

# "Who Wrote the Interview Rule Book"



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## **What is the most difficult question you have ever been asked at interview?**

The depth of discussion and feedback has been amazing. Your complete honesty and willingness to share your experiences, beliefs and frustrations on such an emotive topic, has made me realise how much we all need to learn about the interview process. It has certainly made me reflect on our interview process & technique here at Omnium.

So, lets move onto the feedback, the responses could be grouped into 7 key topics and the responses came from both interviewees (victims) and interviewers (torturers):

### **1. Character Trait Questions**

This topic created a huge debate and in most cases each were able to justify their reasons to love or hate them. However, what was obvious was the fact that neither party could demonstrate an accurate measurement methodology to the response from the interviewee. This led the discussion to further debate as to whether an 'interviewee' who prepared good responses got the position, as opposed to someone who had the skills but had not done their homework. Some good examples of their questions, comments and answers follow:

**Q - Give me the one solid reason, why we would select you?**

**Q - What was the most important thing that happened in your life?**

*Response - "Being born" (the candidate was offered the job!)*

**Q - Of all the things you have done, of which are you most proud?**

*Response - "What on earth do those questions mean?  
I'm going to work as a DBA, not some managerial post.*

**Q - What is your greatest weakness?**

*Response - "My greatest weakness is that I am a work-a-holic"  
(this chap had taken a 'day off' to attend the interview)*

*Response - I said " Chocolate Biscuits".....we laughed.....they liked the humour.....not so much that I got the job though.....*

**Q - If you were interviewing me for the position what questions would you ask me?**

**Q - Describe yourself in 1 word very surprisingly...no witty responses provided so if you've got any publishable ideas please do forward them to me.**

**Q - As a manager where would I have difficulty in managing you?**

**Q- What animal you would rather be? or What is your main weakness?**

**Comment - is this question asked to hide the incompetence of the interviewer, rather than to expose the interviewee."**

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### 3. Mental Agility

You ALL enjoyed demonstrating your mental prowess. Some examples follow:

**Comment 1** - "I was given a series of questions, brain teasers, with the explanation that the interviewer wanted to see how I think. From my perspective these were a waste of time because you can't read peoples minds to see how they think, and in this case the tests had little to do with the ability to do the job."

**Comment 2** - One of my questions was "Nine dots are made in a 3x3 grid, your task is to connect them using four straight lines without lifting the pencil. The solution requires thinking outside the box."

**Comment 3** - "The most difficult question was one where I had to debate a topic with 2 other people. I was given a list of 5 topics, and given 5 minutes to choose 1 topic and prepare myself to take a stance on it and defend my stance."

**Comment 4** - "Write a program on that whiteboard that illustrates the methods and properties of a chicken object" That's right, a chicken. It was the most difficult and the dumbest thing I was ever asked to do on an interview. Naturally I blew it ..

**Comment 5** - "There is no right or wrong answer for this type of question. They were testing my ability to interact with other people who may have an opposing viewpoint to my own."

**Interviewer Comment** - "I like to throw in wild cards e.g. A hypothetical situation such as; You are in Kabul on a Saturday morning with 5000Euros and you need to .... You are having dinner with your in-laws and the subject of.."

**Q - Calculate factorial of 100 using T-SQL.**

**Response:** I'm still confused about this question. I know algorithm, I know also that 100 factorial exceeds the size of INT, BIGINT, DECIMAL. The only solution I suggested was to represent numbers as strings and then calculate.

**Q - What is the Maximum width of indexes** - no response provided

**Interviewer Comment** - I've never been asked a difficult question, but I've posed some I find to be a fair assessment of someone's abilities.

**Q - Given an integer less than 4000 write a script that will output a roman numeral.**

**Response** - This shows a sense of focus in the face of tedium. It also shows an opportunity to code in various ways. "I'd search Google isn't a good answer in an interview"

**Q - Given a shape in the form of the letter h composed of four wooden dowels, turn the image 180 degrees by moving only a single dowel. The solution requires picturing the new image in order to see which dowel**

**Comment 6** - I had one fun question which illustrates this: "How many aeroplanes are there in the world"? "Often the response is just to give an approximation of commercial airline aircraft but the wider picture is to show how your analysis thinking works: should this include model aircraft, have you included military and light aircraft? What about private working aircraft like crop sprayers and can you come up with an approximation method? **There's no right answer** other than showing you can think without restricting focus too much.

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#### **4. Honesty - to be or not to be...**

**Well**, if I can be honest with you, some of the examples that I read were far too honest!

Lots of you gave me examples of when you gave a blunt response to what you viewed to be questions that could be easily prepared for in advance, rather than questions that could truly test your technical ability.

**Comment 1** - "I usually answer the question by informing the interviewer that there are literally over 250K hits if you Google that question. I tell them that I don't like the fact that I can prepare for this question and give them any old answer that cannot be verified and will not give them any insight into whether or not I can do the job..".

**Comment 2** - "On the other hand, as a prospective employee, I have taken to telling the interviewer that they are asking a ridiculous HR questions and asking them what do they want me to do on the job?"

**Comment 3** - "And, by the way, nothing exposes dishonesty and overall lack of integrity as clearly as a serious technical interview does. You can fake your moral qualities; you can't fake real knowledge, especially, if you talk to a person who is an expert in the area."

**Comment 4** - "Another difficult question I had was one where one of the interviewers didn't know the answer. She was wrong, and insisted she was right. Not a good idea to get into an argument in an interview."

**Q - If you get the job what will be the first thing you do?**

**Response-** " I gave an answer based on technically finding my way around the system, but the manager was looking for me to want to read the documentation. I told him I wouldn't bother because the documentation would be inaccurate and out of date, which made him rather upset.

**This interviewee actually got the job and he was right, the documentation was out of date and incorrect!**

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## **5. HR - Competency Based Questions**

**The need to use competency based methodology was another topical debate. Some good examples were provided when these types of questions helped interviewers with their hiring decisions.**

**One contributor to the discussion asked....**

**"Are competency based questions derived from some HR Policy or are they a necessary tool?"**

**Comment 1** - "The standard HR screening covers basic competency, I have worked with many people who are perfect on paper and are completely different in real situations."

**Comment 2 - supports these types of questions** - "A recent hire had a good educational background but a limited amount of work experience and seemed a bit timid, I noticed that part of her volunteer time had been spent managing a dining area on campus. I suggested a hypothetical situation involving drunken rowdiness and inappropriate behaviour. She did not even blink and gave me a run down of the official procedure, alternatives depending on the particular situation and some insight on how she had handled a similar incident. I figured she could handle our Logistics team, they are a bit loud and can be intimidating for some people, but quite hard working and professional. It worked out better than planned, she still seems timid, the word is SEEMS, she turned out to be quite assertive whenever the occasion calls for it."

**Q - Please explain a 'change action' you had to initiate when in the middle of project. How this 'change action' was perceived by affected parties and the out come of the 'change action'?**

This was read out to me from booklet, the interviewer couldn't even remember this one. Personally I believe if a question is long enough to have to be read out of booklet, you should have the opportunity to write your answer down.

**Interviewer Comment** - HR is so consumed with being even handed that they want the same, empty questions asked to eliminate the appearance of bias. I have been on the hiring side where HR gave me a list of approved questions ("tell me about a time you failed") and was directed to record the answers.

**Q - The question I got asked was "What do you think is the most difficult part in a project and what is the least difficult part?"**

I answered, initial stages of the project in which we gather requirements and understand what needs to be done is the rather slow and difficult process and the fun part starts when you do the programming that is when you are in control and can try to face the challenges that arise.

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## 6 - Preparation

The underlying discussions related to the relevance of preparation. Views were mixed about the need to provide open answers that gave the interviewer some understanding of how you think, rather than trying to find the perfect answer to every question that you may be asked. Lots of comments were made on a range of similar questions. I have listed the most common with suggestions made for responses when provided:-

**Response 1:** "You need to at least prepare for these types of questions and be ready to play the game - unfortunately if you don't play the game the way the interviewer wants you to, then you lose out - BUT leave with the satisfaction that if you don't play their way, they potentially lose out on you too!!!!"

**Response 2:** Here's something interesting - in my humble opinion of course: I Googled the following questions and got the following hits:

"Why do you want to work here" - 76, 800, 000 hits  
"What are your strengths and weaknesses" - 8, 140, 000 hits  
"Where do you want to be in five years" - 922, 000, 000 hits

**Q - It wasn't so much one question when I went for a technical interview with SAP, I was asked loads of ethereal, marketing style questions like "where do you see the future of Business Intelligence? What is the next most likely innovation in Data Services?"... "Lesson learnt, study all the Market Sector of the company as well as be technically excellent."**

**Q -Why do you want to work here?.**

**Response 3** - "You should always go into interviews prepared for certain questions **ESPECIALLY** the "why do you want to work here". We all know that inside the answer is "because I need a job and you've got an opening" - unfortunately you have to do a bit of ego massaging about how good their company is and how great you will fit in, hit the ground running and help them achieve their goals. Saying that - you should have a desire to work there and you should be able to communicate that :-)"

**Comment 1** - "If you encounter Questions you don't know the answer to because you've never experienced a relevant situation or studied that subject: **admit you don't know; tell them where/how you'd look it up and research it; tell them an informed guess at the area.**"

**Comment 2** - "Remember that an interview is a two sided affair. The candidate is evaluating you also. When people ask me questions such as you suggest, questions that try to intimidate, make me feel awkward, play games, or where the interviewer is suggesting he is somehow superior, I'm turned off immediately.

**Interviewer Comment 3** - " I'm not suggesting all interviewers are ego-centric, only that part of every interview should be spent selling the person on what a great place your company is to work, and what they should expect if working for you.

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**Q - How do you think that went?**

**Response** - "Here's one I had last interview, on the way back to reception after the interview: My answer: "I thought that went very well. It's always good to have two-way interactive communication rather than simply question and answer." Of course, if it was just simply question & answer I would have been stumped."

**Q - Where do you see yourself in 5 years?**

**Response 1** - " The answer to the "**where do you see yourself in 5 years**"? **is promoted**, but you like to work with a manager that will grow with (or alongside) you and who has the same level of ambition. There's a great book - "**Great answers to tough interview questions**" by **Martin John Yate**. Once you get past the waffle, there are some real insights to what interview questions are actually testing you for."

You all imparted lots of valuable advice to help your colleagues to improve their interview technique: **Questions where they've used different terminology** (maybe just newer, if you've got decades of experience): "extract the explanation from the interviewer; tell them about what it used to be called in the old days."

**Questions where you don't want to risk criticism of an interviewer's personal favourite:** cover multiple aspects and admit they all have pros and cons."

**Try and turn the difficult questions into a discussion with the interviewer** (they'll probably want to show how much they know, too). I managed to get one interviewer to answer the questions himself when he started following up with "Of course, that's just X, isn't it?" to which I agreed and expanded. LOL. (got the contract, too)."

**Always think of the wider picture and show you understand.** Maybe they want to know how you will address situations, who needed to be told, did escalation procedures need to be invoked, was there a short term workaround for users, etc. Which all need to be at least consciously skipped over before or while people get stuck in to the analysis and solution."

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## **7. The Killer Close**

So, you have prepared well, answered all the competency and game questions, given them the perfect answer to the mental agility test and scored 100% in their technical test then you are asked ... what rate/salary are you looking for?

This is one of the most difficult job interview questions to answer well. If you give too high a figure, you may price yourself out of a job, but if you ask for too little, you may devalue yourself. So what can you do to prepare for this question? You have two options: hope the interviewer doesn't ask it or do your homework.

So, I would recommend:-

- **Do your research** - find detailed information about what the market is paying for your skills and background. View industry and skills related web sites to gain market knowledge  
Possible sites include <http://www.itjobswatch.co.uk>, <http://www.jobadswatch.co.uk> and <http://www.mysalary.co.uk>. Calculate the median figure to use as a benchmark rate.
- **Don't fall into the trap of over analysing this process**, of course everyone wants to get the maximum out of any negotiation but if you let greed take over completely you may miss out on something good for what could work out to be only a few £'s a month.
- **Do an appraisal of your finances** to find out what £salary / £rate you really need to (a) to be comfortable on and (b) you would genuinely be happy with.
- **Never make up your current package**, always give accurate figures and details on your benefits. Honesty from the onset of any relationship is key. (Remember they will see your P60's if you are joining them on a salaried role)
- **Always remember**, it can be more difficult to renegotiate after the interview. So, if you give an ill prepared figure under pressure you may regret it for many days to come.

### **Comment from Omnium**

As a general point I would like to say, If you are worried about being paid below market rates say so. "I am currently on £x but feel this is low compared to other colleagues with my background. Going forward I will be looking for a rate/salary in the £x to £x range".

If you know your current rate/salary is above the market average and possibly too 'rich' for the potential employer, let them know that the opportunity is as important to you as compensation. Saying "I currently earn £x but am flexible on my view on the overall package and am looking for the opportunity to learn new skills / gain an opportunity to show you how I can develop a team / manage a project etc.

**Here are some of the responses that were provided by the contributors to the discussion:**

**Response 1** - "I am currently on or in my last position I was on £x but this position is providing me with the opportunity to demonstrate my Management skills / Development knowledge in x, which is exactly what I have been looking for. So, I would consider an offer at a similar salary level or at £x if you were able to commit to review my salary after 3 months when I have provided you with the tangible results."

**Response 2** - "I am currently on £x but I have done some research and understand that an average salary for my experience in your sector is £x therefore I would consider a salary that falls in between these figures."

**Response 3** - "In my last contract I was on £x per day, however this contract role will require me to manager the entire project which will put me under a lot of pressure and therefore I know I need you to consider offering me £x per day. This is the figure that I know I will ensure your get the maximum you can out of me."

**Response 4** - "I explained what my current situation is with e.g. what my role responsibilities are, salary and benefits and that if the new role is going to involve more pressure / responsibility then I justify the increase I am looking for."

**Response 5** - "I always say I understand that the salary banding for the role is £x and my previous/current salary is £x with benefits etc and therefore I am looking for something comparable to £x"

**Response 6** - "I always say "I'm sure the salary you award will reflect both the market rate & the level of experience I have for my level of competency in x. Do you have a guideline in mind?"

So, to conclude, thank you to all those who contributed to the debate. Remember that competency based questions are as common as technical questions so prepare for both. Do your research and don't fall into the trap of being too frank with your responses. Interviews may well be like a game of Chess, one that requires mental agility, tactical thinking throughout the process and lots and lots of patience....but winning is the result you want!

**Thank You.**  
**Melanie Bose**  
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We would really appreciate you becoming a member of our LinkedIn **Super Group** so you can contribute to our next topical discussions [Click Here](#)

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