

Problem Finding, Problem Solving, and Creativity: (Publications in Creativity Research)

By Mike Simpson

When candidates prepare for interviews, they usually focus on highlighting their leadership, communication, teamwork, and similar crucial soft skills. However, not everyone gets ready for problem-solving interview questions. And that can be a big mistake.

Problem-solving is relevant to nearly any job on the planet. Yes, it's more prevalent in certain industries, but it's helpful almost everywhere.

Regardless of the role you want to land, you may be asked to provide problem-solving examples or describe how you would deal with specific situations. That's why being ready to showcase your problem-solving skills is so vital.

If you aren't sure who to tackle problem-solving questions, don't worry, we have your back. Come with us as we explore this exciting part of the interview process, as well as some problem-solving interview questions and example answers.

What Is Problem-Solving?

When you're trying to land a position, there's a good chance you'll face some problem-solving interview questions. But what exactly is problem-solving? And why is it so important to hiring managers?

Well, the good folks at Merriam-Webster define problem-solving as "the process or act of finding a solution to a problem." While that may seem like common sense, there's a critical part to that definition that should catch your eye.

What part is that? The word "process."

In the end, problem-solving is an activity. It's your ability to take appropriate steps to find answers, determine how to proceed, or otherwise overcome the challenge.

Being great at it usually means having a range of helpful problem-solving skills and traits. Research, diligence, patience, attention-to-detail, collaboration—they can all play a role. So can analytical thinking, creativity, and open-mindedness.

But why do hiring managers worry about your problem-solving skills? Well, mainly, because every job comes with its fair share of problems.

While problem-solving is relevant to scientific, technical, legal, medical, and a whole slew of other careers. It helps you overcome challenges and deal with the unexpected. It plays a role in troubleshooting and innovation. That's why it matters to hiring managers.

How to Answer Problem-Solving Interview Questions

Okay, before we get to our examples, let's take a quick second to talk about strategy. Knowing how to answer problem-solving interview questions is crucial. Why? Because the hiring manager might ask you something that you don't anticipate.

Problem-solving interview questions are all about seeing how you think. As a result, they can be a bit unconventional.

These aren't your run-of-the-mill job interview questions. Instead, they are tricky behavioral interview questions. After all, the goal is to find out how you approach problem-solving, so most are going to feature scenarios, brainteasers, or something similar.

So, having a great strategy means knowing how to deal with behavioral questions. Luckily, there are a couple of tools that can help.

First, when it comes to the classic approach to behavioral interview questions, look no further than the STAR Method. With the STAR method, you learn how to turn your answers into captivating stories. This makes your responses tons more engaging, ensuring you keep the hiring manager's attention from beginning to end.

Now, should you stop with the STAR Method? Of course not. If you want to take your answers to the next level, spend some time with the Tailoring Method, too.

With the Tailoring Method, it's all about relevance. So, if you get a chance to choose an example that demonstrates your problem-solving skills, this is really the way to go.

We also wanted to let you know that we created an amazing free cheat sheet that will give you word-for-word answers for some of the toughest interview questions you are going to face in your upcoming interview. After all, hiring managers will often ask you more generalized interview questions!

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Top 3 Problem-Solving-Based Interview Questions

Alright, here is what you've been waiting for: the problem-solving questions and sample answers.

While many questions in this category are job-specific, these tend to apply to nearly any job. That means there's a good chance you'll come across them at some point in your career, making them a great starting point when you're practicing for an interview.

So, let's dive in, shall we? Here's a look at the top three problem-solving interview questions and example responses.

1. Can you tell me about a time when you had to solve a challenging problem?

In the land of problem-solving questions, this one might be your best-case scenario. It lets you choose your own problem-solving examples to highlight, putting you in complete control.

When you choose an example, go with one that is relevant to what you'll face in the role. The closer the match, the better the answer is in the eyes of the hiring manager.

EXAMPLE ANSWER:

While working as a mobile telecom support specialist for a large organization, we had to transition our MDM service from one vendor to another within 45 days. This personally physically handling 500 devices within the agency. Devices had to be gathered from the headquarters and satellite offices, which were located all across the state, something that was challenging even without the tight deadline. I approached the situation by identifying the location assignment of all personnel within the organization, enabling me to estimate transit times for receiving the devices. Next, I timed out how many devices I could personally update in a day. Together, this allowed me to create a general

timeline. After that, I coordinated with each location, both expressing the urgency of adhering to deadlines and scheduling bulk shipping options. While there were occasional bouts of resistance, I worked with location leaders to calm concerns and facilitate action. While performing all of the updates was daunting, my approach to organizing the event made it a success. Ultimately, the entire transition was finished five days before the deadline, exceeding the expectations of many.â€•

MIKE'S TIP: When youâ€™re answering this question, quantify the details. This gives your answer critical context and scale, showcasing the degree of challenge and strength of the accomplishment. That way, your answer is powerful, compelling, and, above all, thorough.

2. Describe a time where you made a mistake. What did you do to fix it?

While this might not look like itâ€™s based on problem-solving on the surface, it actually is. When you make a mistake, it creates a challenge, one you have to work your way through. At a minimum, itâ€™s an opportunity to highlight problem-solving skills, even if you donâ€™t address the topic directly.

When you choose an example, you want to go with a situation where the end was positive. However, the issue still has to be significant, causing something negative to happen in the moment that you, ideally, overcame.

EXAMPLE ANSWER:

â€œWhen I first began in a supervisory role, I had trouble setting down my individual contributor hat. I tried to keep up with my past duties while also taking on the responsibilities of my new role. As a result, I began rushing and introduced an error into the code of the software my team was updating. The error led to a memory leak. We became aware of the issue when the performance was hindered, though we didnâ€™t immediately know the cause. I dove back into the code, reviewing recent changes, and, ultimately, determined the issue was a mistake on my end. When I made that discovery, I took several steps. First, I let my team know that the error was mine and let them know its nature. Second, I worked with my team to correct the issue, resolving the memory leak. Finally, I took this as a lesson about delegation. I began assigning work to my team more effectively, a move that allowed me to excel as a manager and help them thrive as contributors. It was a crucial learning moment, one that I have valued every day since.â€•

3. If you identify a potential risk in a project, what steps do you take to prevent it?

Yes, this is also a problem-solving question. The difference is, with this one, it's not about fixing an issue; it's about stopping it from happening. Still, you use problem-solving skills along the way, so it falls in this question category.

If you can, use an example of a moment when you mitigated risk in the past. If you haven't had that opportunity, approach it theoretically, discussing the steps you would take to prevent an issue from developing.

EXAMPLE ANSWER:

“If I identify a potential risk in a project, my first step is to assess the various factors that could lead to a poor outcome. Prevention requires analysis. Ensuring I fully understand what can trigger the undesired event creates the right foundation, allowing me to figure out how to reduce the likelihood of those events occurring. Once I have the right level of understanding, I come up with a mitigation plan. Exactly what this includes varies depending on the nature of the issue, though it usually involves various steps and checks designed to monitor the project as it progresses to spot paths that may make the problem more likely to happen. I find this approach effective as it combines knowledge and ongoing vigilance. That way, if the project begins to head into risky territory, I can correct its trajectory.”

17 More Problem-Solving-Based Interview Questions

In the world of problem-solving questions, some apply to a wide range of jobs, while others are more niche. For example, customer service reps and IT helpdesk professionals both encounter challenges, but not usually the same kind.

As a result, some of the questions in this list may be more relevant to certain careers than others. However, they all give you insights into what this kind of question looks like, making them worth reviewing.

Here are 17 more problem-solving interview questions you might face off against during your job search:

How would you describe your problem-solving skills? Can you tell me about a time when you had to use creativity to

deal with an obstacle? Describe a time when you discovered an unmet customer need while assisting a customer and found a way to meet it. If you were faced with an upset customer, how would you diffuse the situation? Tell me about a time when you had to troubleshoot a complex issue. Imagine you were overseeing a project and needed a particular item. You have two choices of vendors: one that can deliver on time but would be over budget, and one that's under budget but would deliver one week later than you need it. How do you figure out which approach to use? Your manager wants to upgrade a tool you regularly use for your job and wants your recommendation. How do you formulate one? A supplier has said that an item you need for a project isn't going to be delivered as scheduled, something that would cause your project to fall behind schedule. What do you do to try and keep the timeline on target? Can you share an example of a moment where you encountered a unique problem you and your colleagues had never seen before? How did you figure out what to do? Imagine you were scheduled to give a presentation with a colleague, and your colleague called in sick right before it was set to begin. What would you do? If you are given two urgent tasks from different members of the leadership team, both with the same tight deadline, how do you choose which to tackle first? Tell me about a time you and a colleague didn't see eye-to-eye. How did you decide what to do? Describe your troubleshooting process. Tell me about a time where there was a problem that you weren't able to solve. What happened? In your opening, what skills or traits make a person an exceptional problem-solver? When you face a problem that requires action, do you usually jump in or take a moment to carefully assess the situation? When you encounter a new problem you've never seen before, what is the first step that you take?

Putting It All Together

At this point, you should have a solid idea of how to approach problem-solving interview questions. Use the tips above to your advantage. That way, you can thrive during your next interview.

Good luck!

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