

Surviving the killer questions

Interviews are getting tougher, but practice can help, says Catherine Quinn

As the employment market grows more competitive, interviewers are resorting to extreme methods of selection. These include using a new breed of "KQs" or killer questions, designed to distort new applicants.

How would you respond if asked at an interview "Tell me something about yourself you've never told anyone"? A survey by the recruitment agency Office Angels reveals that 90 per cent of employers pose a killer question at interviews. The figure has risen by 11 per cent from 1999, indicating an emphasis on the ability of candidates to think on their feet.

The type of question has also advanced. Questions revealed in the survey included "Which three famous people would you invite to a dinner party?" and "Laffo Coby... either or biscuit?"

Richard Hill, a branch manager for Tredwell Marketing in Brighton, recruits all kinds of staff from secretaries to sales executives. "Whatever position someone is applying for, it is important that they display analytical skills and evidence that they will fit in with the company. Currently I ask 'What was the last thing you bought, and why?' although I may change this. All of our staff may be called to think on their feet, and our interviews reflect this."

Unfortunately, for some interviewees, intimidating questions can tip



Right on target: more and more interview questions test the ability of candidates to think on their feet.

them over the edge. Anoushka Riley is a secretary in South London. She recalls one of her first interviews. "The guy said: 'We have employed people from your university and they haven't been good. Can you tell us why you think you'll do better?' I couldn't think of anything clever and then just froze. I think if you'd have asked me my name I couldn't have answered. Needless to say, I didn't get the job."

However, they might not be as much of a feat as she thinks. Interview

experts see this "rabbit in the headlights" reaction as the result of a bad interviewer. David Lawton is a business psychologist for Interactive Skills, a company that works alongside interviewers to train them. He has spent 14 years teaching interviewers methods to select the right candidate.

"We advocate a past experience approach, and the statistics bear us out," Lawton says. "Once a candidate has done a few interviews it becomes easy to tell the interviewer what they want

to hear. Asking questions such as 'Are you a team player?' tests the candidate's ability to sound personable."

For interviewees, too, fortunate enough to encounter this technique, it is worth remembering the employer's intention. Paul Jacobs, the UK operations director at Office Angels, advises candidates to remain calm.

"Employers are not trying to catch people out with KQs. There are no right or wrong responses, just appropriate ones. Answering the KQs in the

most confident way could mean the difference between getting the job, or missing it completely."

Lawton, on the other hand, dismisses the use of killer questions entirely. "I think it's a complete nonsense," he says. "It flies in the face of a lot of basic psychology but if you're trying to recruit people for a particular job..."

"These difficult questions... 'Who do you want this job?' What are your strengths and weaknesses?'... are hypothetical. Our argument is that if you ask hypothetical questions you get hypothetical answers."

But the fact remains that the majority of interviewers seem to ask such questions to see how they react under pressure. So what's the best way to cope? Monster, a recruitment website, advises thinking through your response calmly. "Interviewers won't penalise you for taking a few moments," says a Monster spokeswoman. "In fact, they are more likely to be impressed. You might also like to turn the situation on its head and ask a few killer questions of your own."

In Riley's case, the solution was simple. "Once I'd got over the interview, I knew what to expect. Practice in a number of different situations meant I gained confidence, and finally got a job I really wanted."

Killer questions currently in use:

- How would you not jolly to the colting?
- Which three famous people would you invite to a dinner party and why?
- Who was your favourite Pop 100 artist and why?
- If you were PM, which issues would you tackle?
- Name five members of the cabinet
- Why do you think we've invited you here today?