
LAWYERS JOURNAL

L A W P R A C T I C E M A N A G E M E N T

How to answer five common legal interview questions

By Ashley Reed

Interviews are naturally stressful because you can't predict exactly which questions will be asked but prepping for common interview questions will help you ease some stress. Whether you're getting ready for an entry-level or lateral interview, OCI or a callback, preparing in advance will give you time to think of specific examples and ways to tie your experiences to the specific role and firm/organization. Below are some common legal interview questions – plus suggestions on how to approach them.

Tell me a little about yourself.

This may seem like an easy question – after all, you know yourself better than anyone else. But the open-ended nature of this question can be a disaster without proper preparation. A great response will be brief but provide enough information to intrigue the interviewer. Think of this question as an opportunity to share your elevator pitch – discuss your relevant experience, skills and goals. You can also use this question as an opportunity to explain how you became interested in this area of law or even why you decided to pursue law. Your response should be brief and targeted to your audience. Be sure to practice in advance so that you can deliver this response with confidence on interview day.

What attracted you to our firm/organization?

This question seems easy enough – hiring is an investment, and legal employers want to find candidates with sincere interest in working at their organization. Prepare by crafting an answer that includes what you love about the type of law the firm/organization handles and what about the job opportunity (or law firm) piqued your interest. Look at the job description and the firm's website for details you can include in your answer. Take your research a step further by reading about specific matters the firm has handled and why that type of work fits with your professional goals. You can also discuss specific lawyers at the firm who you admire – but make sure you really understand their work if you go this route. Of course, a firm isn't only about its billables – take time to research the firm's culture and initiatives and pinpoint those areas that stand out to you (e.g., pro bono program, sustainability initiative, active affinity groups, etc.). Thoroughly research the firm, and make sure to link your experiences and aspirations to the firm's work and culture.

Can you describe a challenge or conflict you have faced at work and how you overcame it?

Don't worry – behavioral interview questions like this are not traps to disqualify you from the position. Instead, this type of question is an opportunity for you to display how you handle conflict with real experiences from your life. It's critical that legal jobseekers prepare for behavioral interview questions, as they are becoming even more common in law firm interviews (especially as firms work to target implicit bias in hiring).

When responding to behavioral interview questions, a great way to outline your answer is to use the STAR method. STAR stands for situation, task, action, result. Your response will include one to three sentences about each STAR component. Keep the answer short and brief and spare the interviewer from hearing unnecessary details that will make you appear like you are venting.

With regard to this specific question – conflict in the workplace – remember to stick with professional issues. Discussing petty matters or social situations can make you appear immature and unprofessional.

This question may feel daunting if you have not faced this situation or can't think of an example to share. Preparing in advance will go a long way with behavioral interview questions. Giving yourself time to think will likely unearth valuable past experiences that otherwise would've been difficult to remember on the fly.

What is your biggest weakness?

This is another question that feels like a trap. But it does not have to feel that way if you have an answer ready. For starters, don't pick a weakness that is actually a disguised strength, such as "I am a perfectionist." Prepare in advance by identifying a weakness and ways that you are working to improve. Also, don't discuss a weakness that is a specific skill mentioned in the job description or that would be truly detrimental to your job performance (e.g., if you want to be a litigator, don't pinpoint poor writing skills as your weakness). Instead, focus on a skill that you can grow and develop to become an even stronger lawyer. Some examples to consider include not being assertive enough, having trouble saying "no," and focusing too much on the details.

Do you have any questions for us?

Always have at least three questions to ask at the end of the interview. Even though it is tempting to say you don't, asking questions will show the interviewer that you are serious about this interview and that you have done your research. As I mentioned above, doing in-depth research on the firm is one way to stand out in your interview, and there is no better way to show off your research than through your own questions about the firm. Avoid questions that can easily be answered via a quick website search (e.g., how many practice areas a firm has, where the firm is located, etc.). It is also useful to ask the interviewer about their experiences working at the firm and the types of work you would handle as an associate. Below are a few questions to get you started:

1. What drew you to work for this law firm?
2. What is the most important indicator of success in this role?
3. What types of work does an associate do in this practice area?
4. How do performance evaluations work at the firm?
5. What has been the most useful training you've received at the firm, and why?
6. Are you involved in any firm committees or affinity groups?

Remember the best way to handle any type of question is to prepare in advance by doing your research and practicing for the interview. Ask a friend to do a mock interview with you, or if you're a current law student, reach out to your school to see if there are mock interview opportunities. You've got this! ■

This article originally appeared at jobs.acba.org/career-advice.