

Winning Answers to 500 Interview Questions

By Lavie Margolin

(A book review by R. Max Wideman, FPMI)

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Introduction

The "Interview" in this book's title "*Winning Answers to 500 Interview questions*" by author Lavie Margolin refers, of course, to job interviews. And perhaps you might think that this is not a useful topic for a site dedicated to the art of project management. But then again, a little further thought discloses the fact that projects start and finish. For many that means that employment starts and finishes along with it, leading to the urgent need to find new employment on a new project in the project management field. And, as you have now no doubt guessed where I am heading, this means seeking interviews and the inevitable answering of serious interview questions.

Now there are many books on the market on how to go about finding employment and nailing an interview, but not so many about what actual questions you might encounter and then how best to answer them. Lavie has entered this territory audaciously with his book containing a sweeping array of 500 questions and answers covering a broad range of situations. Interestingly, the foreword to the book written by another party,¹ describes his own first interview as a thorough embarrassment simply because: a) He did no homework; b) he hadn't a clue; and c) he even got caught out on a misrepresentation in his resumé.

Many of us have probably been there in our early careers (or even later, if you have had the luxury of a long period of employment, but now find yourself "on the street"). So, as Lavie explains in his *Editor's Note*:²

"This book is intended to be used as a tool when preparing for an interview. As you read each question; strategy; and sample answer, take a moment to formulate the answer you would give if you were being asked that question. While no one is given a list of questions to prepare for an interview, there are only so many topics interviewers are likely to touch on.

Advanced practice will give you an opportunity to think through your work history to have the points you are most proud of and those that apply to your present job search at the forefront of your memory. It will also help you to research any information about the position you are interviewing for in advance so that you come across as a serious applicant."

It should be remembered that this book is also for employers (who may need help in deciding what questions to ask!) as well as job applicants of all stripes (not just project management types). Consequently, many of the questions may appear to those project-management types as a little awkward or even irrelevant. However, by slight changes in wording, or the insertion of "project" where appropriate, can make the question and answer very relevant. In short, it is the intent and style of the question and answer that is important!

About the author

Lavie Margolin is a New York-based Career Coach. As such he acts as advisor in the role of coach, educator and general helping hand in your job search. He works closely with his clients defining all advice given and citing practical examples for applying methods for increasing job search success. This includes: Resumé/Cover letter writing; Interview preparation; Career advice; Job sourcing strategies; and Employer follow up techniques

Book Structure

The content of this book is set out in four major sections plus a number of other items of interest as follows:

- Foreword
- Editor's Note
- Introduction
- Winning Answers
- 1. Background
- 2. Experience
- 3. Education
- 4. Personality/Motivation
 - Author's End Note
 - Would you be so kind...
 - Special Offer
 - About the Author
 - Stay in Touch

The four sections identified above are the ones presenting typical potential questions to you in an interview, sorted according to the section's title. Every question has a standard structure consisting of the question; the reason why the question is being asked; a suggested response strategy; and followed by a sample answer. There is only one question on each page leaving a lot of empty space on most pages. Consider this as useful space for jotting down notes for your own particular situation.

The book has a total of 520 pages. There is no Glossary of terms, but this is hardly necessary considering the type of content. What is interesting is that Personality/Motivation is by far the largest section with 235 questions, followed far behind by Experience with 115, Background with 85 and Education with only 65. Maybe this distribution is a reflection of the importance of each section.

What we liked

To give you some idea of the content, the following are extracts from several sections.

Under **Background**³

Interviewer's question: "*Tell me about yourself*"

Why this question is being asked: The interviewer would like to know about the professional you and understand your qualifications for the job.

Strategy: Focus on the professional you. The interviewer does not want to know about where you took your last vacation or what your favorite pastime is. Provide an introduction to your relevant experience, education, skills and knowledge that will be

discussed more in-depth over the course of the interview.

Sample answer: I am a Public Accountant with ten years of experience in the field. I recently received my CPA. I've worked for Smithson Auditors in a senior capacity. Prior to that, I worked for Jacob Accounting. Supervisors have described me as a quick learner and a great team player."

[MW] Using this as a template, obviously it would not be too difficult to convert this into a specific project practitioner's situation. But note especially, the response is simple, straightforward and factual.

Under **Personality/Motivation**⁴

Interviewer's question: "***What do you know about our company?***"

Why this question is being asked: To learn if you have done your research into the company because you are especially interested in this position, or if you are just applying for any old job.

Strategy: You don't have to give the company history dating back to 1925, but do show an understanding of the core business, how the company operates and, if possible, what you know about the specific department you are interviewing for.

Sample answer: I have been following your company closely for the last several years. Your company became an innovator in the industry by adapting the use of cutting edge fulfillment technologies . . ."

Under **Experience**⁵

Interviewer's question: "***Why was there a gap in your employment between [date] and [date]?***"

Why this question is being asked: The interviewer wants to get a sense of your work ethic and is concerned about the gap in employment. He/she wants to know if you were let go and why.

Strategy: Even if the reason leading to an employment gap was not your decision, frame the answer in a positive sense. Explain what mistakes you may have learned from and how it will make you a better worker in the future.

Sample answer: Unfortunately, I was let go due to downsizing. I did enjoy my year and a half at the company. It allowed me to learn more about the banking industry and demonstrate my skills. At the beginning, it was a little rough managing my time effectively but I did improve vastly and I look forward to bringing my improved abilities to the next opportunity."

[MW] We are not too sure about this specific answer; we think it could be improved. First of all, the question does not ask what you did either before the "gap", or during it. Besides, there are lots of good reasons why one has a "gap in employment" in the project management industry. For example, besides a downturn in the economy and the difficulty of finding alternative employment, maybe you were let go for "cause". The best response here is that you just didn't fit and were persuaded to "move on". You don't have to go into detail why you didn't like the company, or how they handled your dismissal, painful though this may have been.

More to the point, what did you do during the "gap"? Possibilities are that you went back to school, offered your services on the market as a consultant, or simply spent full time on your job search. Whatever you do, do not mention that you are looking for a less demanding job so that you can spend more time skiing or sailing or whatever. That will not impress an interviewer!⁶

Hopefully, these examples give you a good idea of this book's content. Bear in mind that the Q & A's are all very generic and relate to corporate management in general. Obviously it is not possible to cover all of the potential questions that are specific to the management of the technology development involved in projects.

This book is well written in a clear and simple style. No supporting graphics or illustrations are necessary. The content is light and easy reading.

Downside

Contrary to the suggestion to read this book from cover to cover⁷, the necessary consistent framework of each Q & A can become very tedious reading. We suggest a more dynamic approach whereby you prioritize your areas of interest and focus on them.

Another strategy that we suggest is that you prepare a list of questions yourself that you want to ask of the company. What are their policies regarding mentoring and training for example? What is the size of the [department, division or whole company], and hence the chances of promotion? You might even daringly ask the interviewer: What is the rate of turnover in the department of interest? (That should put the interviewer on the spot!)

The effect is to take over the conversation and save the interviewer the trouble of thinking up relevant questions. At the same time, you demonstrate that you have done your homework and now show your potential for becoming an enthusiastic employee and a potential leader.

Oh yes, there is one question in the book about project work. It asks:

"What do you do when you are faced with an obstacle to completing an important project?"

Why this question is being asked: As every job has various obstacles to overcome, the interviewer wants to understand your process for dealing with them.

Strategy: Provide a clear example of the type of obstacle you have encountered, what you did to manage it and the end result.

Sample answer: (As a project manager this question is made for you!)

Come to think of it, considering how many organizations are moving to project-style management in this fast-paced world, it is surprising that there are not more examples of this type in the book.

Summary

As the book explains (paraphrased):⁸

"Have you ever left an interview thinking you could have done better? If you are getting interviews but not the job offer, you have to improve your interview capability.

Interviewing is a high stakes game for both the interviewer and the interviewee. So you

need to learn how to play the game, and play to win.

Therefore, prepare yourself to answer any interview question with a response that makes it clear why the company should hire you. *Winning Answers for 500 Interview Questions* will teach you how to become a more confident interviewee. Not only will you understand why such questions are being asked, but you will also have prepared a set of competent answers."

Of course, when it comes to questions about your expertise in the technology involved, it is up to you to do the necessary research and prepare your answers carefully, accurately and succinctly. By the way, there is no shame in taking in a small notebook with your question-answers and the questions that you want to ask. This tactic will demonstrate that you are also well organized.

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¹ Jacob Share, Job Search Expert, <https://jobmob.co.il/> (Copy and paste this link into your web browser if it does not work.)

² Margolin, Lavie, *Winning Answers to 500 Interview Questions*, self-published, www.lioncub-jobsearch.com, 2014, p7

³ Ibid, p12

⁴ Ibid, p280

⁵ Ibid, p98

⁶ Believe it or not, I have had interviewees who have come to me doing just that!

⁷ Ibid, p5

⁸ Ibid, back cover