Project manager interview questions: 5 key areas to prep for

To land that project management gig, be prepared to talk about what you've done, where you're going, and how you think.

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Contributing writer, CIO Magazine, Mar 8, 2022 Source: https://www.cio.com/article/305891/project-manager-interview-questions-5-key-areas-to-prep-for.html

Good news: You've landed an interview for a project manager job. Maybe it's the first step in a new career, or maybe you're a seasoned PM looking for greener pastures. Either way, you've gotten your resume through the hoops and now have a chance to talk to real people about your qualifications for this job.

Interviews can be a little nerve wracking, so having a sense in advance of what you will be asked about is essential to making a good impression. We spoke to a range of career specialists and coaches, along with folks who've supervised and hired project managers, to get insights into the sorts of questions you can expect at a PM job interview — and how you should prepare to answer them.

1. What do you know?

They won't be the meatiest questions, but you will be asked to demonstrate baseline knowledge about project management and the field of specialty you'd be working in if hired. "If you are in the IT space, you should be prepared to answer questions about software you are familiar with for project management," says Sara Hutchison, an executive resume writer with a background in working with IT professionals and a CompTIA Project+ certification.

Even when faced with basic factual questions, you should look to show some analytical flair. For instance, says Hutchison, when asked about project management software, "if you know multiple software packages, can you talk about the pros and cons of each? You should also be ready to talk about how you remain abreast of the latest technology in these areas."

That said, this isn't a pop quiz that you need to score 100 on; how you deal with a question that throws you can be revealing about your character and capabilities. Cynthia Davis, co-founder of recruitment platform Diversifying.io, says that one thing she would look for in an interview would be if a candidate is "open enough to say, 'I don't know, but here is how I can develop that.'"

2. What do you know about the company where you're applying?

When it comes to your potential new employer, Davis says you should be as up to speed as possible. "In an interview, the candidate would have to show that they have understood the role they are applying for and have taken the time to research the company and demonstrate this is the right role for them," she says.

Remember, though, that an interview is a two-way street, and an opportunity for you to ask questions as well. While you should know as much as you can about the company and the position you're applying

for, you'll only be able to learn some of the details — and how exactly you might fit the bill — by asking about them during the interview; doing so shows you're serious about the job.

"It's important to uncover the why behind the position," says Tushar Gadhia, practice director of consulting at Synoptek. "This will help you determine the proper mindset for the particular job. Do you need to come in as a change agent and undo things that the predecessor set into motion or couldn't achieve? On the other hand, if things weren't problematic, the company may be hiring a PM to come into the fold and get in tune with the processes they already have in place. Understanding exactly what the company needs from a PM is critical to ensure you are the right person for the position and know what will be expected of you."

3. What's your process?

Assuming you've made your way through the filters to get an interview, your potential employers are probably comfortable that you know that basic facts — the what — that you'll need to do the job. What they're going to want to hear you talk about is the how: your process as a manager to help teams shepherd projects to completion, and the mindset behind it.

For instance, how you approach tradeoffs is a key part of your work philosophy. Tim Bailey, vice president of global consulting at Deltek, would ask candidates, "When managing a project, how do you determine which of the triple constraints — scope, schedule, cost — is most important?"

You should be prepared to answer questions about your leadership style as well. Because you'll be in charge of a team, this will be one of the most crucial portions of the interview. Dave Garrett, chief strategy and growth officer at the Project Management Institute (PMI), gives an example of the sorts of things a hiring manager will want to know:

"How do you lead and influence people without authority? Because projects are often cross-functional, your team members have another 'boss,' and your project is not always top priority for other stakeholders."

"Are you a quick study? Because projects can be on any topic and you can be more effective if you can quickly learn about the subject and understand what is important."

"How do you decide which approach to use? Because project teams can apply many approaches: predictive, agile, design thinking, and more, depending on the challenges they face."

You may also be given a chance to talk about how you approach the job of a PM in a meta sense. Debra Wheatman, president of Careers Done Write, says such questions might be framed this way: "Have you improved the project management processes at your company? What did you recommend or implement? What were the results?"

David Ciccarelli, tech entrepreneur and CEO of Voices, gets a little more cerebral when he interviews PM candidates. "I try to understand the candidates through process or get a sense of their mental models that they rely on to make faster, smarter decisions," he says. "A question might be, 'Are there any mental frameworks you use to accelerate your decision-making process?' Mental models are simply frameworks that identify patterns and help a person resolve a difficult situation in a predictable manner.

Knowing that a candidate has a toolkit is a sign that they will get up to speed quickly and start making a positive impact."

4. What have you done?

It can be hard to predict what sorts of questions you'll get in a PM interview. But there's one that's almost guaranteed: "Tell me about a recent project."

This one is "a natural ice-breaker question," says Alan Zucker, founding principal at Project Management Essentials. "Be prepared to describe the project, your role, things that went well, and challenges encountered. Your initial response should be less than two minutes. Practice. Stay focused and high-level."

And be ready to be specific on this one. "Project managers need to be prepared to answer questions that center on real experiences and challenges and how they overcame them," says PMI's Garrett. "Avoid hypothetical answers that do not prove how you reacted to and managed your circumstances."

Part of the specifics you deliver should be honestly about when things went less than perfectly. You might get specific questions about this: "Tell me about a time when you felt overwhelmed by your workload" and "Can you describe a situation in which you missed a deadline?" are two examples offered by Mandy Bennett, director of creative development at Scorpion. You should use questions such as these as an opportunity to talk about how you have overcome adversity.

"A PM that feels in an interview or appraisal that every project or assignment they have ever worked on has gone perfectly 100% of the time could be a red flag," says Hutchison. "Not only is this highly unlikely, but it also doesn't allow the hiring manager to understand how you learn from past experiences, resolve issues, and expand on what was done to prevent them from happening again. Use these past examples as opportunities for you to explain how you took criticism, took ownership of an issue, and documented the appropriate actions."

5. What can you tell us about you?

In the end, keep one thing in mind about a job interview: It's the only chance you and your potential employers get to assess one another as people. Don't get too personal, but don't feel like you have to spend the entire time in the realm of numbers and software proficiency, either: Interviewers will want to know how your personality will mesh with the rest of the team. "The key is to show that you are genuine," says Maziar Adl, CTO of Gocious. "You want to be able to articulate your accomplishments, not just by rattling off a series of data points and facts, but rather show how these items helped the business grow. Explain how you worked with your team and across the organization to accomplish these metrics."

"Employers want people who care, who have character, integrity, and are a good fit with the company culture," adds Deltek's Bailey. "We like to see how candidates align with our core values. A couple of good questions to be prepared for would be, 'What is important to you outside of work?' and 'What do you value?'"

As we've already said, an interview is a conversation that goes both ways, and this is your chance to pose similar questions to your interviewer as well. "As we're seeing more and more in the 'Great Resignation,' one of the big reasons people are leaving jobs is because of a toxic culture or boss," says Tracy Podell, partner and executive coach at Evolution, a professional coaching and leadership development company. "You want to ask specific behavioral questions about the team you'll be working with so you can get a better sense if it's a culture fit for you. For instance, you can ask about the company values and for examples of how they play out in company processes. You can ask for an example of how the team handled a recent conflict, and so on."

Ultimately, what you want is an employer who's invested in your career and doesn't just see you as a replaceable cog. "I would ask where the person wants to go and what they expect out of the work," says Lovisa Stenbäcken Stjernlöf, identity and governance lead at Advania Sweden. "I want an idea of what you want to explore further on in your career. I want to see some aspiration."

But to get that respect, you have to earn it, and that means showing respect during the interview process. Diversifying.io's Davis warns of blunders to avoid: "Saying the wrong company name, calling the interviewer by the wrong name, and not answering the questions. Some things are specific to interviews taking place over video. Not looking at the camera makes you seem disinterested — the same with checking your phone or taking a phone call. It gives the appearance that you are not present and focused on the interview." Tripping up this way definitely tells your interviewer something about you — and not something they'll want to hear.