

Avoid job interview icebergs

We all dread them -the horrible interview questions that seem to offer endless possibilities for providing the wrong answer.

I'm not talking about awkward questions that relate specifically to your situation such as: "So tell me, Mr Smith, how come all of your referees are prison guards and your address is c/ Her Majesty, Long Bay." No, I mean those questions that appear designed to put the boot into your psyche.

One of my all-time favourites is, "What would you say is your greatest weakness?" Unless you're Kate Cerebrano and you've written a song about it, it's not normally something you'd care to discuss.

There's a few schools of thought on this one. One is you can be honest -"Chocolate éclairs, and a litre of gin" -and the other is to confess to a "weakness" that will impress your potential employer such as: "My friends tell me I'm mad to be a loyal employee who works 80 hours a week and never takes a holiday, but I can't help it."

While many HR professionals have long ago put that question out to pasture, it's still pretty common. My advice? Admit to a totally irrelevant weakness. If the job is an underground miner, tell 'em you're scared of heights. Geologist role in the desert? Mention you can't swim very well.

These examples are wildly exaggerated (wild exaggeration being my weakness) but it really does work.

An alternative is to admit a weakness, but then counter it. In my current role, I truthfully suggested a weakness -I'm not great in the late afternoon, I'm a real morning person... but then I explained that I usually logged on from home at 5:30 in the morning and got a staggering amount of work done in the peace and quiet.

So, what other questions don't we like? How about -"What sort of money are you after?" Easy enough if you're going for an award-based position, but not otherwise.

Research and being prepared is one answer, but who knows what might happen? I once walked into a job interview knowing how much I wanted per year. To be prepared, I also knew what that amount worked out to be per week, per fortnight and also per hour. The interview went very well and then suddenly the interviewer held out his hand and said, "We'd like to offer you the job at \$2,173 per month. Will you accept?" At that moment, all my math ability failed me, and I just accepted. To save you getting out your calculators, that added up to \$26,076 a year and thankfully it was a long time ago.

These days, I recommend you don't really discuss money until the final interview. If they bring it up, explain that they know the role better than you, so they should have an idea what it is worth. You might like to mention what you are on now, and whether you will be seeking an increase.

The most difficult questions of all can be those that make no sense. A recruiter colleague of mine had a client [the employer] that would ask every interviewee, "How many petrol stations are there in Adelaide?"

She asked him not to, and then she resorted to warning the candidates up front. It didn't seem to help. In desperation, she asked me to find out, and I did.

So the next interviewee, when asked the question, replied, "Four hundred and twelve". When asked how he knew, he informed the interviewer that he'd been given the answer by the recruiter. So, the very next candidate, half an hour later, was asked "How many Hungry Jacks are there in Adelaide?"

The point is; the interviewer was trying to find out, fairly crudely, how the person's thought process works -are they able to logically work through an unexpected problem? He had no interest in the actual answer, just the process.

There's a few questions like that -designed to throw you, and see your reaction. If this happens, ask the interviewer to repeat the question, and make a note if it is complex. Ask questions about the question. (Does that include Hungry Jacks that are part of service station or food courts, or just stand alone businesses?). Anything, just to demonstrate you have an ability to work through a problem.

Demanding to know why they want to know or saying "that's not fair" is unlikely to win many points, though you could always try "I'll do some research and get back to you". If you do that and get away with it, email them the answer within a few hours -shows you can follow through.

Never forget, all applicants get the difficult, hard to cope with questions. Unless you have the very best claim on the job, these questions are where you can shine over those who plan to rely their track record alone. Practise some answers to these types of questions, and learn to love them. They might well be the key to your next job.