

DEALING WITH DISCRIMINATORY QUESTIONS IN INTERVIEWS*

The Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication

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Abstract

This handout illustrates problematic questions that may come up in an interview and suggests ways of dealing with them.

1 Discriminatory Questions

You may encounter interviewers who have not been properly trained in fair hiring practices or who want information not relevant to the position. The following questions may violate state or federal nondiscrimination guidelines. You will want to think in advance about how you can respond to them.

- Have you changed your name? What was your original name? (“What was your maiden name?” is an acceptable inquiry.)
- Where were you (or your parents) born?
- What church do you belong to? Who is your pastor or priest?
- What race (or ethnic group) do you belong to?
- What is your birth date? (Unless this information is needed to maintain apprenticeship requirements, satisfy legal minimum-age requirements for such things as state laws on the operation of certain kinds of equipment, or prevent interference with benefit programs)
- What is your native language? What language do you commonly use when you are at home?
- What is your marital status? How many dependents do you have?
- What does your spouse do?
- Do you own your own home?
- Have you ever been arrested? (“Have you been convicted of a felony” is an acceptable inquiry.)
- What is your military status?
- What is your height and weight? Do you have a handicap? (unless there is a bona fide job-related reason for possessing particular physical abilities associated with a particular job)
- What political party do you belong to?
- What kind of child-care arrangements have you made?
- Do you plan to have children? Do you intend to start a family in the next five years?

Sometimes you can avoid answering directly, but it’s a good idea to practice an answer that will emphasize your own high ethical standards to the employer. For example, If your date of birth is asked for, you can

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inquire why the information is needed. If the interviewer persists with the question, give the month but not the year: "Oh, I was a July baby." You can also gently guide the interviewer onto safe ground by signaling that the question is discriminatory: "Mr./Ms. Smith, I know that SYC corporation is trying to find the most valuable employee for this position, but if I answered this question, it would foster discrimination. What other information could I supply?"