

## Job Interview Tips: How to Survive 10 Awkward Situations

Job hunting is fraught with tricky conversations that you might need to have throughout the process — from what to say if you botched your answer to an interview question to how to ask if a long hiring process will ever end. Especially given the power dynamics in job interviews, it can be hard to know exactly how to navigate these conversations. Below, we've got ten of the trickiest conversations you might need to have with an interviewer and advice on what to say in each one.

1. You've had multiple interviews with a company with no end to the process in sight.

It's increasingly common for employers to ask candidates to interview multiple times before they make a hiring decision. From the employer side of things, I'll say that I think it's a good trend, because hiring someone after a single one-hour conversation can be pretty risky, especially with more senior jobs. But that should generally mean two or three meetings — not ten.

If you find yourself in a long interview process with no indication of when it will end, it's entirely reasonable to say something like this:

- "Can you tell me more about what steps remain in your process and what your likely timeline will be for making a decision?"
- "I'm very interested in this position, but it's becoming harder for me to take time off work for additional meetings. Would it be possible for us to consolidate some of the remaining steps?"

2. You're completely stumped by an interview question.

If you're totally stumped by an interview question, the worst thing you can do is to try to bluff your way through it. If the question is an important one, the interviewer is going to be able to tell you're bluffing, and that's not good. Instead, be up-front about it. You'll come across as having more integrity, and good interviewers will appreciate seeing you handle the situation with grace.

What to say depends on the type of question you were asked. If it's a question about your knowledge of something, acknowledge that you don't know and then talk about how you'd go about finding the answer:

- "Hmmm, you know, I actually don't know the answer to that! When I've encountered similar things in the past, I've done X and Y and that usually gets me pointed in the right direction."

On the other hand, if the question is more along the lines of "Tell me about a time when you had to do X" and you can't think of a good example to share, just be honest about that. Then, ideally you'd either share an example of something related although not identical, or talk about how you think you'd approach the situation if it occurred. For example:

- "It's a good question. I'm having trouble thinking of a time when I've encountered that at work. But if it did come up, I'd approach it this way ..."

3. The company has terrible online reviews from employees.

If you're interviewing with a company that has terrible reviews on a site like Glassdoor or otherwise has reputation problems, you might be wondering if there's any way to ask about it in your interview.

As long as you bring up the topic professionally, it's a perfectly legitimate thing to ask about. You're considering linking yourself to this company for the next few years, so you shouldn't let fears of awkwardness stand in the way of getting your concerns addressed.

The key is to frame it in a way that doesn't put your interviewer on the defensive. So your tone should be collaborative rather than accusatory; you want to sound as if you're giving them the benefit of the doubt (even if secretly you're not). For example:

- "I noticed that the company's reviews from employees on Glassdoor frequently include concerns about culture and work hours. I'm curious what your take is on that and whether it's something the company is working to change."

4. You're getting conflicting information about the job from different interviewers.

Talking to multiple people throughout an interview process can be a huge benefit because you can get different perspectives on the job, the culture, the challenges of the role, and so forth. But if you notice that you're hearing different things about key elements of the role — like what the job's focus will be or what's most important for the person to achieve in the first year — it's pretty important to clarify what's going on. Otherwise you risk ending up in a job that turns out to be different than what you were signing up for, or where no one can agree on how your success should be measured.

How to say it:

- "I've heard different perspectives on the job from Anna, Fergus, and Portia. It sounds like some people want to see the role focus on expanding the training curriculum and some people want to see it focus on bringing in new business. Can you help me get a better sense of how those will be balanced, and whether there's internal alignment about what people want to see from the position?"

5. Your interviewer asks about your religion, ethnicity, plans for children, or other inappropriate topics.

Contrary to widespread belief, there's no federal law that makes it illegal for an interviewer to ask you about your religion, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, or plans for kids. However, it's illegal for an employer to make a hiring decision based on your answers to these questions, and so therefore smart employers don't ask them. And understandably, encountering these questions makes job seekers very nervous — since it raises the specter that the interviewer might discriminate against you in some illegal way.

But that message hasn't reached everyone, and you may encounter an interviewer who asks one of these questions anyway. Sometimes even interviewers who know better do it as part of making small talk (not thinking about how in the context, it might freak you out).

So what do you do if you encounter a question like this in an interview?

If it truly seems like the question is being asked as part of making small talk — that your interviewer is just trying to be friendly and build rapport — you'll usually get a better outcome by answering in that spirit.

But if you get the sense that the interviewer is, say, asking whether you're married out of concern that you'll want time off soon to have babies, or is asking which church you go to because she doesn't want to hire any church-avoiding heathens, that's a different situation. In that case, here are some options:

- Speak to what you think the interviewer's concern really is. For example, if you think an interviewer is concerned that having kids means that you won't be at work reliably, say this: "There's nothing in my personal life that would interfere with my ability to work the hours needed and make the job a top priority."
- Ask why the interviewer is asking. You have to do this carefully because if you seem adversarial, the interview will likely never get back on track, but try saying one of these lines pleasantly and with a tone of genuine curiosity:
  - "Why do you ask?"
  - "I've never been asked that before in an interview. What makes you ask?"

#### 6. You need to explain a past firing.

If you were fired from a fairly recent job, you're probably dreading being asked about it in an interview. But lots of people get fired and go on to find plenty of work in the future! Being fired is not the kiss of death for your career.

The keys to talking about a firing with your interviewer are:

- Be calm. Make sure that you don't sound defensive or bitter, because if the situation still sounds emotional for you, that's going to be a red flag for your interviewer. You want to sound like you've learned from what happened and have moved forward.
- Be concise. This is crucial! Your interviewer is really only looking for a few sentences about what happened, not expecting a detailed account of what went down.
- Practice your answer ahead of time. Firing can be awkward to talk about. Practicing out loud makes it more likely that you won't sound horribly uncomfortable when it comes up.

As for the answer itself, try to sum up in a sentence or two why you and your employer were mismatched or otherwise what went wrong, followed by a sentence about what you've learned or do differently now as a result. For example:

- "Actually, I was let go. I reported to two different VPs and was getting conflicting instructions from each, and I didn't speak up about it when I should have. I tried to make it all work, which wasn't realistic, and ultimately I dropped some balls. It taught me a lot about needing to speak up early on when priorities aren't clear so that never happens again."

- “I was fired. That’s on me — I took a job with a heavy coding component, and I’m not a coder. I thought I’d be able to get up to speed quickly enough, and I underestimated how much I’d need to learn. They made the right call, and I was relieved to be able to go back to focusing on design work.”
- “It ended up being a bad fit. They were looking for design expertise when I’m really a copywriter, not a designer. Ultimately we agreed that it didn’t make sense for me to be in that role.”

#### 7. Your interviewer asks you to do free work.

It’s smart for employers to find ways to see job candidates in action by using things like writing tests, problem-solving simulations, and (short) mock projects, as long as these requests don’t take a significant amount of time and are only being used for assessment purposes. But it’s not cool for an employer to ask you to do something that will require a significant amount of your time (more than an hour or two) or that they might actually use.

If an employer asks you to spend more than an hour or two producing real work for them, you’re in a tricky position since if you push back, you risk being taken out of the running. Because of that, this comes down to how comfortable you are with that possibility. One way to look at it is that you wouldn’t want to work for a company that’s inconsiderate of candidates — or worse, takes advantage of them — but the reality is that not everyone has the luxury of having lots of options.

If you do decide to push back, here are some ways to say it:

- “I don’t think I’ll be able to do this project justice without knowing a lot more. We could talk about doing it as a consulting project if you’d like, but because of other commitments right now I can’t really spend more than an hour or so on an assessment exercise. But I could do [name a much smaller piece of the work] to give you a feel for my work if that would work on your end?”
- “I don’t usually do spec work, but I can definitely send you examples of similar work that I’ve done in the past.”

#### 8. Asking for your own office, to work from home, or for other perks.

Theoretically, you can negotiate anything as part of a job offer. In practice, what you’re able to negotiate will depend on how much leverage you have, and that’s a function of how much the employer wants to hire you and how in-demand your skills are. If you’re pretty junior in your career, you don’t have a ton of negotiating leverage. But as you become more senior and build your reputation, you have the standing to ask for more. That doesn’t mean you’ll get it, of course — but it becomes more reasonable to ask.

Of course, the “reasonable” part is key. You need to have a sense of what the norms are in your field and at your level, so that you can calibrate the request accordingly.

It helps to frame the request as “Would you be open to X?” or “I’d like Y because of Z. Is that an option on your end?” That way you’re being direct about what you want, but you’re not demanding it like a crazed prima donna.

As part of the negotiating the offer, say something like this:

- Asking about working from home: “My current job is very work-from-home-friendly, and I usually work from home a few times a month. Would you be open to me continuing to do that?”

Sometimes it’s easier to negotiate working from home when you explicitly connect it to the salary: “I understand you’re not able to go up to \$X. I’d be willing to accept the job for \$Y if I was able to work from home one day a week, since there’s value to me in cutting back on commuting time. Would that work on your end?”

- Asking about office space: “Can you tell me about where I’d be working? Would I be in a private office or a shared space?” If the person tells you that it will be a shared space, you can say, “Would it be possible to have a private office? This type of work often requires concentration, and I’ve found that having a quiet space lets me focus and get more done.” (Keep in mind that the answer will likely to be subject to things like whether space is even available and whether it will cause issues with people above you who don’t have their own space — but you can pose the question.)

## 9. You think you botched the interview.

Walking out of an interview knowing that you flubbed it is a terrible feeling! And it might make you wonder if there’s any way to get a do-over or otherwise acknowledge to the interviewer that you know you weren’t at your best.

For what it’s worth, I’ve talked to a lot of people who thought they flubbed the answers to a question or two and still ended up getting the job. Some questions don’t matter nearly as much as others, and sometimes people’s self-assessments are just off.

But if you’re convinced your interview was a crap-show, you have a few different options for how to handle it.

If you feel like you just messed up on a question or two, as opposed to the entire interview, you could send the interviewer a thank-you note that reiterates your interest in the job and says something like this:

- “I realized after we spoke that when you asked me about X, I should have said \_\_\_\_\_. I realized I’d misunderstood the question afterwards and wanted to correct it!”

If the issue is that the interviewer asked a lot of questions in an area you’re not as strong in, you could say something like this in your thank-you note:

- “I want to be up-front about the fact that I don’t have a lot of experience X, although I do think that my background in Y would be really useful in helping you achieve Z.” (But keep in mind that if they’re really looking for serious experience in X, this may not be a job you’ll succeed in — which means it’s a job you don’t want.)

If you were just having an off day (didn’t sleep the night before, dealing with bad personal news, recovering from illness, etc.), and you’re sure it impacted you in ways the interviewer picked up on, you can say something like this:

- “I want to be transparent that I wasn’t at my best when we spoke, due to a relatively sleepless night the night before. If we have the chance to talk again, I hope you’ll see the difference!” (But do be sure that the interviewer would have picked up on it before saying this, since if they didn’t, this can be a surprising note to receive.)

Will any of this make a difference? Maybe, maybe not. It really depends on the interviewer’s assessment, what they care about most and what they’re deprioritizing, and what the rest of the candidate pool is like. But it’s worth a shot.

#### 10. Negotiating salary.

People often think that negotiating salary means presenting a formal case to justify why they’re worth more money than the employer has initially offered. The thing to know about salary negotiation is that most of the time, that’s not at all necessary! Often you can get more money just by saying something like this:

- “I’m really excited about this job, but I was hoping the salary would be higher. Would you be able to go up to \$X?”
- “I was hoping you’d be able to go up to \$X. Is that possible?”
- “Do you have any flexibility on the salary? I was hoping for \$X.”
- “If you were able to do \$X, I’d be thrilled to accept.”

Important: After you say one of these, stop talking. Even if you’re nervous or uncomfortable or mentally freaking out about what the hiring manager will say, once you’ve made the request, stop talking and wait. There might be an awkward pause, and that’s okay. Eventually the hiring manager will speak and you want to wait for that to happen — because if you keep talking, you may end up undercutting yourself simply to ease the awkwardness of the silence.

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