the extra bonus and I have now been officially promoted to team leader as a result.”

You need to practice your answers out loud, to ensure it's continuity and that you don't go
far over 2 minutes.
The example above not only answers the leadership question asked, but also conveys that you have other skills and behaviours any interviewer would be interested in.

Answering tough interview questions like this will work wonders, but answering poorly worded questions will really set you apart.
You will get a lot more of your message across to less experienced interviewers, while your competitors won’t.
It’s a great technique that should be practiced and perfected, It’ll be well worth your while.
Interview Practice / Rehearsal

Up till now you've done a ton of solid preparation work for your interview, and you should be congratulated.

It was the great South African golfer Gary Player who said “the more I practice the luckier I seem to get”, and with the work you've done you deserve all the interview luck there is.

However there is still one more piece that should be done.

You've got the theory, and you've prepared your STAR answers that demonstrate the appropriate skills and behaviour for the job your aiming at; you've done the personality and motivational tests, which will add true personality into your answers (both on your CV / Resume, and at interview), and you've practiced saying them out loud, so they trip off your tongue, naturally and enthusiastically.

What more can be done?

It's simply more practice, trying to add the type, of realistic pressure that you'll encounter at interview.

What I mean is to actually rehearse your interview in front of a friend, colleague or family member. I realise this is not always easy, and I must confess when I'd tried this myself many years ago it would often end in giggles, and silliness. I'm such a big kid that I gave up with this method and stuck to practicing my answers out loud on my own.

But if you can keep it together, these rehearsals will really pay off.

You can also hire a interview coach, who will sit down and interview you against the brief for the job your going for. This is a great way to go, but is going to cost a bit, hiring a trained professional for 1 – 2 hours doesn't come cheap, but if the prize at the end is worth it maybe this is a good option.

Other's recommend going on more interviews for jobs your not interested in, just for the practice. Not sure I'd be happy knowingly wasting peoples time, so I'll let you decide on this one.

However just recently one of my candidates (Jenny) introduced me to something called “Interview Gold”
Interview Gold is an online interactive system to help you improve and rehearse your interview skills.

It's been featured in The Guardian and Mirror national newspapers, Personnel Today, and on National Television (the BBC).

Jenny said “it enabled me to practice without calling on other people, or attending interviews that I had no interest in”.

“I could practice when I wanted, and for as long as I needed to get things right”.

Interview Gold fitted in with all the other preparation Jenny was doing, and I'm glad to report helped Jenny get the job she was trying for.

It cost's around £50.00, (about $69 or 53 EUR approx) but you'll get a full 7 day's to try it out, and make sure that it's going to help you pass your interviews, so you can't say fairer than that, can you.

You can go to our website for a full review of Interview Gold or go to Interview Gold directly.

Another training resource you may wish to consider is “The Expert's Guide Interview Skills” DVD, CD and guide book.

This is another great resource and I have done a detailed review of Experts Guide Interview Skills on our website.

Or click the picture to the right to go to the Experts Guide website.
Conclusion

I very much hope this guide has been useful and informative, and would like to wish you all success in your career interview endeavours.

Richard Penfold.

Sentient Selection Ltd.

Any suggestions for the improvement of this guide will be most welcome, and comments generally.

To contact me please email