



Job Seekers: How To Respond To Bizarre Job Interview Questions

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A young man I've mentored since he was in college recently called me. "Chris" is now about five years into his career and had been interviewing at various companies in search of a more challenging job. He had received a strange question during his telephone interview that day and hadn't been sure how to answer it.

"The question was bizarre because it had nothing to do with the job requirements and it kind of blindsided me because I wasn't expecting it," he explained. "I have no idea if I answered it correctly and now I'm worried that my answer might have cost me the job opportunity."

Before telling me the question and his answer, he asked me the question to find out how I would have answered it. The question was: If you were asked to unload an airplane full of jelly beans, how would you do it?

Chris definitely had me laughing with that question. "I'm serious though. How would you have answered the question?" he asked.

My response was: "That depends."

"On what?" he asked.

"On all the variables affecting the situation," I said, smiling into the phone.

"Like what?"

"Well, like timing and quantity - how quickly the jelly beans have to be unloaded and how many there are. The resources available to help me unload the jelly beans. If there are any budget restrictions to unloading them - because different methods would cost different amounts. Whether the jelly beans are in containers or they spilled into the airplane and are loose inside of it. The size of the airplane would also matter - is it a little Cessna or a huge 747?" I answered.

"Oh, good grief," he sighed.

To get Chris to laugh, I purposely started rambling with additional comments: "The location could also matter. Because the method to unload would be different if the plane was in a hot geographic location where the jelly beans might melt. Oh, and if the airplane was located in a country in the middle of a war zone it would require a different approach for unloading than if it was sitting on the tarmac at LAX..." I let my voice trail off.

"Okay. Okay. I think I get your point," he said, finally beginning to laugh. "So you're saying that the recruiter wasn't looking for a perfect answer, he just wanted to see how I'd think through the situation."

Exactly! The good news is that Chris made it through the rest of the interviews and was offered the job. The situation he encountered in his telephone interview isn't uncommon - some recruiters and hiring managers will purposely ask somewhat bizarre questions, just to see how a candidate will respond.

In most cases, there isn't a perfect answer. What they're looking for is your thought process, creativity and problem-solving skills. They want to understand how you would think through a difficult situation.

If you're ever asked a bizarre interview question to which you don't know the answer, try these tips:

First, take a deep breath and think about the question. Ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand what you're being asked.

Remember that, most likely, the person isn't looking for a perfect answer; they're trying to see how you analyze and think through a problem.

Then, share your thought process on how you would arrive at a solution and the variables you would need to consider, e.g. cost, timing, budget, location, resources, etc.

*Lisa Quast, author of the book, **Secrets of a Hiring Manager Turned Career Coach: A Foolproof Guide to Getting the Job You Want. Every Time.***

