



Rephrasing Interview Questions - For HR Professionals and Employers

Part of being a good interviewer is being able to provide all job candidates with a fair opportunity to present them selves for a position. In some cases, the candidate may have all the skills for the job but, because English is not their first language, they may find the interview questions difficult to answer. Often rephrasing a question will provide an opportunity for any candidate to tackle the question appropriately.

The following is a list of ways you can rephrase some common interview questions to make it easier to interview candidates who:

- may speak English as their Second Language, and
- may have little or no experience being interviewed in Canada.

| Question | Rephrase it as: | Notes |
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| 1. Can you tell me your greatest strength? | <i>Can you tell me your best quality as a worker? How would you describe yourself as an employee? What do you do best at work?</i> | The word ‘strength’ may cause confusion in this context. Some people find it uncomfortable to ‘talk about themselves’ in flattering terms for cultural reasons. |
| 2. Why should I hire you? | <i>Tell me why I should hire you for this job and not one of the other candidates? What skills or experiences can you bring to this position that other candidates cannot?</i> | This may seem like a very odd question for many people from other cultures because, in some cultures, it is not polite to boast nor to appear to be providing negative comments about others. |
| 3. What are your major weaknesses? | <i>Tell me three good/bad characteristics about you. Are there any things you think you could do better?</i> | In some cultures, it is inappropriate to identify flaws or inadequacies. |
| 4.a) Are you comfortable: - talking on phone - participating at (staff) meetings. etc. b.) Part of the work involves: - talking on the phone. - Participating | <i>Are you comfortable talking on the phone? Do you find it easy to talk on the phone? Are you comfortable speaking up at meetings? Do you join in the conversation at staff meetings or do you sit quietly and listen?</i> | a) ESL speakers may take this literally and answer ‘no’ but rephrasing can determine if they are ‘able’ to do the work. b) ESL speakers may not realize that this statement is an implied question but view it as a statement of fact. |



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| in meetings. | | |
| 5. What prompted your decision to apply for this job? | <i>What interested you about this job? Why does this position interest you? Why do you want to work here?</i> | Need to consider culture as well as practical circumstances |
| 6. Where do you see yourself five years from now? or What are your long-range goals? | <i>What are your future work plans? Are you interested in advancing in this company? What are your long-term ambitions? What kind of position would you eventually like to have?</i> | As with any candidates for a position, the employer hopes the person will stay long term and perhaps be promoted within the organization. This question gives insight into the candidate and some personal goals. Some candidates may feel pressured by this question as they may feel that they need to make a long-term commitment. |
| 7. Tell me about yourself. | <i>Can you give us a brief introduction about who you are? Please tell us briefly a little bit about yourself?</i> | The point here is that the candidate is to speak briefly about themselves – prompts may be necessary – how did you become interested in..., where did you study, tell us about the course you took, etc. If this is the first interview a person has in Canada, they may tell more information than is required |
| 8. Are you a team player? | <i>Do you work well with other people? Can you give me an example of when you have worked well with one person or a group of people? We value people that can work cooperatively with other people ... In this job you will be expected to share ideas and work on projects with others Can you give me some examples of how you work when you are part of a _____ (i.e. engineering) team? Do you prefer to work alone or with others?</i> | This question needs a strong introduction to set the context for the candidate. Team player is jargon that can be literally thought of as a 'sports team' |
| 9. What qualifications do you | <i>How will your experience and education help you to be successful</i> | Again, cultural issues related to the fact that in some cultures, being able |



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| <p>have that make you think you will be successful in this position? or What personal characteristics are necessary for success in this position?</p> | <p><i>in this position?</i></p> <p><i>What personal qualities or experience will help you be successful in this position?</i></p> <p><i>What special qualities do you have that will make you successful in this job?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me why you will do well in this job?</i></p> | <p>to “sell yourself” is not done. Rephrasing allows you to focus on what they need to highlight in their response.</p> |
| <p>10. Why have all your jobs been short term? or Tell us about your most recent work experiences?</p> | <p><i>Can you tell us about some of the other jobs you've had in Canada?</i></p> <p><i>What have you learned from some of your other jobs in Canada (that will help you with this position)?</i></p> | <p>Newcomers may not have had much work experience in Canada – what is important is to identify what it is that the employers are looking for when they ask this question (punctuality, etc.). HR professionals can find another way to get the candidate to demonstrate the competency required.</p> |
| <p>11. Do you have references?</p> | <p><i>Are you able to give (send) me the names of three people who know your work (in Canada?) or you personally. I will need names, phone numbers and email addresses.</i></p> | <p>Newcomers may not have met many people in Canada who can vouch for their work habits, names of teachers, counselors or others should be accepted.</p> <p>In some cases, prospective employees may volunteer to present a portfolio of achievements that highlight their work-related experience overseas and their education.</p> |
| <p>12. What is your management style? or What style of management do you prefer?</p> | <p><i>Can you tell us how you like to manage a project? A team?</i></p> <p><i>What kind of manager works best with you?</i></p> <p><i>What kind of manager do you like best?</i></p> <p><i>What qualities should a successful manager have?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me about someone who is a good supervisor?</i></p> | <p>Management style examples may have to be provided based on your organization, prior to asking this question.</p> |



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| | <i>Can you tell me about the best supervisor you ever had? What made him/her so good?</i> | |
| 13. Can you tell us about your hobbies or interests? | <p><i>We value hard workers who are dedicated but we also recognize the need to relax.</i></p> <p><i>What do you like to do outside work?</i></p> <p><i>What do you like to do in your spare time?</i></p> <p><i>Can you describe any special skills or knowledge you have?</i></p> | <p>Also, if the interviewer wants to get a sense if the candidate is 'balanced' they should ask that in a different question. e.g. How do you balance work commitments with personal time?</p> <p>An ESL speaker may be thrown by this change in questioning - perhaps at the end of the interview this kind of question can be asked</p> <p>This is very difficult for some because there are cultures where work is of the utmost importance and it is not appropriate to discuss leisure at work.</p> |
| 14. Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done. | <p><i>Can you tell me about when you worked extra hard to get the job done?</i></p> <p><i>Can you give me an example how you have shown <u>creativity</u> (dedication, etc.) in a previous position?</i></p> | 'Above and beyond' is an expression that may not be known by ESL speakers |
| 15. Tell me about your worst "nightmare" project. What went wrong and what did you do and what did you learn from that situation? | <p><i>"We want people who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - can solve problems. - don't get frustrated or discouraged when _____. <p><i>Can you tell me about how you might react in this situation."</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me the worst problem you have faced at work?</i></p> <p><i>Can you tell me about when something went wrong at work and how you fixed it?</i></p> | Using " Nightmare " at a job interview may confuse an ESL speaker. |
| 16. How have you kept your skills /knowledge current? | <p><i>Describe how you have managed to stay knowledgeable in this field?</i></p> <p><i>How has your volunteer experience</i></p> | The newcomer may have been in a training program, getting settled in Canada, or unemployed. However, the candidate may have volunteered |



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| Can you explain the gap(s) in your work history? | <i>helped you? As a volunteer/student/co-op student, what skills did you learn that may help you with this position?</i> | with an organization, taken a leadership course, or found another way to stay current in the field. |
| 17. What do you know about our company/industry? | <i>Can you tell us what you know about our company? Can you describe what you have learned about the industry in Canada?</i> | |

In many cases, using Behavioral or Scenario-types of questions works well as they allow the candidate to give workplace examples based on experiences. This allows the candidates to explain further how they approach specific workplace tasks or give examples of how they did this in the past, using concrete examples.

Below are three examples of scenarios that could be used in an interview:

Example #1 - Customer Service Representative:

You are the CSR and have an angry customer arguing with you on the phone about a mistake on his bill. What steps would you take to deal with him?

Example #2 – Medical Example

You are the emergency triage nurse and have three emergency situations to deal with. One is a four year old boy with a broken leg. One is an elderly man complaining of chest pain. One is woman who cut her hand on a knife when cooking dinner. Tell us how you would prioritize the handling of each patient?

Example #3 – Office Example

You have the following to do by the end of this week:

- finish a 3 page monthly report to the client,
- prepare a budget for a proposal that is due for another client,
- meet with other team members to set up a new file sharing system.
- attend a one-day training on some new software.

How would you deal with these tasks?

From the publication, *Work Ready: Resources for Counselling, Hiring, and Working with Internationally Trained Individuals*. For more information, see www.language.ca.