



Job interview

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How do I answer the strengths and weaknesses question?

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The question

In an interview, how do I answer the question, “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” It’s always a hard one for me to answer.

The answer

There are mixed reviews on how effective and useful this question and answer is. Some people feel that it is a question to ask when you don’t know other questions to ask. Others feel it is an important part of the interview process and provides telling information.

Regardless of which side you support, it is a question you may get and, like other key questions, you need to go into the interview with a straightforward answer – and a strategy. This is a question that asks you to critique

yourself – identify what you are most capable of, and where some of the downsides are. Make them work to your advantage.

It is easy for us to determine strengths. Especially in an interview, as you have likely spent the last 30 minutes talking about what you are good at. When this question is asked, give them something that sums up what you can bring to the job – and accompany it with a plan on how you are growing that strength. For example, if you are applying for a sales role, talk about a key strength being your knowledge of the sales market and the demographics of the target customer. Then mention you are building on this strength by investing time into reading customer research and trends in the sales industry.

This approach will tell the interviewer that you know what you are excelling in, and how you will keep excelling in it.

The trickier, and more uncomfortable question lies in stating your weaknesses. People tend to feel that if they say something negative, the employer hangs on to that and nothing else. This is untrue. Research has shown that the strongest candidates are ones that admit to mistakes and shortcomings, and clearly articulate what they learned from them and how they will overcome them. Again, this comes with a strategy.

Key to answering this question is to give a realistic, thoughtful answer. Do not provide something that is artificial, for example – “I work too hard sometimes.” Provide something that shows you know your weakness, and give information about how you are either managing it or working on eliminating it all together.

For example, time management is a common weakness, as well as being able to say no to a request. Tell the interviewer how this weakness affects your productivity or overall role. Then state what you do about it. For example, you may talk about how you make a list each morning of tasks you need to accomplish, and check them off as you go along. Or you may talk about how you try to provide colleagues with alternatives to getting the request taken care of.

You can also personalize it a bit. I had a client say that he misses out on office chit-chat because he does not go out after work with the staff. This is also interpreted by many that he is anti-social and not interested. The fact is that he has small children at home who go to bed early and he wants to see them for that short time after the work day. To address this, he makes a point of getting together with his colleagues during lunch or coffee breaks to catch up on office news.

The strengths and weaknesses question, like all interview questions, needs to be predicted and prepared in advance so you are not caught off guard, and can provide a thorough critique of your best and not-so-best skills.

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