



# PRACTICE INTERVIEWS: STRENGTHEN YOUR INTERVIEWING SKILLS

JOB SEEKERS OF MONTCLAIR, DEC 10, 2025

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# TONIGHT WE'LL PRACTICE ANSWERING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

## **Standard questions:**

- Why do you want to work here?
- Where do you think this industry will be in 5 years?
- Why did you leave/are you leaving your last job?
- What are you best at?
- Have you ever failed? Have your work criticized?
- What did you do least well in your last job?
- How much money are you looking for? OR, if range is given, What are your salary expectations within this range?
- Sell me this watch.
- Should we hire you, What's the greatest challenge you think you will find in this role?

## **Stress questions:**

- I've seen ten candidates with qualifications equal to yours: why should I hire you?
- Have you ever been fired?

## **Illegal questions (they may be asked anyway):**

- How does your family feel about a job with this much travel?
- Do you have sufficient child care to work overtime two nights a week and every other Saturday?
- When did you graduate from college?
- What is your current or most recent salary? (Illegal in NY, NJ, other states, selected cities)

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## PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS SINCE THE COVID PANDEMIC/NEW LAW MAKING EMPLOYERS POST SALARY RANGES ON OPEN POSITIONS

Tonight we are going to focus first on questions that have become common since the COVID pandemic, mass layoffs by high tech companies, longer gaps in employment, the switch to remote work, and the subsequent recent morphing to either hybrid jobs or fully on-site jobs.

There will be time later tonight to practice answering whichever standard questions are giving you the most trouble.

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## PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS WITH PROBLEMATIC ANSWERS

1. I see you left your job in January. Was that voluntary? **(NO, people are still squirming not to say they were laid off; wrong approach, stigma is gone. OWN the layoff, identify what caused it (supply chain dried up, did not have enough product to sell; sales were down due to Pandemic disruptions, company had to cut staff; state the # of people laid off which reassures interviewer it wasn't a layoff of one for poor performance)**
2. Oh, you quit in January? **(YES, I was ready for a bigger challenge [perceived as idiotic or reckless or independently wealthy therefore weak interest in work] for leaving a job before you have the next one, or lying])**
3. So what have you been doing since January? **(applicants don't prepare for this, chew their nails, say "applying for jobs", "collecting unemployment," "fighting off depression", "driving for UBER")**
4. How does your family feel about a job with this much travel (40%) **"Oh, my husband and and 5 kids are very supportive, I've been able to take them on a few great vacations when I was working in Europe."**

**You've just answered an illegal question designed to make you reveal your marital and parental status, information that can be used against you. Married people move, their trailing spouse follows, that increases the likelihood you won't stay in one job long. Kids get sick, parents want to drive them to sports events . . . These are NOT related to your qualifications for the job.**

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## PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS WITH SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- **I see you left your job in January. Was that voluntary?** **A** My employer's sales fell due to the collapse of the supply chain in the X industry: we could not manufacture sufficient inventory, so there was a fairly extensive layoff, x # of people, in order to cut costs. I'm focused on finding an industry less vulnerable to supply chain failures, where I can apply my inventory management expertise. **B** The restaurant where I'd worked for a decade closed during Covid, and although it re-opened last year, business did not return to pre-Covid levels and the business closed for good. I'm targeting an established, well financed hospitality company where I can lead post-Covid growth. **C** My company merged with another to survive during Covid, and moved our factory from central New Jersey to South Carolina. I was offered relocation to work in the South Carolina location, but for personal reasons could not make the move. They gave me a "stay" bonus to help closing the NJ location in recognition of my managerial skills and ability to work under tight deadlines,
- **Oh, you quit in January?** I did, because I had a good savings cushion to carry me through as much as a year while I figured out what I wanted to do, slightly pivot my career. I earned a certificate in coding and began preparing for the project management exam which I will take in July. Now I am ready to undertake a project management leadership role, such as this one, with a stronger ability to head up a challenging project. [You need a plan that justifies leaving a job without having one.]
- **So what have you been doing since January?** Because I am interested in positions with more assignments in Latin America, I have been taking intensive lessons and hired a tutor to improve my Spanish for professional use. I've also been volunteering at a rehab facility for veterans.

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## MORE PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS WITH SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- **What does your family think about a job with 40% travel?** “I have a successful track record in jobs with high overnight travel—in my most recent role, I exceeded the annual sales target by 22%—and my family’s support has been key to that success.” Your family may be the younger sister you are raising, your parakeet, or your great aunt who lives 2000 miles away—who constitutes your family is NOT a legal job criterion.
- **When did you graduate from college?** (when the date is omitted from your resume). “Long enough ago that it’s less relevant than my work history and accomplishments, not on my resume because I want interviewers to experience my presence, energy, and currency rather than my chronological age,”
- **Why have you been out of work so long?** (months, over a year, whatever made interviewer ask the question). **A** “I’m pivoting from quality assurance to quality engineering, and pivots take more time than a lateral move.” **B** “Many high tech firms are shedding workers in high numbers, flooding the market and increasing competition while new openings are fewer: I’m caught up in this supply and demand mismatch. I am evaluating opportunities carefully, to find a good fit for the long term.” **C** “I had to take a hiatus to help my parents move into assisted living/manage new health issues, but that is resolved now, and I am fully focused on returning to a challenging new position.”

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## MORE PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS WITH PROBLEMATIC ANSWERS

- 1. The salary range for this position is \$85K-\$125K. How much are you looking for?** (now that salary ranges must be posted at least in NYC and NJ, I hear applicants saying "oh that's fine" to really broad ranges; that does not move the conversation forward. Or they say "My salary expectation is \$120K" but they are new to the role, or "my salary expectation is \$90K" which may generate an offer of \$85.
- 2. This job is hybrid, 2 days a week in the office. How does that mesh with your expectations?** (no, you can't do that from Bozeman or Tampa or Belize. People lie, they're being interviewed over Zoom but are in Boston, the Catskills, Lake Tahoe, then chafe when the schedule is exactly as promised .) **2025 update: many employers are insisting both remote and hybrid workers return to the office completely--be prepared.**
- 3. Why do you want to work here?** ("Because I like to eat and pay my rent" is not going to fly, though someone tried it on me recently. Are you selling yourself off to the highest bidder, or is there something distinctive about this place learned in your research for this interview?)

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## MORE PROBLEMATIC QUESTIONS WITH SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- **The salary range for this position is \$85K-\$125K. How much are you looking for?** **A** As a high performer in a similar role, I'm interviewing for positions between \$110K - \$120K **B** I've demonstrated I'm ready for this role, but as a newcomer to this exact position, I'm finding comparable positions at \$80-\$95K and expect to be offered the higher end of that range. **C** I've been a solid performer for a competitor, so I expect between \$100-110K in this kind of a role.
- **This job is hybrid, 2 days a week in the office. How does that mesh with your expectations?** Two acceptable choices here: **A** It's a long commute, I've worked well at home for two years, and frankly I'd prefer 1 day a week in the office, would hope to arrange that here, maybe after the first three months when I'm fully integrated into the business, the culture, and the team. I can commit to the 2-day requirement. Is the 1-day schedule a possibility to work toward? **B** That's fine with me. It's the new normal, I like the balance of working alone with some time built in to work on an in-person team.
- **Why do you want to work here?** I've taken a careful look at this organization's mission, values which I share, its growth, its investment in innovative products over the past 5 years, and its reputation for moving excellent performers into more senior roles and therefore retaining talent. Few companies in a field as cutthroat as this one have achieved those distinctions.

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## MORE QUESTIONS

### **Skills-based questions (behavioral based):**

- Tell me about a time when you led a team project to success.
- What is your level of experience with\_\_\_\_\_? (*e.g.* survey design, Excel, Python, event planning, cooking Thai food, boiler repair). Give an example.
- When have you persuaded a manager or colleague to reverse a decision?
- Can you give me an example of applying your teamwork skills?

### **Thought processing questions (case-method):**

- How can you tell if the light is working inside a refrigerator when the door is closed?
- Why are all manhole covers round?
- You want to export an American cheese to France: should you, and why or why not?
- How many baby diapers are sold in the US each year?
- Note: consulting firms and federal government agencies ask complex business decision making questions that can take an hour or more to devise a solution

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## AND MORE?

### What question do you most dread?

- --have you ever failed? Turned in a subpar performance?\*
- --which part of your current job do you do least well?\*
- --what would your current or most recent supervisor say is your greatest weakness?\*
- --why were you let go?\*
- --how much money are you looking for?
- --yours?

\*these question are asked to assess your ability to learn from failure, *not* to reveal a fatal flaw.

### Questions that appear nonsensical, but have been used by companies with household names:

- You are going to cook and serve a meal for a group of your colleagues. What do you plan to make?
- Do you prefer Coke or Pepsi?

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## COMMUNICATION BEYOND YOUR WORDS

- **Tone:** warm?
- **Smile** often!
- **Speed:** can a listener capture your words? Native English speakers can talk too fast, especially in New York City. Non-native speakers often need to slow down so that listeners can process foreign accents.
- **Enunciation:** Native English speakers can be sloppy enunciators; both native and non-native speakers reduce a listener's comprehension if mumbling or speaking too fast
- **Loudness** of your voice: confident? Too soft? Too loud?
- Eye contact: **in US culture, builds trust and conveys** honesty but don't glare!

### **Body language:**

- Overuse of hands when speaking conjures up an unknown form of American Sign Language. Use hands only for emphasis, not to augment intonation.
- Arms crossed shuts your interviewer out.
- Foot tapping, playing with your hair convey nervousness.
- Leaning back in the chair conveys nonchalance, cockiness, unwarranted informality.

### **What you are wearing:**

- Dress for the job you want to have in this organization. Better yet, dress for the next job you want to be promoted to!

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## Questions to ask your interviewer?

- What do you expect within the first three months from the person hired into this position?
- What will be the greatest challenge for a person new to this position and organization?
- How will my performance in this position be measured?
- Why is this position open? (a way to learn if the company promotes from within)
- Do you have any unanswered concerns about my candidacy?
- What is the next step in your selection process?

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## CLOSING THE SALE

- Many candidates forget to “close the sale” at the end of the interview: briefly sum up your fit and motivation, and ASK for the job. Note: you are not likely to get an offer at the end of an interview.
- Example: “Thank you so much for this interview. Now that I’ve learned more about the position and your expectations, I see my fit for the role and this organization even more clearly. My proven ability to grow revenues from both existing and new customers, and deliver service that increases their loyalty, are exactly what you’ve explained to me is the measure of success in this role, and I know I can deliver the sales and increased customer base you anticipate.
- Remember to ask for a business card or screen shot of the interviewer’s contact info.

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## THANK YOU NOTES AFTER AN INTERVIEW

- Taking notes during an in-person interview is not recommended: this distraction leads to not listening, forgetting to answer part 2 of a 2-part question, and reducing your focus on building a rapport with the human interviewer. It's not much easier on a Zoom interview, though you can't be seen writing, your eye contact is going to suffer as well as your focus.
- "Debrief" yourself immediately after the interview: this is the time to write down especially good or bad answers, and information you received only orally.
- Only 15% of candidates send a thank you note after an interview, whether by snail mail, email, or text. Be among them. One more way to stand out; use the information you took down in your notes to sell your fit!
- This is *not* your thank you note to Grandma after she sent a birthday present: it is a chance to remind the interviewer of your qualifications, fit, and enthusiasm for this specific opportunity. Recap that; strengthen any answer you think was inadequate.
- After a team interview, you should write an individual note to each interviewer that relates to the questions they asked you.