

What Can an Employer NOT Ask You in an Interview?

From the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission website: Ireland's equality laws outlaw discrimination on nine characteristics: gender, civil status, family status, sexual orientation, disability, religion, age, race, and membership of the Traveller community. All of these grounds are protected from discrimination in employment.

Whilst interviewers can ask a job candidate questions about themselves and their history, making hiring decisions based on these "protected characteristics" is certainly not permitted. Inappropriate lines of enquiry can suggest that the employer intends to discriminate, opening up the possibility of legal challenge, and are therefore generally avoided by well-trained interviewers. But not all interviewers are well-trained, and sometimes these questions get asked anyway; so candidates need to anticipate inappropriate questions, and to think about how they might reply.

1 Gender

Questions that are based on gender characteristics or stereotypes, such as 'Would you be able to handle working in an all-male team?' or 'Isn't this an unusual job for a man?' could well come into this category. The question is best answered, as is any other question about suitability, by giving examples from your past.



2 Civil Status

In the past, women have been far more likely to be asked about their personal relationships than men, and this sometimes still happens. References to marriage tend to be prompted by concerns about future stability; an answer such as 'I've no plans to make big changes in my life, if that's what you mean' is one way to side-step the issue.

3 Family Status

An interviewer who refers to a candidate's status as a parent or potential parent is making unfounded assumptions about that person's ability to do the job. Often, being a parent is seen as positive for a man (because he will behave more responsibly) but negative for a woman (because it's assumed that she will be the main carer). 'I'm confident that I can apply myself full-time to this role' is a positive answer.

4 Sexual Orientation

What bearing could a candidate's sexual orientation possibly have on their ability to perform well in a job? If the vacancy were in a LGBT counselling service, perhaps; but otherwise a question on this topic should send out real warning signals about the kind of workplace you are applying for, regardless of your own orientation.

5 Disability

The interviewer's questions should be aimed at ensuring that you can carry out essential tasks within the advertised role, and if you have a disability they can (and should) ask what would need to be done to adapt the workplace to meet your requirements. Questions about your medical history are generally off-limits, though. "I am confident that I will be able to handle the requirements of this position" is a good answer to questions touching on your physical abilities.



6 Religion

There are so many indirect ways of bringing up the question of religion – "Where did you go to school?" is an obvious example. But the interviewer may simply be trying, in a clumsy way, to discover if your religious affiliation will affect your work schedule. If the answer "I can work any day of the week" doesn't end this line of questioning, you may decide to challenge the interviewer directly. (Of course, there are jobs for which religion is a genuine requirement.)

7 Age

This is another issue which may be approached indirectly by the interviewer. It's a good idea to answer on the assumption that the question is about your experience or plans rather than your age. "I have worked in this industry for six years" or "I have no intention of retiring within the next five years" are examples of responses which would give the interviewer the information they seek, if their intention is not to discriminate.

8 Race

There are many ways in which inappropriate questioning can occur – sometimes in the guise of friendly conversation: "How long have you lived in this country?", "Is English your first language?" and so on. If it's impossible to deflect the enquiry in an equally friendly way, "This question does not relate to my ability to do the job" is a perfectly reasonable response.

9 Membership of the Traveller Community

Questions about where the candidate lives, or their current family circumstances, may all relate to their status as Travellers. Again, as a candidate, you should bring the discussion back to the requirements of the job and affirm your ability to perform it well, using your history as evidence wherever possible.



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