

BE PREPARED FOR DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AT YOUR JOB INTERVIEW

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The interview can be one of the more difficult parts of a lawyer's job search. Nearly every other aspect of the job search is under the lawyer's control. Although you can't choose the questions that will be asked, you can be prepared beforehand for the likely tricky ones.

Think of these questions as an opportunity to shine. When you are asked a question that at first blush seems difficult, pause a minute to consider how the question could be turned to your advantage. Much of lawyering is about turning negatives into positives, challenges into opportunities. This moment is no exception.

If you are presented with an unforeseen question for which there is no easy answer, pause to consider what positive aspect of yourself can be revealed in your reply. Many interviewees mistakenly believe they must have quick answers at the tips of their tongues for every question. It is perfectly permissible, and even beneficial, to take a few moments to think about a difficult question. It shows you are thoughtful, careful and sincere.

Humor is a wonderful tool often overlooked by interviewees. One of the most difficult questions to answer well – the ubiquitous “What are your biggest weaknesses?” – can be handled gracefully with a little humor. Consider a reply such as, “I know I'm supposed to say something like ‘I work too hard,’ but that's so trite. You must be sick of hearing it. I think my biggest problem is finding a seat on the train that isn't next to someone with a cell-phone addiction.” Nothing like a chuckle or two to break the ice. If this fails and the interviewer perseveres for a more serious answer, consider something like “I sometimes have trouble delegating.”

Questions about previous jobs are sometimes disguised attempts to see how readily you will badmouth an employer. If you say negative things about another firm, interviewers suspect eventually you will say damaging things about their firm. If you are asked questions such as, “Why did you move from that firm?” or “What don't you enjoy about your current job?” say positive things about your career or abilities. Consider an answer such as, “I decided I wanted to do complex mergers and acquisitions, and the firm was more centered in traditional corporate work like corporate governance and minutes,” or a harmless, “The recent merger changed my position at the firm – there are now double the associates at my level.”

Avoid seemingly innocuous but subtly negative answers to questions about changing firms. For instance, don't admit to wanting a “better lifestyle,” or that “the compensation structure didn't suit me” or “the partner was hard to get along with.” These answers could suggest you don't want to work hard, are too focused on money or you can't handle difficult people.

Questions about your goals, such as, “Where do you see yourself in five years” can also be tricky. If you seem too driven to make partner or get into court, the interviewer could think you might leave the firm too readily if things don't go your way on your timeline. You must find the right balance between personal ambition and the ability to work on a team. Not enough drive could make you seem like a slacker, yet too much could seem pushy and over-ambitious. The middle ground could sound something like: “I want to grow my practice, become integrated into the firm and have a reasonable opportunity to make it into court,” or “I would like to do more securities work and possibly make partner on a timeline that is beneficial to the firm.”

Interviewers sometimes like to ask open-ended questions, such as, “tell me about yourself.” These interviewers are not necessarily trying to give you enough rope with which to hang yourself – it just seems as if they are. A good answer should be brief and not convey too much detail. Consider mentioning the basics, such as where you are from and where you currently reside. Then, try to spend most of your time discussing law-related issues, such as your reasons for going to law school and why you chose the schools you attended. Avoid talking about personal issues, such as why your parents moved often when you were little or your recent operation.

Another tricky question along the same line is “What do you like to do in your free time?” Harmless, mainstream hobbies are appropriate to discuss here. Be wary of divulging interests that could conflict with your long-term prospects at the firm, such as climbing Mount Everest, running for office or bungee jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge.

“Why do you want to work for us?” can also be challenging. Avoid answering that you’ve heard it’s a lifestyle firm, you will have better chance at making partner, it’s a better commute from your home or that you’ve “heard it’s just a really great firm!” While all of these may be true, find a reason that relates to a meaningful, positive aspect of the firm. Do your research to uncover a unique feature of the group for which you’d like to work, such as an inspiring partner who has made significant contributions to his field, or that the practice area has recently done significant deals in your area of interest. Reinforce your answer by naming an article the partner has written, or a specific deal that was closed, if you are able.

Finally, have an answer ready for the old standby, “Why should we hire you?” Buttress commonplace answers such as, “I work really hard,” or “I will do whatever it takes to get the job done” with specific, concrete examples of how your experience can be useful for the firm. Replies such as “My extensive experience with the Americans With Disabilities Act could benefit your labor and employment group” or “My tax background will be an asset to your corporate group” are more helpful than generic, boilerplate answers.

Remember, you are there to promote yourself. On some level, lawyering is all about selling your case to a judge, your version of the contract to opposing counsel. Let this be your moment to shine, regardless of the questions posed.