

# HR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## **GENERAL GUIDELINES IN ANSWERING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Everyone is nervous on interviews. If you simply allow yourself to feel nervous, you'll do much better. Remember also that it's difficult for the interviewer as well.

In general, be upbeat and positive. Never be negative.

Rehearse your answers and time them. Never talk for more than 2 minutes straight.

Don't try to memorize answers word for word. Use the answers shown here as a guide only, and don't be afraid to include your own thoughts and words. To help you remember key concepts, jot down and review a few key words for each answer. Rehearse your answers frequently, and they will come to you naturally in interviews.

As you will read in the accompanying report, the single most important strategy in interviewing, as in all phases of your job search, is what we call: "The Greatest Executive Job Finding Secret." And that is...

### **Find out what people want, than show them how you can help them get it.**

Find out what an employer wants most in his or her ideal candidate, then show how you meet those qualifications.

In other words, you must match your abilities, with the needs of the employer. *You must sell what the buyer is buying.* To do that, before you know what to emphasize in your answers, you must find out what the buyer is buying... what he is looking for. And the best way to do that is to ask a few questions yourself.

You will see how to bring this off skillfully as you read the first two questions of this report. But regardless of how you accomplish it, you must remember this strategy above all: before blurting out your qualifications, you must get some idea of what the employer wants most. Once you know what he wants, you can then present your qualifications as the perfect "key" that fits the "lock" of that position.

Other important interview strategies:

- Turn weaknesses into strengths (You'll see how to do this in a few moments.)
- Think before you answer. A pause to collect your thoughts is a hallmark of a thoughtful person.

As a daily exercise, practice being more optimistic. For example, try putting a positive spin on events and situations you would normally regard as negative. This is not meant to turn you into a Pollyanna, but to sharpen your selling skills. The best salespeople, as well as the best liked interview candidates, come off as being naturally optimistic, "can do" people. You will dramatically raise your level of attractiveness by daily practicing to be more optimistic.

Be honest...never lie.

Keep an interview diary. Right after each interview note what you did right, what could have gone a little better, and what steps you should take next with this contact. Then take those steps. Don't be like the 95% of humanity who say they will follow up on something, but never do.

## **About the 64 questions...**

You might feel that the answers to the following questions are "canned", and that they will seldom match up with the exact way you are asked the questions in actual interviews. The questions and answers are designed to be as specific and realistic as possible. But no preparation can anticipate thousands of possible

variations on these questions. What's important is that you thoroughly familiarize yourself with the main strategies behind each answer. And it will be invaluable to you if you commit to memory a few key words that let you instantly call to mind your best answer to the various questions. If you do this, and follow the principles of successful interviewing presented here, you're going to do very well. Good luck...and good job-hunting!

### **#01: Tell me about yourself.**

**TRAPS:** Beware, about 80% of all interviews begin with this "innocent" question. Many candidates, unprepared for the question, skewer themselves by rambling, recapping their life story, delving into ancient work history or personal matters.

**BEST ANSWER:** Start with the present and tell why you are well qualified for the position. Remember that the key to all successful interviewing is to match your qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. In other words *you must sell what the buyer is buying. This is the single most important strategy in job hunting.*

So, before you answer this or any question it's imperative that you try to uncover your interviewer's greatest need, want, problem or goal.

To do so, make you take these two steps:

1. Do all the homework you can before the interview to uncover this person's wants and needs (not the generalized needs of the industry or company)
2. As early as you can in the interview, ask for a more complete description of what the position entails. You might say: "I have a number of accomplishments I'd like to tell you about, but I want to make the best use of our time together and talk directly to your needs. To help me do, that, could you tell me more about the most important priorities of this position? All I know is what I (heard from the recruiter, read in the classified ad, etc.)"

Then, ALWAYS follow-up with a second and possibly, third question, to draw out his needs even more. Surprisingly, it's usually this second or third question that unearths what the interviewer is most looking for.

You might ask simply, "And in addition to that?..." or, "Is there anything else you see as essential to success in this position?"

This process will not feel easy or natural at first, because it is easier simply to answer questions, but only if you uncover the employer's wants and needs will your answers make the most sense. Practice asking these key questions before giving your answers, the process will feel more natural and you will be light years ahead of the other job candidates you're competing with.

After uncovering what the employer is looking for, describe why the needs of this job bear striking parallels to tasks you've succeeded at before. Be sure to illustrate with specific examples of your responsibilities and especially your achievements, all of which are geared to present yourself as a perfect match for the needs he has just described.

### **#02: What are your greatest strengths?**

**TRAPS:** This question seems like a softball lob, but be prepared. You don't want to come across as egotistical or arrogant. Neither is this a time to be humble.

**BEST ANSWER:** You know that your key strategy is to first uncover your interviewer's greatest wants and needs before you answer questions. And from Question 1, you know how to do this.

Prior to any interview, you should have a list mentally prepared of your greatest strengths. You should also have, a specific example or two, which illustrates each strength, an example chosen from your most recent and most impressive achievements.

You should, have this list of your greatest strengths and corresponding examples from your achievements so

well committed to memory that you can recite them cold after being shaken awake at 2:30AM.

Then, once you uncover your interviewer's greatest wants and needs, you can choose those achievements from your list that best match up.

As a general guideline, the 10 most desirable traits that all employers love to see in their employees are:

1. A proven track record as an achiever...especially if your achievements match up with the employer's greatest wants and needs.
2. Intelligence...management "savvy".
3. Honesty...integrity...a decent human being.
4. Good fit with corporate culture...someone to feel comfortable with...a team player who meshes well with interviewer's team.
5. Likeability...positive attitude...sense of humor.
6. Good communication skills.
7. Dedication...willingness to walk the extra mile to achieve excellence.
8. Definiteness of purpose...clear goals.
9. Enthusiasm...high level of motivation.
10. Confident...healthy...a leader.

### #03: What are your greatest weaknesses?

**TRAPS:** Beware - this is an eliminator question, designed to shorten the candidate list. Any admission of a weakness or fault will earn you an "A" for honesty, but an "F" for the interview.

**PASSABLE ANSWER:** Disguise a strength as a weakness.

*Example:* "I sometimes push my people too hard. I like to work with a sense of urgency and everyone is not always on the same wavelength."

*Drawback:* This strategy is better than admitting a flaw, but it's so widely used, it is transparent to any experienced interviewer.

**BEST ANSWER:** (and another reason it's so important to get a thorough description of your interviewer's needs before you answer questions): Assure the interviewer that you can think of nothing that would stand in the way of your performing in this position with excellence. Then, quickly review your strongest qualifications.

*Example:* "Nobody's perfect, but based on what you've told me about this position, I believe I'd make an outstanding match. I know that when I hire people, I look for two things most of all. Do they have the qualifications to do the job well, and the motivation to do it well? Everything in my background shows I have both the qualifications and a strong desire to achieve excellence in whatever I take on. So I can say in all honesty that I see nothing that would cause you even a small concern about my ability or my strong desire to perform this job with excellence."

*Alternate strategy* (if you don't yet know enough about the position to talk about such a perfect fit): Instead of confessing a weakness, describe what you like most and like least, making sure that what you like most matches up with the most important qualification for success in the position, and what you like least is not essential.

*Example:* Let's say you're applying for a teaching position. "If given a choice, I like to spend as much time as possible in front of my prospects selling, as opposed to shuffling paperwork back at the office. Of course, I long ago learned the importance of filing paperwork properly, and I do it conscientiously. But what I really love to do is sell (if your interviewer were a sales manager, this should be music to his ears.)"

### #04: Tell me about something you did – or failed to do – that you now feel a little ashamed of.

**TRAPS:** There are some questions your interviewer has no business asking, and this is one. But while you may feel like answering, "none of your business," naturally you can't. Some interviewers ask this

question on the chance you admit to something, but if not, at least they'll see how you think on your feet.

Some unprepared candidates, flustered by this question, unburden themselves of guilt from their personal life or career, perhaps expressing regrets regarding a parent, spouse, child, etc. All such answers can be disastrous.

**BEST ANSWER:** As with faults and weaknesses, never confess a regret. But don't seem as if you're stonewalling either.

*Best strategy:* Say you harbor no regrets, then add a principle or habit you practice regularly for healthy human relations.

*Example:* Pause for reflection, as if the question never occurred to you. Then say, "You know, I really can't think of anything." (Pause again, then add): "I would add that as a general management principle, I've found that the best way to avoid regrets is to avoid causing them in the first place. I practice one habit that helps me a great deal in this regard. At the end of each day, I mentally review the day's events and conversations to take a second look at the people and developments I'm involved with and do a doublecheck of what they're likely to be feeling. Sometimes I'll see things that do need more follow-up, whether a pat on the back, or maybe a five minute chat in someone's office to make sure we're clear on things...whatever."

"I also like to make each person feel like a member of an elite team, like the Boston Celtics or LA Lakers in their prime. I've found that if you let each team member know you expect excellence in their performance...if you work hard to set an example yourself...and if you let people know you appreciate and respect their feelings, you wind up with a highly motivated group, a team that's having fun at work because they're striving for excellence rather than brooding over slights or regrets."

#### **#05: Why are you leaving (or did you leave) this position?**

**TRAPS:** Never badmouth your previous industry, company, board, boss, staff, employees or customers. This rule is inviolable: never be negative. Any mud you hurl will only soil your suit.

Especially avoid words like "personality clash", "didn't get along", or others which cast a shadow on your competence, integrity, or temperament.

#### **BEST ANSWER:**

*(If you have a job presently)*

If you're not yet 100% committed to leaving your present post, don't be afraid to say so. Since you have a job, you are in a stronger position than someone who does not. But don't be coy either. State honestly what you'd be hoping to find in a new spot. Of course, as stated often before, your answer will all the stronger if you have already uncovered what this position is all about and you match your desires to it.

*(If you do not presently have a job.)*

Never lie about having been fired. It's unethical – and too easily checked. But do try to deflect the reason from you personally. If your firing was the result of a takeover, merger, division wide layoff, etc., so much the better.

But you should also do something totally unnatural that will demonstrate consummate professionalism. Even if it hurts, describe your own firing – candidly, succinctly and without a trace of bitterness – from the company's point-of-view, indicating that you could understand why it happened and you might have made the same decision yourself.

Your stature will rise immensely and, most important of all, you will show you are healed from the wounds inflicted by the firing. You will enhance your image as first-class management material and stand head and shoulders above the legions of firing victims who, at the slightest provocation, zip open their shirts to expose their battle scars and decry the unfairness of it all.

*For all prior positions:*

Make sure you've prepared a brief reason for leaving. Best reasons: more money, opportunity, responsibility or growth.

### #06: The "Silent Treatment"

**TRAPS:** *Beware* – if you are unprepared for this question, you will probably not handle it right and possibly blow the interview. Thank goodness most interviewers don't employ it. It's normally used by those determined to see how you respond under stress. Here's how it works:

You answer an interviewer's question and then, instead of asking another, he just stares at you in a deafening silence.

You wait, growing a bit uneasy, and there he sits, silent as Mt. Rushmore, as if he doesn't believe what you've just said, or perhaps making you feel that you've unwittingly violated some cardinal rule of interview etiquette.

When you get this silent treatment after answering a particularly difficult question, such as "tell me about your weaknesses", its intimidating effect can be most disquieting, even to polished job hunters.

Most unprepared candidates rush in to fill the void of silence, viewing prolonged, uncomfortable silences as an invitation to clear up the previous answer which has obviously caused some problem. And that's what they do – ramble on, sputtering more and more information, sometimes irrelevant and often damaging, because they are suddenly playing the role of someone who's goofed and is now trying to recoup. But since the candidate doesn't know where or how he goofed, he just keeps talking, showing how flustered and confused he is by the interviewer's unmovable silence.

**BEST ANSWER:** Like a primitive tribal mask, the Silent Treatment loses all its power to frighten you once you refuse to be intimidated. If your interviewer pulls it, keep quiet yourself for a while and then ask, with sincere politeness and not a trace of sarcasm, "Is there anything else I can fill in on that point?" That's all there is to it.

Whatever you do, don't let the Silent Treatment intimidate you into talking a blue streak, because you could easily talk yourself out of the position.

### #07: Why should I hire you?

**TRAPS:** Believe it or not, this is a killer question because so many candidates are unprepared for it. If you stammer or adlib you've blown it.

**BEST ANSWER:** By now you can see how critical it is to apply the overall strategy of uncovering the employer's needs before you answer questions. If you know the employer's greatest needs and desires, this question will give you a big leg up over other candidates because you will give him better reasons for hiring you than anyone else is likely to...reasons tied directly to his needs.

Whether your interviewer asks you this question explicitly or not, this is the most important question of your interview because he must answer this question favorably in his own mind before you will be hired. So help him out! Walk through each of the position's requirements as you understand them, and follow each with a reason why you meet that requirement so well.

*Example:* "As I understand your needs, you are first and foremost looking for someone who can manage the sales and marketing of your book publishing division. As you've said you need someone with a strong background in trade book sales. This is where I've spent almost all of my career, so I've chalked up 18 years of experience exactly in this area. I believe that I know the right contacts, methods, principles, and successful management techniques as well as any person can in our industry."

"You also need someone who can expand your book distribution channels. In my prior post, my innovative promotional ideas doubled, then tripled, the number of outlets selling our books. I'm confident I can do the same for you."

“You need someone to give a new shot in the arm to your mail order sales, someone who knows how to sell in space and direct mail media. Here, too, I believe I have exactly the experience you need. In the last five years, I’ve increased our mail order book sales from \$600,000 to \$2,800,000, and now we’re the country’s second leading marketer of scientific and medical books by mail.” Etc., etc., etc.,

Every one of these selling “couplets” (his need matched by your qualifications) is a touchdown that runs up your score. IT is your best opportunity to outsell your competition.

### #08: Aren’t you overqualified for this position?

**TRAPS:** The employer may be concerned that you’ll grow dissatisfied and leave.

**BEST ANSWER:** As with any objection, don’t view this as a sign of imminent defeat. It’s an invitation to teach the interviewer a new way to think about this situation, seeing advantages instead of drawbacks.

*Example:* “I recognize the job market for what it is – a marketplace. Like any marketplace, it’s subject to the laws of supply and demand. So ‘overqualified’ can be a relative term, depending on how tight the job market is. And right now, it’s very tight. I understand and accept that.”

“I also believe that there could be very positive benefits for both of us in this match.”

“Because of my unusually strong experience in \_\_\_\_\_, I could start to contribute right away, perhaps much faster than someone who’d have to be brought along more slowly.”

“There’s also the value of all the training and years of experience that other companies have invested tens of thousands of dollars to give me. You’d be getting all the value of that without having to pay an extra dime for it. With someone who has yet to acquire that experience, he’d have to gain it on your nickel.”

“I could also help you in many things they don’t teach at the Harvard Business School. For example...(how to hire, train, motivate, etc.) When it comes to knowing how to work well with people and getting the most out of them, there’s just no substitute for what you learn over many years of front-line experience. Your company would \_\_\_\_\_ gain \_\_\_\_\_ all \_\_\_\_\_ this, \_\_\_\_\_ too.”

“From my side, there are strong benefits, as well. Right now, I am unemployed. I want to work, very much, and the position you have here is exactly what I love to do and am best at. I’ll be happy doing this work and that’s what matters most to me, a lot more than money or title.”

“Most important, I’m looking to make a long term commitment in my career now. I’ve had enough of job-hunting and want a permanent spot at this point in my career. I also know that if I perform this job with excellence, other opportunities cannot help but open up for me right here. In time, I’ll find many other ways to help this company and in so doing, help myself. I really am looking to make a long-term commitment.”

**NOTE:** The main concern behind the “overqualified” question is that you will leave your new employer as soon as something better comes your way. Anything you can say to demonstrate the sincerity of your commitment to the employer and reassure him that you’re looking to stay for the long-term will help you overcome this objection.

### #09: Where do you see yourself five years from now?

**TRAPS:** One reason interviewers ask this question is to see if you’re settling for this position, using it merely as a stopover until something better comes along. Or they could be trying to gauge your level of ambition.

If you’re too specific, i.e., naming the promotions you someday hope to win, you’ll sound presumptuous. If you’re too vague, you’ll seem rudderless.

**BEST ANSWER:** Reassure your interviewer that you're looking to make a long-term commitment...that this position entails exactly what you're looking to do and what you do extremely well. As for your future, you believe that if you perform each job at hand with excellence, future opportunities will take care of themselves.

*Example:* "I am definitely interested in making a long-term commitment to my next position. Judging by what you've told me about this position, it's exactly what I'm looking for and what I am very well qualified to do. In terms of my future career path, I'm confident that if I do my work with excellence, opportunities will inevitably open up for me. It's always been that way in my career, and I'm confident I'll have similar opportunities here."

#### #10: Describe your ideal company, location and job.

**TRAPS:** This is often asked by an experienced interviewer who thinks you may be overqualified, but knows better than to show his hand by posing his objection directly. So he'll use this question instead, which often gets a candidate to reveal that, indeed, he or she is looking for something other than the position at hand.

**BEST ANSWER:** The only right answer is to describe what this company is offering, being sure to make your answer believable with specific reasons, stated with sincerity, why each quality represented by this opportunity is attractive to you.

Remember that if you're coming from a company that's the leader in its field or from a glamorous or much admired company, industry, city or position, your interviewer and his company may well have an "Avis" complex. That is, they may feel a bit defensive about being "second best" to the place you're coming from, worried that you may consider them bush league.

This anxiety could well be there even though you've done nothing to inspire it. You must go out of your way to assuage such anxiety, even if it's not expressed, by putting their virtues high on the list of exactly what you're looking for, providing credible reason for wanting these qualities.

If you do not express genuine enthusiasm for the firm, its culture, location, industry, etc., you may fail to answer this "Avis" complex objection and, as a result, leave the interviewer suspecting that a hot shot like you, coming from a Fortune 500 company in New York, just wouldn't be happy at an unknown manufacturer based in Topeka, Kansas.

#### #11: Why do you want to work at our company?

**TRAPS:** This question tests whether you've done any homework about the firm. If you haven't, you lose. If you have, you win big.

**BEST ANSWER:** This question is your opportunity to hit the ball out of the park, thanks to the in-depth research you should do before any interview.

Best sources for researching your target company: annual reports, the corporate newsletter, contacts you know at the company or its suppliers, advertisements, articles about the company in the trade press.

#### #12: What are your career options right now?

**TRAPS:** The interviewer is trying to find out, "How desperate are you?"

**BEST ANSWER:** Prepare for this question by thinking of how you can position yourself as a desired commodity. If you are still working, describe the possibilities at your present firm and why, though you're greatly appreciated there, you're looking for something more (challenge, money, responsibility, etc.). Also mention that you're seriously exploring opportunities with one or two other firms.

If you're not working, you can talk about other employment possibilities you're actually exploring. But do this with a light touch, speaking only in general terms. You don't want to seem manipulative or coy.

#### #13: Why have you been out of work so long?

**TRAPS:** A tough question if you've been on the beach a long time. You don't want to seem like damaged goods.

**BEST ANSWER:** You want to emphasize factors which have prolonged your job search by your own choice.

*Example:* “After my job was terminated, I made a conscious decision not to jump on the first opportunities to come along. In my life, I’ve found out that you can always turn a negative into a positive IF you try hard enough. This is what I determined to do. I decided to take whatever time I needed to think through what I do best, what I most want to do, where I’d like to do it...and then identify those companies that could offer such an opportunity.”

“Also, in all honesty, you have to factor in the recession (consolidation, stabilization, etc.) in the (banking, financial services, manufacturing, advertising, etc.) industry.”

“So between my being selective and the companies in our industry downsizing, the process has taken time. But in the end, I’m convinced that when I do find the right match, all that careful evaluation from both sides of the desk will have been well worthwhile for both the company that hires me and myself.

#### **#14: Tell me honestly about the strong points and weak points of your boss (company, management team, etc.)...**

**TRAPS:** Skillfull interviewers sometimes make it almost irresistible to open up and air a little dirty laundry from your previous position. DON'T

**BEST ANSWER:** Remember the rule: Never be negative. Stress only the good points, no matter how charmingly you're invited to be critical.

Your interviewer doesn't care a whit about your previous boss. He wants to find out how loyal and positive you are, and whether you'll criticize him behind his back if pressed to do so by someone in this own company. This question is your opportunity to demonstrate your loyalty to those you work with.

#### **#15: What good books have you read lately?**

**TRAPS:** As in all matters of your interview, never fake familiarity you don't have. Yet you don't want to seem like a dullard who hasn't read a book since Tom Sawyer.

**BEST ANSWER:** Unless you're up for a position in academia or as book critic for The New York Times, you're not expected to be a literary lion. But it wouldn't hurt to have read a handful of the most recent and influential books in your profession and on management.

Consider it part of the work of your job search to read up on a few of these leading books. But make sure they are quality books that reflect favorably upon you, nothing that could even remotely be considered superficial. Finally, add a recently published bestselling work of fiction by a world-class author and you'll pass this question with flying colors.

#### **#16: Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized.**

**TRAPS:** This is a tough question because it's a more clever and subtle way to get you to admit to a weakness. You can't dodge it by pretending you've never been criticized. Everybody has been. Yet it can be quite damaging to start admitting potential faults and failures that you'd just as soon leave buried.

This question is also intended to probe how well you accept criticism and direction.

**BEST ANSWERS:** Begin by emphasizing the extremely positive feedback you've gotten throughout your career and (if it's true) that your performance reviews have been uniformly excellent.

Of course, no one is perfect and you always welcome suggestions on how to improve your performance. Then, give an example of a not-too-damaging learning experience from early in your career and relate the ways this lesson has since helped you. This demonstrates that you learned from the experience and the lesson is now one of the strongest breastplates in your suit of armor.

If you are pressed for a criticism from a recent position, choose something fairly trivial that in no way is essential to your successful performance. Add that you've learned from this, too, and over the past several years/months, it's no longer an area of concern because you now make it a regular practice to...etc.

Another way to answer this question would be to describe your intention to broaden your master of an area

of growing importance in your field. For example, this might be a computer program you've been meaning to sit down and learn... a new management technique you've read about...or perhaps attending a seminar on some cutting-edge branch of your profession.

Again, the key is to focus on something not essential to your brilliant performance but which adds yet another dimension to your already impressive knowledge base.

### #17: What are your outside interests?

**TRAPS:** You want to be a well-rounded, not a drone. But your potential employer would be even more turned off if he suspects that your heavy extracurricular load will interfere with your commitment to your work duties.

**BEST ANSWERS:** Try to gauge how this company's culture would look upon your favorite outside activities and be guided accordingly.

You can also use this question to shatter any stereotypes that could limit your chances. If you're over 50, for example, describe your activities that demonstrate physical stamina. If you're young, mention an activity that connotes wisdom and institutional trust, such as serving on the board of a popular charity.

But above all, remember that your employer is hiring you for what you can do for him, not your family, yourself or outside organizations, no matter how admirable those activities may be.

### #18: The "Fatal Flaw" question

**TRAPS:** If an interviewer has read your resume carefully, he may try to zero in on a "fatal flaw" of your candidacy, perhaps that you don't have a college degree...you've been out of the job market for some time...you never earned your CPA, etc.

A fatal flaw question can be deadly, but usually only if you respond by being overly defensive.

**BEST ANSWERS:** As every master salesperson knows, you will encounter objections (whether stated or merely thought) in every sale. They're part and parcel of the buyer's anxiety. The key is not to exacerbate the buyer's anxiety but diminish it. Here's how...

Whenever you come up against a fatal flaw question:

1. Be completely honest, open and straightforward about admitting the shortcoming. (Showing you have nothing to hide diminishes the buyer's anxiety.)
2. Do not apologize or try to explain it away. You know that this supposed flaw is nothing to be concerned about, and this is the attitude you want your interviewer to adopt as well.
3. Add that as desirable as such a qualification might be, its lack has made you work all the harder throughout your career and has not prevented you from compiling an outstanding track record of achievements. You might even give examples of how, through a relentless commitment to excellence, you have consistently outperformed those who do have this qualification.

Of course, the ultimate way to handle "fatal flaw" questions is to prevent them from arising in the first place. You will do that by following the master strategy described in Question 1, i.e., uncovering the employers needs and then matching your qualifications to those needs.

Once you've gotten the employer to start talking about his most urgently-felt wants and goals for the position, and then help him see in step-by-step fashion how perfectly your background and achievements match up with those needs, you're going to have one very enthusiastic interviewer on your hands, one who is no longer looking for "fatal flaws".

### #19: How do you feel about reporting to a younger person (minority, woman, etc)?

**TRAPS:** It's a shame that some interviewers feel the need to ask this question, but many understand the reality that prejudices still exist among some job candidates, and it's better to try to flush them out beforehand.

The trap here is that in today's politically sensitized environment, even a well-intentioned answer can result in planting your foot neatly in your mouth. Avoid anything which smacks of a patronizing or an insensitive attitude, such as "I think they make terrific bosses" or "Hey, some of my best friends are..."

Of course, since almost anyone with an IQ above room temperature will at least try to steadfastly affirm the right answer here, your interviewer will be judging your sincerity most of all. "Do you really feel that way?" is what he or she will be wondering.

So you must make your answer believable and not just automatic. If the firm is wise enough to have promoted people on the basis of ability alone, they're likely quite proud of it, and prefer to hire others who will wholeheartedly share their strong sense of fair play.

**BEST ANSWER:** You greatly admire a company that hires and promotes on merit alone and you couldn't agree more with that philosophy. The age (gender, race, etc.) of the person you report to would certainly make no difference to you.

Whoever has that position has obviously earned it and knows their job well. Both the person and the position are fully deserving of respect. You believe that all people in a company, from the receptionist to the Chairman, work best when their abilities, efforts and feelings are respected and rewarded fairly, and that includes you. That's the best type of work environment you can hope to find.

## #20: On confidential matters...

**TRAPS:** When an interviewer presses you to reveal confidential information about a present or former employer, you may feel it's a no-win situation. If you cooperate, you could be judged untrustworthy. If you don't, you may irritate the interviewer and seem obstinate, uncooperative or overly suspicious.

**BEST ANSWER:** Your interviewer may press you for this information for two reasons.

First, many companies use interviews to research the competition. It's a perfect set-up. Here in their own lair, is an insider from the enemy camp who can reveal prized information on the competition's plans, research, financial condition, etc. Second, the company may be testing your integrity to see if you can be cajoled or bullied into revealing confidential data.

What to do? The answer here is easy. Never reveal anything truly confidential about a present or former employer. By all means, explain your reticence diplomatically. For example, "I certainly want to be as open as I can about that. But I also wish to respect the rights of those who have trusted me with their most sensitive information, just as you would hope to be able to trust any of your key people when talking with a competitor..."

And certainly you can allude to your finest achievements in specific ways that don't reveal the combination to the company safe.

But be guided by the golden rule. If you were the owner of your present company, would you feel it ethically wrong for the information to be given to your competitors? If so, steadfastly refuse to reveal it.

Remember that this question pits your desire to be cooperative against your integrity. Faced with any such choice, always choose integrity. It is a far more valuable commodity than whatever information the company may pry from you. Moreover, once you surrender the information, your stock goes down. They will surely lose respect for you.

One President we know always presses candidates unmercifully for confidential information. If he doesn't get it, he grows visibly annoyed, relentlessly inquisitive, It's all an act. He couldn't care less about the information. This is his way of testing the candidate's moral fiber. Only those who hold fast are hired.

### #21: Would you lie for the company?

**TRAPS:** This another question that pits two values against one another, in this case loyalty against integrity.

**BEST ANSWER:** Try to avoid choosing between two values, giving a positive statement which covers all bases instead.

*Example:* "I would never do anything to hurt the company.."

If aggressively pressed to choose between two competing values, always choose personal integrity. It is the most prized of all values.

### #22: Looking back, what would you do differently in your life?

**TRAPS:** This question is usually asked to uncover any life-influencing mistakes, regrets, disappointments or problems that may continue to affect your personality and performance.

You do not want to give the interviewer anything negative to remember you by, such as some great personal or career disappointment, even long ago, that you wish could have been avoided.

Nor do you wish to give any answer which may hint that your whole heart and soul will not be in your work.

**BEST ANSWER:** Indicate that you are a happy, fulfilled, optimistic person and that, in general, you wouldn't change a thing.

*Example:* "It's been a good life, rich in learning and experience, and the best it yet to come. Every experience in life is a lesson it its own way. I wouldn't change a thing."

### #23: Could you have done better in your last job?

**TRAPS:** This is no time for true confessions of major or even minor problems.

**BEST ANSWER:** Again never be negative.

*Example:* "I suppose with the benefit of hindsight you can always find things to do better, of course, but off the top of my head, I can't think of anything of major consequence."

*(If more explanation seems necessary)*

Describer a situation that didn't suffer because of you but from external conditions beyond your control.

For example, describe the disappointment you felt with a test campaign, new product launch, merger, etc., which looked promising at first, but led to underwhelming results. "I wish we could have known at the start what we later found out (about the economy turning, the marketplace changing, etc.), but since we couldn't, we just had to go for it. And we did learn from it..."

### #24: Can you work under pressure?

**TRAPS:** An easy question, but you want to make your answer believable.

**BEST ANSWER:** Absolutely...(then prove it with a vivid example or two of a goal or project accomplished under severe pressure).

## #25: What makes you angry?

**TRAPS:** You don't want to come across either as a hothead or a wimp.

**BEST ANSWER:** Give an answer that's suited to both your personality and the management style of the firm. Here, the homework you've done about the company and its style can help in your choice of words.

*Examples: If you are a reserved person and/or the corporate culture is coolly professional:*

"I'm an even-tempered and positive person by nature, and I believe this helps me a great deal in keeping my department running smoothly, harmoniously and with a genuine esprit de corps. I believe in communicating clearly what's expected, getting people's commitment to those goals, and then following up continuously to check progress."

"If anyone or anything is going off track, I want to know about it early. If, after that kind of open communication and follow up, someone isn't getting the job done, I'll want to know why. If there's no good reason, then I'll get impatient and angry...and take appropriate steps from there. But if you hire good people, motivate them to strive for excellence and then follow up constantly, it almost never gets to that state."

*If you are feisty by nature and/or the position calls for a tough straw boss.*

"You know what makes me angry? People who (the fill in the blanks with the most objectionable traits for this type of position)...people who don't pull their own weight, who are negative, people who lie...etc."