

WHY DO EMPLOYERS ASK WEIRD, WACKY, IRRELEVANT JOB PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS?



When a candidate walks into the interview room fully prepared and geared to answer whatever is thrown at him and willing to go through the most grilling interrogation, he is certain to be flummoxed if the interviewer asks him a question like, "If you were a box of cereal, what would you be?" Glassdoor.com, a website on which candidates talk about their interviewing experiences without having to disclose their names or identities, confirmed that was a real question that Wegmans posed to a job applicant Irrespective of what the candidate answers, he may think of himself as a chocolate flavored cereal or "Krispies," or any of the hundreds of varieties that flood the market. Can it be used as a yardstick to gauge a candidate's quality and competence? Certainly not? But such questions are cropping up with unfailing regularity and there are some employment experts who feel that they serve a purpose. They argue that employers receive hundreds of resumes and staid commonplace interviews, with routine question and answers often make it very hard for the interviewers to differentiate between the worthy and the not so worthy and make it difficult for them to separate the wheat from the chaff. Such curveball questions that are unexpected and startling and designed to trick or deceive can be a way to find candidates who stand out and can think on their feet. However more often than not, many use it to have some fun at the candidate's expense to lighten up the atmosphere of a boring and mundane interview. Employers are inundated with resumes, and off-the-wall questions can be a way to find candidates who stand out and can think on their feet, employment experts say. Some employers, experts say, actually believe a quirky question will uncover a candidate's personality, or at least liven up a boring interview — albeit at the applicant's expense The candidates given the current market scenario are helpless and have to take such imprudence in their stride. There are multiple applicants for the same job and they are hard to come by and opposing the interviewer's foibles would not be very prudent, they feel. Howard Leifman, a career coach and senior consultant with New York-based BPI Group said that "It is truly a buyer's market. The companies are so much in control right now. Candidates are becoming more desperate. They're worried about the job market, there are so few jobs available, you will put up with people's idiosyncrasies." Reader's responses via Twitter to the most bizarre interview questions they received elicited some very quirky questions, that including stating preference, "Ravens or Redskins?" or what your astrological sign was and if Hollywood made a movie about your life, whom would you like to see play the lead role as you? If asked to contribute to an office potluck, what food would you bring along? And on the lines of the cereal question, if you were a fruit, which one would, you be? However, the last question can have interesting answers and answers could vary from being a grape, because they grow in clusters and I am team player, to being an apple, as my skills are highly polished and a banana because my last employer said that I have a peel. Similarly if you are asked what animal you'd most like to be or resemble, don't get stumped say, "I would be a leopard and I would be sleek and fast. I would also be able to climb trees and get a bird's eye view of the whole jungle and sat abreast of what's happening there. Glassdoor.com annually lists the most bizarre and oddball questions asked. Those that made the list last year include such inexplicable questions as, "Does life fascinate you?" "Are you exhaling warm air?" "How do you feel about those jokers in Congress?" and one of the most inane questions, *If you were shrunk to the size of a pencil and put in a blender, how would you get out?* Companies that hire the most are also prone to asking the most ridiculous questions. Microsoft and Google are known to be amongst the worst offenders. Interviewers selecting candidates for Microsoft have asked "How many ping pong balls can fit into a warehouse?" Debbie Shalom, owner of Amazing Resumes & Coaching Services in Baltimore County in an effort to find reasons for such quirky questions says that the software company is in all probability attempting to estimate an applicant's "critical thinking" skills. Sometimes these questions can have a very good reason behind them," Shalom says. "Usually, there is a psychological reason behind them." However when Shalom, who frequently visits job interviews to see what candidates are up against, was asked what fruit she most resembled, she after giving it a long thought, agreed that it was "a stupid question." Joe Gonzales, regional manager for Robert Half International in Baltimore, said that candidates come so well prepared that the interviewers want to catch them unawares and gauge them on what they are not prepared for. "People like to change it up ... and see how someone comes back from the question," he says. When Gonzales was asked what fruit he thought he was, unlike Shalom who was rendered answerless, he said he would be an orange, because as he put it, "It's universally respected and good for people." Comila Shahani-Denning, an associate professor of psychology at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y., said that such questions are never good indicators of job performance and interviewers should not waste the limited time they have with the candidates in asking such meaningless questions. Behavior-based interviewing, the more conventional and proven method and one that many large employers use, which is designed to probe past behavior as an indicator of future job performance, is a better method, according to Shahani-Denning. Would it not be better for an employer, seeking to hire someone for a team, to find out if the candidate is suited to working with others and instead of asking him what cereal or fruit he'd like to be to ask him instead, about the last time he collaborated on a project. His answer could be followed up with questions regarding the challenges he faced and how he surmounted them. Shahani-Denning advises job seekers that if you are confronted with such questions, politely ask the interviewer how this concerns the job that you are interested in to help you better respond to it. It will help steer the interview back to business and also create the impression that you are a serious and not lighthearted contender. Steve Langerud, director of professional opportunities at DePauw University in Indiana, says many interviewers who ask frivolous and weird questions ask them because they are untutored in the finer nuances of interviewing and are new to the field. It reflects their amateurish and unprofessional behavior. "They aren't quite sure what to ask or how to focus the interview," he says. Shayla Harding, human resource manager for Wegmans in Maryland, when asked about the question, that triggered this article, "If you were a box of cereal, what would you be?" doubted the helpfulness of such a question and said that was not the norm at the company and that question was an aberration. She said that we typically ask questions that attempt to evaluate a candidate's competence and capabilities in customer service, whether they are team men and would they be able to fit in a work environment of people with diverse interests, culture and capabilities. As an example she cited that we'd much rather ask, candidates to describe what they consider an "incredible customer service" or "about the pros and cons of working with someone unlike them." There have been many occasions, and employers would be advised to keep it in mind that bizarre and absurd questions have put off candidates and they have abdicated the companies and opted for jobs elsewhere, unhappy of the frivolous and cavalier atmosphere at the company. They feel that if this is how they are treating you before you have joined; imagine what is in store for you once you join. More often than not, such employees are the better ones who are talented, assured and confident of their ability to land another job, if they opt out of this one. An applicant posted on Glassdoor.com, that he had second thoughts about joining a company that was excessively impressed with an answer to an irregular hamburger question. The applicant eventually decided to leave the company. "My advice to my candidates is to try to be prepared as possible," says career coach Leifman. "If you get a crazy question, don't allow it to unnerve you. The question might be asked to see how you handle stressful situations." Sadly however, the market scenario being what it is, not many candidates have the luxury of rejecting a job offer and telling them to take their jobs and shove it. It will bide them well to include answers to bizarre questions in their list of preparations. So know which cereal you are, what fruit you'd want to be and which part of the hamburger you'd like to be? Don't say the 'meat', because you could find yourself on the chopping block.