

CaPS Tips on

Answering Inappropriate Interview Questions

What are inappropriate interview questions?

Sometimes questions asked on application forms and during interviews are inappropriate in that they are not relevant to the job being filled and may let discriminatory elements creep into the selection process. For example, an applicant's place of birth seldom has anything to do with ability. Height and weight requirements are often not accurate measures of physical strength and may act to screen out women or some racial groups who tend to be smaller in stature. Other examples include marital and family status, race and religion.

However, a particular skill or qualification can be specified if it is based on a bona fide occupational requirement. For example, a job that requires a certain level of hearing ability in order to be done safely may require that a person with a functionally limiting hearing disability could not be hired for that job.

How should inappropriate interview questions be answered?

Sometimes interviewers ask questions which can be interpreted as discriminatory. Sometimes their intent is to discriminate, while at other times it is to satisfy a curiosity or simply to find out more about you. It is best to consider in advance how you would respond if faced with a question that is inappropriate. There are a number of options available for you to consider. An example on the back of this sheet demonstrates each of these options.

When thinking about your answer, keep in mind that the first inappropriate question you encounter in an interview may simply be a slip up on the part of an inexperienced interviewer and is not intended to discriminate. Additionally, the attitude of the interviewer may not be an indication of the pervasive attitude of the company. The best thing to do when you encounter an inappropriate question is to direct the conversation towards a discussion of your skills and abilities as they relate to the position.

Sample Question: "When were you born?"

Option

Sample Answer

Refuse to respond.

I'd prefer not to answer that question as it has nothing to do with my ability to do the job.

- Refusing to answer a question may be risky as the employer may perceive you as resistant, secretive or a troublemaker.

Inquire about how the question relates to the job.

I'm not sure why you are asking that question. My age won't affect my ability to do a great job.

- By phrasing your response in an open manner, the interviewer will then have the opportunity to explain the reason for the question, if there is one.

Answer the question and address the underlying issue.

I imagine your question stems from a concern that I may be young for this kind of work. In many ways, my age will be of benefit to you. My education is very recent so I am up to date on the latest in the industry. I am energetic and eager to do well. Plus, I have experience and many related skills.

- This answer will satisfy an interviewer who has a concern about your ability to perform the job but who may not realize that they have asked an inappropriate question.

Simply answer the question.

I was born in September 1979.

- If you choose to answer in this manner, it may be helpful to add information that you believe the employer is seeking; for example, "I am a mature 22 year old and I have considerable skills and experience. My education is very recent so I am up to date on the latest in the industry." This type of answer acknowledges the facts and presents them as an advantage, not a disadvantage.

In some cases, you may feel the need to assure the interviewer that you do not fit a stereotype based on some obvious character trait, even if it does not come up in the interview in the form of an inappropriate question. Whether you choose to use one of the options for answering inappropriate interview questions or choose to broach a sensitive subject yourself, diplomacy and a professional manner are most likely to lead to favorable outcomes.

Your Future is in Your Hands!