



Interviews: Inappropriate Questions

Handling innocent/ignorant/illegal interview questions.

When small talk is not small talk.

Interview questions serve one purpose: To help employers better determine how well a match you are for the company. However, this does not mean employers have an open license to inquire freely about anything they choose.

Why? Because certain interview questions are prohibited by Federal, state, and local laws as discriminatory. Your answers might either be used against you by unscrupulous employers in the hiring process, or even put the employer at risk of public lawsuits if you are not hired.

Instead, interview questions must be asked in a manner relevant to the specific job position, and for the sole purpose of assessing your skills and ability to perform the specific task or job functions.

Even the seemingly innocuous “How was your holiday? Did you celebrate [Christmas][Hanukkah] [Ramadan]?” may be a no-no.

Say wha-a-a-at?!

Basically, illegal questions are those that attempt to gather personal information about a candidate’s age, race, religion, ancestry, citizenship, gender, height, weight, marital/family status, sexual orientation, disabilities, medical history, affiliations, beliefs, arrest record, and military obligations.

So how do you handle illegal questions during an interview? Bear in mind that while some employers knowingly ask inappropriate or insensitive questions, many others are simply untrained and ask out of sheer ignorance or innocent curiosity.

Which creates a dilemma: Do you risk offending the person asking and jeopardize your chances of being hired, or do you answer the question and risk facing more improper questioning? After all, your objective for meeting is to directly convince the employer that you are the ideal candidate.

As with many life situations, exercise judgment. Familiarize yourself with illegal questions so you can be prepared. And determine the INTENT behind the question so that you can respond appropriately.

To plead or not to plead the Fifth.

Here are some options to consider when faced with illegal questions:

1. answer the question if you feel comfortable, knowing it’s inappropriate, and hope for the best. Or inquire why they ask, then decide;
2. try to change the topic to avoid answering;
3. determine the “intent” behind the question and tactfully address that. This skill avoids embarrassing the interviewer and provides relevant information without compromising your privacy;
4. refuse to answer and risk being considered confrontational. If you believe the offense is intentional, ask yourself if you wouldn’t prefer to work elsewhere. And, you can always leave.

Examples of illegal questions (and sample responses).

Q: “How old are you?”

A: I am over the age of 18.

Q: “Are you a U.S. Citizen?”

A: I am eligible to work in this country.

Q: “Do you have a girl/boy friend?”

A: I am a dedicated worker and keep my personal life separate from my job performance.

Q: “Do you have any disabilities?”

A: I understand you may be concerned, but I’m sure I can perform the job requirements.

Q: “Do you have trouble working with older workers?”

A: My abilities enable me to work with a diversity of people.

Q: “What kind of car do you have?”

A: I drive a very reliable vehicle that gets me safely to and from work without a problem.

Remember, it’s not always necessary to share.



i n a nutshell:

Be prepared for curve balls. They are not all meant to strike you out. Keep your focus on the job requirements:

- **Think, determine the intent of the question, then reply**
- **Be alert for patterns of improper questions**
- **Use tact; if possible, avoid being confrontational**
- **Ask the interviewer to rephrase the question**
- **Answer the question politely with an alternative question**
- **Say you’re not comfortable answering the question**
- **Use humor to diffuse**

Remember, you can always refuse the job once it’s offered.