

Dealing with Inappropriate Interview Questions

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

In life we're sometimes faced with individuals who lack a sense of what is appropriate. Interviewers are not exempt from this group. It may happen that they have not been adequately trained, and if their own sense of what is acceptable to ask is deficient, you may find yourself being asked inappropriate questions. Although this may seldom happen, it is advisable to be prepared for such an eventuality.

As part of your interview preparation, ask yourself:

- What kinds of question would make me feel uncomfortable?
- If I get asked this kind of question, what does that say about the culture of the organization I am considering taking a job with?
- What is the best way for me to deal with an inappropriate question?
- Which of the strategic options fits my particular situation?

What You Need to Know

Aren't people attuned enough to political correctness not to ask inappropriate questions?

Most hiring managers are professionals who are well-trained in appropriate interviewing techniques. However, there is no guarantee that every interviewer you meet will fall into that category. It is, of course, always better to be prepared.

Are some people more likely than others to be asked an inappropriate question at interview?

Yes. It is an unfortunate fact that women, younger people, and people of a non-dominant ethnic group tend to be asked this type of question.

What questions are illegal?

It depends on the laws of the country in which you are working. However, many inappropriate questions are discriminatory, and are therefore likely to be illegal. Other questions are considered

inappropriate simply because they are of a personal nature and have nothing to do with qualifications for the job.

What to Do

Be Prepared

Whatever the industry you work in, when you prepare for a job interview you need to arm yourself with strategies to cope with a variety of possible scenarios. In terms of dealing with inappropriate questions, this is a two stage process: first, think about what uncomfortable to you, and second, decide on how to respond. The following steps looking at these two stages in more detail.

Get Up to Speed with Legalities

Some questions are so way off beam that legislation has been created to combat them and in the United States, these questions are covered by the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) laws. Some examples are:

- How old are you?
- Do you have any physical impairments?
- Do you follow any religious movement?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have any children? How old are they?
- Are you planning to start family?
- Do you have a criminal record?

Each of these questions could be construed as discriminatory and, as such, they are illegal.

Note Down Some Interview Questions That Would Feel Inappropriate to You

Most of us would feel uncomfortable being asked questions about our personal lives by a complete stranger, but only you can decide if a question feels inappropriate to you—we all have different tolerances. If you are asked a question at interview that is not work-related and which makes you feel embarrassed, angry, or uncomfortable, that question is inappropriate. On the other hand, also bear in mind that the interviewer may be trying to break the ice and find out what makes you tick by

asking you a question about your life outside work, and may simply have pressed one of your buttons inadvertently. It can be tricky trying to work out where the line is crossed, but use your commonsense.

Work Out Where the Question Has Come From

When someone asks you a question that seemingly has no bearing whatsoever on the job you have applied for, look out for some clues that will help you formulate an answer. Start by looking at the interviewer's body language and listening carefully to his or her tone. Also look at how tense the interviewer seems, how much eye contact the interviewer can manage. Most of us are can make a stab at interpreting these cues instinctively. Second, tune in to your own responses. If you find yourself having a physical reaction to what is said—you feel nauseous, hold your breath, your hands clench, or your heart beats faster—your body is telling you that something is amiss. The quickest way to find out why someone has posed a particular question is simply to ask them politely why they want to know. Then let them answer, without interjecting.

Think About Your Options for Response

It can be hard to remain professional when someone has offended or upset you, but it is essential that you keep calm if an interviewer has asked an inappropriate question. Don't be intimidated and consider the following options for your response:

- avoidance: you ignore the question and change the subject;
- humor: you treat the question as a joke, thus allowing the interviewer the chance to withdraw it and ask something more relevant;
- mild refutation: this generally consists of asking the interviewer, "Why do you want to know?"
- emphatic refutation: telling the interviewer that the question is inappropriate and that you are not going to answer it.

You can, of course, comply and answer, but sometimes it's not worth dignifying these questions with a response.

Decide How to Respond

You should take into account several factors when deciding how best to respond to a question which you believe may be inappropriate. These include:

- the severity or outrageousness of the question;
- your sense of the interviewer's motivation in asking the question;

- how strongly you desire this job;
- the extent to which you believe that this kind of question is a reflection of the corporate culture.

You will have to weigh these factors and decide whether the question is fairly benign or crosses ethical lines. If you really want the job, you may overlook the interviewer's question. If the question is so awful that you know you could never work for this company, you might choose to be more confrontational.

What to Avoid

You Go Along with Anything the Interviewer Says

If you feel so hungry for the job that you answer an offensive question only to please the interviewer, you may end up leaving the interview feeling ashamed of yourself or angry. If you have been jobhunting for some time, feelings of desperation can creep in, but try to guard against them as best you can and work hard to create a variety of attractive interview options. Also spend time preparing yourself mentally for the interview, so that you are able to handle any question with composure.

You Overreact

Your goal in an interview is to garner a job offer. It is not an opportunity to right the wrongs of the world, and approaching the situation with a militant political agenda or a chip on your shoulder is just as inappropriate to the situation as any offensive question would be. Do not let yourself be provoked, and do not overreact.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Zigarelli, Michael. *Can They Do That? A Guide to Your Rights on the Job*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Web Sites:

Careerbuilder.com: www.careerbuilder.com

U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission: www.eeoc.gov

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.