

HOW TO ANSWER: What Are Your Strengths?

Posted by [Pamela Skillings](#) on Mar 14, 2013

Today, we are tackling another critical job interview question: What are your strengths?

This is a [commonly-asked question](#) in job interviews for all levels of positions in all industries.

Even when this question is not asked, you must be able to answer it in order to land the job. After all, from the [employer's perspective](#), the main point of a job interview is to understand what you could do for the organization and why she should hire you instead of someone else.

You must be prepared to talk about your strengths. Many candidates don't do it well, so there is an opportunity for you to stand out from the crowd if you can speak about your strengths in an authentic and compelling way.

Let's start by talking about how to respond when an interviewer asks you specifically, "What are your strengths?" (or "What are your three greatest strengths?" or similar)

Why Do Interviewers Ask This Question?



It's the interviewer's job to find someone who will perform in the position and get along with the team. With this question, the interviewer seeks to find out if:

- *Your strengths align with the company's needs*
- *You can do the job and perform like a rock star*
- *You are the best person for the job — no need to hold out for someone better*
- *You have qualities, skills, and/or experience that set you apart from the competition*
- *You are someone who will make an excellent addition to the team*

Common Mistakes



Some people think this is an easy question. This question is basically a prompt for you to brag and “sell” yourself as the best fit for the job. So how could you screw it up? You know yourself, right?

Unfortunately, many candidates fail to prepare properly and [sabotage themselves](#). Here are some of the common mistakes that I see when working with my [coaching clients](#):

Lack of self-awareness. Most job seekers don’t spend enough time analyzing their strengths and thinking about which ones are most relevant for each position. Knowing your strengths will serve you well in job interviewing and in the rest of your life as well. If you don’t feel you have a clear sense of your job-related strengths, read on for some advice on how to identify them.

Modesty. Many candidates are too humble or just aren’t comfortable articulating what makes them great. This is particularly true for introverts and/or people who never really had to “sell” themselves before because new jobs always fell in their laps in the past. You have to get over any hesitation to say nice things about yourself. You can do it in a way that feels comfortable and authentic if you prepare in advance.

Choosing lame strengths. Others choose strengths that don’t help them stand out — strengths that aren’t important for the job at hand or strengths that just about anybody could claim. This mistake makes a candidate bland and forgettable at best. At worst, you can raise red flags with the interviewer — who wants to hire someone whose greatest strength is the ability to show up on time?

How to Talk About Your Strengths



It’s important to take the time to identify your strengths and PRACTICE talking about them

in advance. That way, you'll be ready when you walk into that interview for your dream job. Let's start by identifying/confirming what your greatest strengths are:

1. Brainstorm. Sit down and make a list of your top strengths — aim for at least 10 and be creative. Banish your modest internal editor to another room. Jot down everything that comes to mind. You can delete later if you like.

Your strengths could include:

Experience — Experience with a certain software or type of task, expertise in a particular industry, a track record of working with similar products or clients, etc.

Talents — Abilities such as programming in a desired language, writing proposals, selling widgets, litigating cases, organizing events, translating from Mandarin, etc. (the possibilities here are truly endless)

Soft skills — Competencies such as [problem solving](#), influencing, team building, negotiation, managing up, etc.

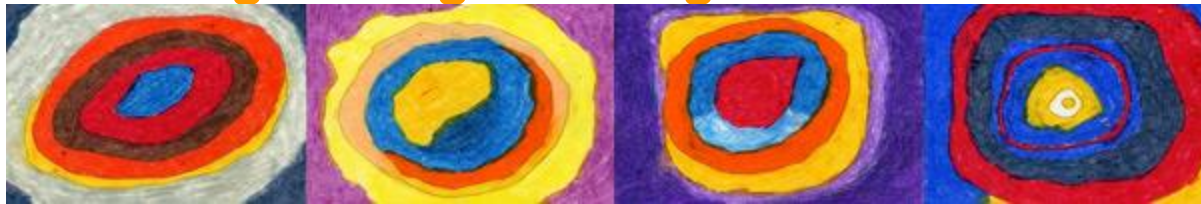
Education/training — Relevant background on topics critical to the job — including college degrees, certifications, training seminars, mentoring, internships, etc.

If you have trouble coming up with enough work-related strengths, jot down positive personality qualities or personal strengths. You may find ways to relate these to job performance.

2. Focus. Narrow your list down to least five strengths that you are comfortable discussing (or could get comfortable discussing with a little bit of practice). The more, the better. You may not talk about all of these strengths in every interview, but it's good to have options.

3. Prepare Examples. Develop at least one example or Interview Story to illustrate each of your strengths. If you're not sure how to go about crafting compelling stories and examples from your previous experience, check out [Big Interview and our Answer Builder](#).

Choosing the Right Strengths



1. Be accurate. Choose strengths that you actually possess. Don't pick a strength just because it's in the job description or worked for your buddy. You want to be yourself in an

interview, just the best and most professional version of yourself. You will be much more convincing and likable if you talk about authentic strengths.

2. Be relevant. You should take the time to analyze the job description and identify the most important strengths for each opportunity. You likely have many strengths, but which will be most relevant for this interviewer?

3. Be specific. Choose specific strengths. Instead of “people skills” (too broad and boring), go with “relationship building” or “persuasive communication.” Don’t be generic. Could 90% of your friends claim your strength? Pick another one.

4. Don’t be too humble. See common mistakes above. Avoid “weak praise” and lame strengths. Pick something impressive. Don’t go with “pleasant to work with” as your main selling point. Just about everybody can and should be pleasant to work with. To get the job, you have to show you would bring more to the position.

5. Be prepared to demonstrate. As discussed, have a concise example ready to back each strength up. Be careful about rambling on too long here. Your answer should still be 1-2 minutes long. If you want to share three strengths and back each up with an example, you will want to practice in advance so that you can do it in a concise way.

I Don't Know My Own Strengths



If you get stuck trying to develop a list your strengths, try these techniques:

1. Get a second opinion. Ask a trusted friend or colleague what they think are your greatest strengths.

2. Dig for clues. Go back to previous performance reviews and analyze the positive feedback. Dig up old emails praising your work (if you haven’t been saving these, start a folder now). If you’re a student or new grad, think about the feedback that you’ve received from professors and supervisors from past internships and jobs.

3. Review your resume. Look for common themes in your achievements. Sometimes, we’re so close to the subject that we lose perspective. Try to read [your resume](#) with fresh eyes — as if it was the resume of an admired friend. What stands out?

4. Get scientific. Try the StrengthsFinder assessment. You can answer a series of questions and get a report that summarizes your top strengths. This should spark some ideas and/or help you focus your thinking. I use StrengthsFinder with many of my coaching clients and the results can really help with your professional and personal development. Many corporations also ask their employees to take the StrengthsFinder assessment as a foundation for their performance improvement plans.

www.StrengthsFinder.com

Some Example Answers to “What Are Your Strengths?”

1. Example Answer: 3 Strengths for a Technology Team Leader

“I think one of my greatest strengths is as a problem solver. I have the ability to see a situation from different perspectives and I can get my work done even in the face of difficult obstacles. I also feel that my communication skills are top notch. I feel just as comfortable presenting to senior executives as I do mediating a conflict between junior team members. I worked as a programmer in the past so I have that perspective of a developer and I think that they respect me for that.”

Why We Like It:

This is a nice answer that summarizes three strengths that are relevant for the job at hand. Just saying that you’re a “problem solver” and have “good communication skills” can sound bland and rehearsed. You have to add some detail and color to make your answer more believable and memorable. In this case, the candidate talks about how her problem solving skills work (seeing things from different perspectives) and gives examples of her communication skills (presenting to senior leaders and mediating team disputes). We also like her discussion of her programming past and how this makes her a better manager. Notice that she did not include a specific example for each of the strengths cited. Sometimes you want to avoid squeezing too much detail into one answer. You don’t want this answer to turn into an endless monologue. This candidate gave a little bit of detail for each strength and then left an opening for the interviewer to ask for more information. She should, of course, be prepared with an Interview Story for each of her strengths. That way, she will be

ready when the interviewer asks: “Tell me about a time when you solved a difficult problem” or “Give me an example of a conflict that you mediated.”

2. Example Answer: Work Ethic

“One of my strengths is my strong work ethic. When I commit to a deadline, I do whatever it takes to deliver. For example, last week we had a report due and got some numbers back late from our team in Singapore. I pulled an all-nighter to finish the spreadsheet because I knew that the client HAD to receive the report on time.”

Why We Like It:

Notice that the answer goes beyond “hard worker,” which is way too general. Anybody can say that they work hard. This candidate gets specific about what work ethic means to him and talks about being deadline-driven and reliable, with a specific example.

3. Example Answer: Writing Skills (New college grad applying for analyst position)

“I am proud of my writing skills and believe that they will make me a better analyst. I am able to communicate complicated topics to different audiences. I can take a lot of data and information and find the story and themes that clients need to know about.

I honed my research and writing abilities during my days writing for the college paper, where I learned how to write well on deadline from pretty demanding editors. I even won an award for my series on the financial crisis.”

Why We Like It:

This answer explains why the candidate is a good writer and how that applies to the position. The example adds credibility, showing that others also believed the candidate’s writing skills were top-notch (editors, award judges).

What If They Don’t Ask Me About My Strengths?



If the interviewer doesn’t think to ask you about your strengths (not every interviewer has

been trained to ask the right questions), you'll have to look for opportunities to bring up the topic.

Keep in mind that there are many other questions that basically ask for your strengths. **These include:**

- *Why should we hire you?*
- *Why are you the best person for the job?*
- *What makes you a good fit?*

You should walk into every interview with a clear goal: to communicate your greatest and most relevant strengths to the interviewer. If you aren't asked directly, look for openings. For example, when asked a behavioral question ("*Tell me about a time...*"), share an example that illustrates one of your top strengths and emphasize it.

If all else fails, wait until the end of the interview when they ask you if you have anything else to add (after you have [asked some smart questions of the interviewer](#)). Then, take the opportunity to summarize your strengths and reiterate your interest in the position.

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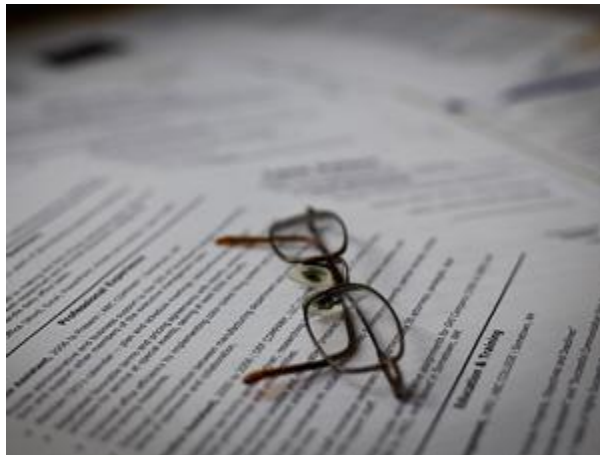
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Another Article

What Are Your Greatest Strengths and Weaknesses?

Carole Martin, Monster Contributing Writer

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Interview Questions: What Are Your Strengths and Weaknesses?

Marie is about to interview two candidates for the customer service manager position. Her candidates are Francine and William. As always, one of the [interview questions](#) she plans to ask is about their strengths and weaknesses.

Francine answers the question, "What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?" with, "My strength is that I'm a hard worker. My weakness is that I get stressed when I miss a deadline because someone else dropped the ball."

This answer is unimaginative. Most people think of themselves as hard workers.

William has difficulty with the question. "I really can't think of a weakness," he begins. "Maybe I could be more focused. My strength is probably my ability to deal with people. I am pretty easygoing. I usually don't get upset easily."

This answer leads with a negative, and then moves to vague words: maybe, probably, pretty and usually.

So what is the best way to answer this [common interview question](#)?

Assessing Your Strengths

[Assess your skills](#), and you will identify your strengths. This is an exercise worth doing before any interview. Make a list of your skills, dividing them into three categories:

- Knowledge-Based Skills: Acquired from education and experience (e.g., computer skills, languages, degrees, training and technical ability).
- Transferable Skills: Your portable skills that you take from job to job (e.g., communication and people skills, analytical problem solving and planning skills)
- Personal Traits: Your unique qualities (e.g., dependable, flexible, friendly, hard working, expressive, formal, punctual and being a team player).

When you complete this list, choose three to five of those strengths that match what the employer is seeking in the job posting. Make sure you can give specific examples to demonstrate why you say that is your strength if probed further.

Assessing Your Weaknesses

This is probably the most dreaded part of the question. Everyone has weaknesses, but who wants to admit to them, especially in an interview?

The best way to handle this question is to minimize the trait and emphasize the positive. Select a trait and come up with a solution to overcome your weakness. Stay away from personal qualities and concentrate more on professional traits. For example: "I pride myself on being a 'big-picture' guy. I have to admit I sometimes miss small details, but I always make sure I have someone who is detail-oriented on my team."

Scripting Your Answers

Write a positive statement you can say with confidence:

"My strength is my flexibility to handle change. As customer service manager at my last job, I was able to turn around a negative working environment and develop a very supportive team. As far as weaknesses, I feel that my management skills could be stronger, and I am constantly working to improve them."

When confronted with this interview question, remember the interviewer is looking for a fit. She is forming a picture of you based on your answers. A single answer will probably not keep you from getting the job, unless, of course, it is something blatant. Put your energy into your strengths statement -- what you have to offer. Then let the interviewer know that although you may not be perfect, you are working on any shortcomings you have.