

Skills 360 – Handling Technical Interviews (Part 1)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you feel when you have to prepare for a difficult interview?
2. When you don't understand an interview question, what do you usually do?
3. When you have to explain something complex, are you good at keeping your explanation clear and short?

Vocabulary

The ins and outs of a situation: how something works or all the details involved in a situation or process; "A good contract lawyer should be able to explain all the ins and outs of commercial leases for you."

Sharp mind: intelligence or quick thinking; "Reggie certainly has a sharp mind, as his college grades show, but I don't think he has enough experience for the job."

Brainteaser: a tricky or difficult problem that you do for fun or mental exercise; "My doctor recommended that I do sudoku, crossword puzzles, and other brainteasers every morning to keep my mind sharp."

To consider yourself lucky: to think that you are fortunate; "I consider myself very lucky to have a helpful uncle with a lot of connections in business and government."

To face: to have to deal with something such as a situation or problem; "With oil prices on the rise, we're suddenly facing increased shipping costs."

Anxiety: a feeling of worry or stress, especially that something bad might happen; "With two consecutive quarters of decreased revenues, many shareholders are feeling anxiety about the future of the company."

Good fortune: luck and opportunity; "I have had the extremely good fortune of working for a great company that offers so much support to aspiring managers."

To head into: to go into a situation or place; "I feel much more confident heading into a meeting if I know the people and the agenda beforehand."

To be upfront: honest and open; "Rather than just feeling frustrated and complaining, I think you should sit down with your supervisor and be totally upfront about the issues that are bothering you."

Inflation: the natural rise in prices in an economy; "Central banks will often raise interest rates to try and lower inflation."

Right off the bat: immediately or at the beginning; "The facilitator was surprised when he walked into the room and participants were arguing right off the bat."

Off base: wrong, not correct, not exact, unrealistic, or not what is expected; "I think expecting to capture 20% market share in the first year is off base. 10% is much more reasonable."

To craft: to make or produce something carefully; "Let's take our time here and craft a really great and well-planned marketing campaign."

Know-how: knowledge or understanding of how to do something; "Tom is a great senior manager because he has both the engineering know-how to supervise big projects and the ability to lead people."

To assess: to evaluate or estimate how good or valuable something is; "A resume isn't enough to fully assess how an employee will fit into your team. You need a good interview process as well."

Concise: short and clear, for things expressed in words; "You've only got 10 minutes to present your report, so make sure you're concise and focused."

To brush up on something: to review or practice something that you learned before; "With my move back to the finance department, I'm really going to have to brush up on my knowledge of accounting practices."

Formula: a mathematical rule, idea, or relationship expressed in numbers and symbols; "The formula for calculating break-even volume involves dividing fixed costs by contribution margin per unit."

To rattle off: to say or list something quickly; "Rather than just rattling off the sales figures for our different divisions, I'd like you to actually analyze the reasons behind any changes in sales."

Off the top of your head: without too much thought or mental effort; "Sorry John, I don't know our exact leasing rates off the top of my head; I'll have to look them up for you."

Chatter: fast and informal conversation or speaking; "When the chatter at the back of the room became too distracting, the speaker asked everyone to listen quietly."

To think something through: to consider or think about something completely and carefully; "The company has offered me a position in Poland, but it would be a big change and I really need to think it through over the next week."

Insight: understanding about something; "Personality tests can provide a lot of insight into how your employees working styles and approaches to tasks differ."

To underline: to emphasize, highlight, or show clearly that something is important; "I think the recent dip in profits helps to underline that we need to start cutting costs."

Cash flow: the flow or rate at which a business brings in money and spends it; "By speeding up our system of collection and prioritizing bills payable, we've improved our cash flow situation."

Inventory: the total store of goods or products a company has or the list of this total; "Unfortunately sir, we don't have the XR900 in store right now, but let me check our warehouse inventory for you."

Payables: money that is owed by a business to other businesses, government, or lenders; "I know it seems like we've got a lot of cash on hand right now, but we've got some big payables to deal with, including a big tax bill."

To work out: to solve a problem, especially by doing calculations; "I worked out the rate of return on several different types of investments, and I think we should put our money into real estate."

Whiteboard: a white plastic board that you write on with markers that can be erased; "I'm hearing a lot of great ideas here, and let's just pause for a moment so I can write them up on the whiteboard here for everyone to see."

From the get-go: from the beginning; "When Apple launched the iPad, it was clear right from the get-go that there was great consumer demand for tablets."

To clear up: to correct a misunderstanding or make a situation or mystery clear; "I realize you're upset about my decision, but can we just sit down and chat to clear up some of the reasons for it?"

To get across: to make something clear or understood by someone; "You need to practice your pitch so that you can get your great idea across to investors clearly in less than a minute."

To walk somebody through something: to carefully explain, step-by-step, a problem or process; "I had trouble with the new database too, but just call Ryan in tech and he'll come down and walk you through the whole log-in process."

To rehearse: to practice, especially something you must say or perform; "To make yourself less nervous before a big presentation, you should rehearse at least a dozen times in front of colleagues or friends."

Pitfalls: a danger or possible problem in a situation; "One of the biggest pitfalls of rebranding is that existing customers might not respond positively to your new brand image."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to look at how to handle a technical interview.

Whether you're in finance, engineering, technology, or software design, your job search might involve a technical interview. In a technical interview, you have to do more than just answer questions about your background and experience. You have to show you understand the technical **ins and outs** of your field and have a **sharp mind**. And you'll do that by solving technical problems and answering **brainteasers**.

That might sound challenging, but if you get a technical interview, **consider yourself lucky** as they're typically reserved only for the best candidates. But chances are when you **face** a technical interview you feel more **anxiety** than **good fortune**. So how can you **head into** your interview with confidence and deal with the questions effectively?

For starters, you need to make sure you actually *understand* the question. If it's not clear right away what the interviewers are asking you to do, be **upfront** about it and ask for clarification. For example, you might ask "exactly which programming language do you mean?" Or "should my calculations be adjusted for **inflation**?" If you don't understand the exact question **right off the bat**, your solution or answer will be **off base**. It's always best to clarify everything right at the start, rather than finding out you're confused in the middle of your response.

Once you understand what is being asked, you can **craft** a good response. And you should realize that a technical interview is designed to test more than just your technical **know-how**. You're also being **assessed** on your communication skills and problem-solving abilities. So make sure your answers are short, **concise**, and well-organized. Keep this in mind when you prepare for your interview. You shouldn't just be **brushing up on formulas** – though that might also be important – you should also be practicing giving good clear answers and solutions.

But good clear answers aren't always easy, and being clear might require you to take the time to stop and think. Problem-solving is a *process*. For example, if you're asked how you would design a program that manages customer information and sorts it for marketing purposes, you won't be expected to **rattle off** a solution **off the top of your head**. You'll need to think about it. And when you do, avoid filling the time with useless **chatter** like "hmm... that's a tough one" or "well, maybe I could try... oh... no, that wouldn't work..."

But while you want to avoid useless chatter, you *do* want to show the interviewers your thought process. That's really what they're interested in! So **think it through** out loud. Describe the mental steps you're taking. Give them **insight** on how you're approaching the problem while minimizing "ums" and "ahs" that are meant just to fill the silence.

Another good little strategy you can use when answering questions is relating your ideas or the problem to previous work situations you've faced. This is a good way to [underline](#) key experiences and show how you've learnt from them. For example, imagine you're in an accounting interview faced with the question "is it possible for a company to show positive [cash flow](#) yet be in serious trouble?" You can answer "yes" and explain how a company might be selling off [inventory](#) and delaying [payables](#). But you can also add "and I saw several examples of this during my time with KPMG."

Some questions might require pretty long and complex answers, particularly ones in which you have to design a program or analyze a situation. You might even be asked to [work out](#) a problem on a [whiteboard](#). Once again, you need to make sure you're clear on the task [from the get-go](#). But you should also make sure your audience is clear at the *end* of your response. You might say "is that the kind of solution you were looking for?" Or "is there any part of my solution that wasn't clear?" Or "would you like me to explain any of these steps in more detail?" Questions like that will give you the chance to [clear up](#) anything that you didn't [get across](#) perfectly, and it shows that you care about making yourself understood.

Now let's run through all of this again to make sure *you're* clear on what *I've* suggested. Start by clarifying the question, if necessary. Next, [craft](#) a brief and concise response. Stop to think when necessary and [walk](#) the interviewers [through](#) your thought process. Relate problems or ideas to previous experience if you can, and finish up by checking that everyone's understood.

And remember, this gets easier with practice, so don't forget to spend some quality time preparing and [rehearsing](#) technical questions. In our next lesson, I'll talk about some common [pitfalls](#) and how to avoid or deal with them.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the myBOnline.com website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. In a technical interview, what should you do if you're not clear about what is being asked?
 - A Attempt to answer as best you can.
 - B Politely request another question.
 - C Ask the interviewer to clarify the question.
 - D Relate the general problem to a work situation.

2. Which of the following might interviewers be assessing during a technical interview?
 - A Your technical knowledge of the field.
 - B Communication skills.
 - C Your problem-solving ability.
 - D All of the above.

3. Which of the following are recommended when crafting a good response to a problem-solving question? *Select all that apply:*
 - A Provide an answer as quickly as possible.
 - B Take the time to stop and think.
 - C Indicate that you think the question is very difficult.
 - D Make sure your answer is concise.
 - E Ask the interviewer how the problem relates to a work situation.
 - F Relate the problem to a work situation you've faced in the past.

4. Which of the following might help to show interviewers your thought process? *Select all that apply:*
 - A "Well, first I could list all the important variables."
 - B "Um" and "ah."
 - C "Maybe I could try... not, that wouldn't work."
 - D "Next I would ask myself what types of information are important."

5. At the end of your response to a complex question, what should you do?
 - A Repeat your response in greater detail.
 - B Ask a question to make sure your response has been understood.
 - C Follow up with a question about the company.
 - D Ask whether your response was incorrect.

6. What is one of the keys to entering a technical interview with confidence?
 - A Dressing formally.
 - B Reviewing all the relevant technical material thoroughly.
 - C Practicing answering technical questions.
 - D Remembering that you are lucky to have a technical interview.

Review Answers

1. In a technical interview, what should you do if you're not clear about what is being asked?

C Ask the interviewer to clarify the question.

2. Which of the following might interviewers be assessing during a technical interview?

D All of the above.

3. Which of the following are recommended when crafting a good response to a problem-solving question? [choose all that apply]

B Take the time to stop and think.

D Make sure your answer is concise.

F Relate the problem to a work situation you've faced in the past.

4. Which of the following might help to show interviewers your thought process? [choose 2]

A "Well, first I could list all the important variables."

D "Next I would ask myself what type of information is important."

5. At the end of your response to a complex question, what should you do?

B Ask a question to make sure your response has been understood.

6. What is one of the keys to entering a technical interview with confidence?

C Practicing answering technical questions.

Online Practice

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