

Awkward Interview Questions: Owning Up to Your Current Salary

By Deb Perelman

Experts weigh in on how to prevent your current salary from becoming an issue when you are trying to land a new job. The toughest interview question isn't "Tell me about yourself." It's not "Why do you want to work here?" "What don't you like about your current job?" or even "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?"

These questions are close runners up, but most experts argue that the toughest interview question is, "What is your current salary?" This is true for a simple reason: If you answer the question honestly, you may not get the salary you want, and if you answer it dishonestly, you may not get the job you want.

Joyce Maroney, director of the Workforce Institute at Kronos, says that hiring managers have a budgeted number in mind for each position, and want to understand if the job seeker is in the desired range.

"If the job seeker volunteers a number that's outside of the range on either side, the hiring manager is going to have second thoughts. Too low, and the job seeker looks insufficiently experienced; too high and the hiring manager decides he or she can't afford the candidate," said Maroney.

So what is a job-seeker between a rock and a hard place supposed to do? eWEEK has culled responses from several employment experts on how they think the question is best answered. The answers fall largely within two categories: dodge the question for as long as you can, and don't you dare dodge the question, as it will hurt your prospects. A discrepancy which suggests that potential employers are as torn about this question as the job seeker—as if that is any consolation.

Arguments for Dodging the Question

Penelope Trunk, the work/life columnist behind Brazen Careerist, sees the salary question as more of a challenge, to which the right answer "is always some version of 'I'm not telling you.'" Trunk encourages readers to explain that the position is not exactly the same as their last job, and that they'd rather discuss what responsibilities would be at the new job, and determine a fair salary from there.

"The interviewer is just trying to get a leg up on you in negotiations. If you give in, you look like a poor negotiator, and the interviewer is probably not looking for someone like that," writes Trunk.

Karen Burns, another workplace blogger, suggests seven different answers to what she calls the hardest interview question of all.

"Everyone says never to be the first to name a number in any negotiation, salary or otherwise, but few people tell you how to handle this stickiest of sticky wickets," writes Burns, while suggesting responses ranging from "I believe my current salary isn't related to my future salary" to "My current employer prohibits disclosure of salary information."

Reasons to Tell the Truth

Jamie Parker, president of Adecco, a recruiting firm, reminds job seekers to include all of their extras in their salary, so the interviewer gets an honest picture.

“Be sure to include the value of any bonuses or incentives you’ve received on top of your salary and if it’s sizable, share information around the amount, frequency and percentage of your recent salary increases. Also, if you’ve got a raise coming up, tell the interviewer, as this will alert them that you will be expecting them to surpass your next bump in compensation.”

Lee Salz, president of Sales Dodo, a consulting firm, warns that job seekers who lie about their current salary are usually found out, and don’t get the job.

“Most companies perform background checks as part of their due diligence when hiring. When they call your employer, salary information is shared. Many candidates have had their offers rescinded due to embellishing their income,” said Salz.

Chuck Pappalardo, principal and managing director at Trilogy Search, an executive recruiting firm, says that fudging or even fidgeting over your current salary level does more than damage your job prospects, it damages your integrity.

“If someone asks you what your current salary is, it’s a direct question and there no way to answer it but with a direct response. If you’re stumbling around—‘It’s not what I make, it’s what I do,’ for example—you’re not painting a good picture for yourself,” said Pappalardo.

Questions like this are often not just to gauge budget, but the character of the interviewee.

“We try to screen character. They will pay you at the top of the range if you’re a great employee with great references. It’s hard to find great employees. I cannot overstate the importance of not lying to a potential employer,” said Pappalardo.

It’s Not the End of the Conversation

Maroney also reminds job seekers that a number too high might not hurt their chances, anyhow—so long as they can convince the hiring manager that they’re worth it.

“Stay focused on the value you bring to the job vis a vis the market value of the job. Irrespective of the money budgeted for the position, hiring managers are highly motivated to make the money side of the situation work when the candidate is outstanding,” said Maroney.



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