

THE BESTSELLING INTERVIEW GUIDE  
COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED

# WHY YOU?

101 Interview  
Questions  
You'll Never  
Fear Again

NOW WITH  
**10 NEW**  
QUESTIONS  
ON 'THE FUTURE  
OF WORK'



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**JAMES REED**

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## WHY YOU?

James Reed is the Chairman of Reed, the recruitment specialists. He first joined the company in 1992 after graduating from Harvard Business School; since then Reed has more than quadrupled in size and reed.co.uk has become the number one job site in the UK and Europe. Reed now receives more than 50 million job applications a year and has delivered over 100 programmes helping more than 140,000 long-term unemployed people back into work. James is co-author of *Put Your Mindset to Work*, winner of the Commuter's Read Prize at the CMI Management Book Awards 2012. He is also a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

## Praise for *Why You?*:

‘Takes much of the fear out of preparing for a job interview’ *Sunday Post*

‘Amazon UK’s fastest-selling new read on interview techniques’ *City A.M.*

From Amazon:

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Got the job!’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘A must for all interviewees’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Worth a permanent place on your bookshelf’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Perfect preparation for any interview’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Good for employers too!’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘I read this from cover to cover before an interview for a very much wanted job. I did all the exercises it recommend and . . . I got the job!’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘If you are seriously after a job this is essential reading’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Helped me get my current job!’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Really useful, gives clear examples and well explained – I got the job so must have been a good buy!’

\*\*\*\*\* ‘Helped me prepare perfectly for interview, giving me real questions that come up – along with excellent tips for how to answer them. Wouldn’t have got the job without this book’

# WHY YOU?

*101 Interview Questions  
You'll Never Fear Again*

**JAMES REED**



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*For the moment*



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## FOREWORD

It seems right that a book about interviews should start with a question. Here's mine for you: When did you last have a life-changing conversation? The chances are, if you're applying for jobs and being invited to interview, you're about to have one. There won't be any dry runs or dress rehearsals. You'll have one go and you'll need to give it your best shot.

I wrote *Why You?* to help prepare you for this moment. I did so because so many people have told me that they left interviews feeling like they were underprepared when they went in; that they had felt nervous; and that they wished they had had a better idea of what questions to expect. This book will be your coach and guide so that when you start that crucial conversation you will feel more confident and better prepared. It will help you to present the best version of yourself and, by doing so, to seize the moment.

The latest edition contains a new chapter entitled 'The Future of Work' with ten new crowdsourced interview questions. They were chosen to help you understand the changing needs of employers since the book was first published and how to address those needs when you go for an interview. *Why You?* has helped many thousands of readers move on in their lives and careers. I sincerely hope that it will help you too.



ONE

.....

## ALL IN THE MIND

'Well, life all comes down to a few moments. This is one of them'

*Wall Street*, 1987, 20th Century Fox

### One moment

Can the path of a person's entire life come down to what they do in just one or two decisive moments? The guitarist Andy Summers certainly thinks so.

You might not recognize Summers' name but you'll know his work. Summers was one-third of The Police, one of the most successful rock bands of all time.

Maybe you're not a fan, but you would have to agree that Summers, in being a guitarist in a rock band, landed a job that many of us would love to have. His job took him to almost every country in the world. He did creative things all day. He met interesting people and devoted fans. He was paid a ton of money for doing something he loved, something that came naturally to him. Truly, great work if you can get it. So how *did* he get it?

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He got it by boarding a London Tube train and sitting down at random next to a drummer named Stewart Copeland. People don't usually talk on the Tube, but for some reason those two struck up a conversation that day. It was a conversation in which they told each other what kind of music they wanted to make. Each convinced the other that he was sincere and suitable. They clicked. They formed a band. They met Sting. They went to work.

Take out that last bit about Sting and you've got a perfect description of what happens at a good job interview: two people talking from the heart about a common interest, each setting out what they have to offer. (Admittedly, this is different from the ritualized job interview that many of us are familiar with.)

When the time came for Summers to write his autobiography, he called it *One Train Later*, because if he'd taken the next train along he wouldn't have met Copeland and none of his enchanted career would have happened. Clearly, it was one of those moments when the entire course of his life could have gone one way or another – just as occurs in a job interview.

Maybe you feel that Summers didn't interview for his job, that he succeeded by having a skill (in his case, playing the guitar) and by honing that skill with hours of practice every day. You'd be right, but skills are never the full picture.

It's more accurate to say Summers was *fully prepared when his moment of destiny presented itself*. He was at a point in his life where he knew what he was good at, and could communicate it to a total stranger in a way that made him seem like the sort of person you would want around.

This is a book about how you can learn to do exactly the same thing.

## Knowing your moment

All the evidence is that these moments of life-changing destiny are most likely to present themselves in the form of a job interview.

How you perform in that thirty-to-ninety-minute window will determine what you do for a living, which in turn will shape much of your time on Earth, including:

- **What you do all day:** Approximately one-third of your adult life is spent at work. If you don't enjoy your work, that's one-third of your existence hammered, with no refunds and no re-runs. (To put this into even sharper relief, half the remaining two-thirds of your adult life is spent asleep, or maybe lying awake at night thinking about work.)
- **Where you live and what you see all day:** Where we spend our limited time on this planet is determined largely by where we work, with 90 per cent of us living within an hour of our job. Your job interview is going to determine what you see out of the window all day, be it city skyline or sunrise over the Pacific at 35,000ft.
- **Your income:** When a really good PA can earn more than a junior pilot, who cares about sunrises?
- **Your life partner:** If you go to nightclubs hoping to find that special someone, statistically you'll have more luck working behind the bar than on the dance floor. Nineteen per cent of us meet our spouses at work – it's the most common place for love to start, by far. And should you get lucky with a colleague, you can rejoice in the fact that divorce rates are lower than average among couples who meet at work, probably because they have a common interest.

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- **When you'll die:** There's a good reason your life-assurance company asks what you do for a living. It's a proven fact that, whether you're a personal trainer or someone who sits down in an office all day, your health is subject to the physical impact of your job.
- **Your social status:** You are what you do. Of all the professions, it seems doctors and nurses get most of our admiration and trust. (Politicians and bankers, not so much.)
- **Your personal happiness:** Job satisfaction is, of course, hugely important. Interestingly, more than one study has shown that if you want to be happily employed you should pick up some scissors and learn to cut hair. Most hairdressing salon owners are happier in their work than any of their clients.

So that's your time, your money, your love life, your horizon, your health, your social status and your happiness – all determined in part at a job interview. If life really does boil down to a few decisive moments, the interview is surely one of them. Like it or not, people who are good at interviews tend to be good at life.

With so much resting on the outcome, it's no wonder interviewees get nervous. But as scary as it is to meet one's destiny in a job interview, you are at least told about the meeting in advance and given a chance to prepare. You get more notice of your key moment than Andy Summers got for his. Better still, with interviews you only need to practise a *little* harder than the rest, not for hours a day like musicians do.

If you think of interviews that way, they'll suddenly seem less like a trial and more like a lucky big break, a tip-off, an

inside advantage, one that you should seize with everything you have.

### **What have you done for destiny lately?**

Learning how to get just a *little* better at job interviews is one of the best-value things you can do for yourself, pound for pound and minute for minute.

Despite this, most people spend more time preparing their dinner than preparing for an interview. Maybe they're scared, knowing there is so much at risk. Fear often creeps in whenever the stakes are high, closely followed by procrastination, resulting in many candidates feeling the same way about interview preparation as Orson Welles felt about flying: a mixture of 'boredom and terror'.

In truth, almost everybody procrastinates about job interviews – which means less competition for you. Employers rarely complain about having too many great-performing interviewees to choose from. So, for those who would push a little harder than the rest, success at interview is there for the taking.

The best preparation consists of finding heartfelt and useful answers to certain key questions – and there aren't so many questions that they can't all be mastered by the average person in a few evenings' work.

At Reed, we believe that even the most thorny and exotic interview questions are just permutations of a tiny superset of key questions. Get good at these key questions and all the other questions will take care of themselves. If you want to make a start right now, go straight to the 'Classic Interview Questions' section in Chapter 2.

## How to use this book

It's important to know that this book will not teach you how to 'game' interviews by using canned answers. You will be offered some broad illustrative responses, but I strongly suggest that you don't parrot those illustrations word for word. Believe me, *canned answers don't work*. I employ approximately 3,000 people and most of them conduct job interviews for a living. I can assure you that they hear canned answers every day, as do the employers who make up Reed's clients – and every single one of those canned answers is played out.

The problem is getting worse all the time, thanks to the internet being one big echo chamber. The phrase 'interview questions' alone is searched half a million times a month on Google, not to mention all the other similar searches, such as 'What to say in interview'.

What happens is that candidates click on the first one or two results, memorize the answers and then feel they've done all the interview prep they need, when in fact they've just made it harder for employers to find out who they really are. It's as though some people think of interviews as a game of catchphrase bingo, rather than a sincere conversation between two strangers.

Pretending to be someone you're not is wrong. It is also much harder work for you in the long run. Nobody ever got fired for turning out to be exactly the person they seemed to be in interview, but plenty of people have been fired for spoofing their way into a post they weren't right for, and, before being fired, they probably suffered for a long time, thrashing away at a job they couldn't actually do.

The other reason to avoid canned responses is that there is surprisingly little consensus among interviewers about what constitutes a good answer. That much became clear when

Reed conducted twenty or so workshops among its recruitment consultants for this book. In those sessions, a bad answer was easily identified but a good one was often a matter of taste and much debate.

But as useless as canned answers are, their example does at least bring us to the heart of this book. Canned answers are bad because they get in the way of letting the employer find out who you are. And *who you really are* is becoming just as important as what you can do. Go back a couple of decades and a job interview would have been almost exclusively about skills and experience; these days your interview is just as likely to be about your personality and your mindset. As has been written a million times elsewhere, the world is changing very rapidly these days, partly because skills and expertise are becoming increasingly commodified and distributed. In this environment, your personality comes to the fore. What that means for job interviews is that a computer programmer's ability to convey their hopes and dreams and quirks now has almost as much bearing on their chances of success as their ability to program. Once again, you might not like such a state of affairs – but it absolutely is how things are now. Firms don't hire CVs, they hire people. They always have, but more so now than ever.

### **How I wrote this book**

I've always believed in the idea that a team is a genius. Consequently, it was clear to me that the interview wisdom found in this book should be crowdsourced. And since I'm proud to be the Chairman of the Reed Group, the recruitment agency started in 1960 by my father Sir Alec Reed and now the UK's single largest aggregator of jobs and job interviews, I was fortunate to have access to the views of a very large crowd

## WHY YOU?

indeed. (By the way, what follows is the first and only bit of tub-thumping for Reed you'll see in this book, although, unavoidably, it can't be the last mention.)

On any given day Reed's website features 250,000 jobs from 12,000 employers; we receive more than 180 million visits a year and have over 11 million CVs on our database. More importantly, we employ 2,000 recruitment consultants. These consultants spend their entire working day matching jobs to candidates. In most cases they meet the firm offering the job and they also meet or speak with the candidates looking to win that job. This gives consultants a unique insight into what works, both from the employers' point of view and from that of the successful and unsuccessful candidates. Consultants will often ring both parties after the interview to find out what was asked and which answers went down well. Just as usefully, they hear about which answers bring interviews to an early and uncomfortable end on a daily basis.

There are literally hundreds of questions you might be asked at interview, but you shouldn't care about the full set. You only want to know which questions you're most likely to be asked – and who can blame you? You can't prepare for all of them.

With so much traffic to Reed's website, it's very easy for us to survey a large number of employers about the questions they're most likely to ask – and that's exactly what we did for this book.

What follows, then, is the most rigorously data-tested survey of the interview questions that you're most likely to be asked this year. If that doesn't justify the price of the book alone, write to me at [James@jamesreed.com](mailto:James@jamesreed.com) and tell me what would. I'll put it into the next edition. Equally, let me know if you found this book useful during an interview, and what questions you were asked; you can Tweet me using #WhyYou.

But Reed didn't just gather questions. I also hit the road to talk to our consultants about what constitutes a good and a bad answer for each. These workshops were among the most fun I've ever had at Reed and the wisdom that emerged from them is here on every page. Take it from me: recruitment consultants know interview questions better than anyone.

Throughout this book, you'll see that each of our 101 questions are headed with two short sections of text – 'The Real Question' and a 'Top-line Tactic'. These are for your insight and convenience, respectively. The Real Question is essentially the interviewer's inner dialogue, telling you what he or she is really thinking but is (hopefully) too nice to say. The Top-line Tactic is simply a summary of our recommendation for answering that particular question, expressed in a single sentence. The former is there to help you understand, the latter is there to help you remember what you might say.

### **The digested read**

If you only take away four points from this book, make them these:

- The best person you can be at interview is yourself.
- The way you talk about who you are and what you can become counts for more than a good CV or an expensive education.
- Every interview question that you can be asked is a variation of a handful of underlying fundamental questions.
- To an employer, a job is a problem to be solved. All other concerns are secondary, including yours.

Let's look at those in turn.

***The best person you can be at interview is yourself***

This might not sound like new advice and it is often reported as clichéd. It's not clichéd – it's vital.

Interviewers are only human. They want to feel an emotional connection with a real person, not a politician. They love it when that connection happens in an interview room, but it happens less often than it might, because an interview room is an artificial environment, one that can easily prompt artificial behaviour, stilted conversation and awkward pauses. It's usually not where you see people at their best, even though that's what everyone in the room wants to see.

After wading through countless canned answers, awkward pauses and half-truths, interviewers are often left craving a genuine encounter with a sincere human being. If you speak from the heart and don't exaggerate, bluff or waffle, you'll be giving interviewers what they crave. They'll remember you for it, even if you're not right for the job.

.....  
Many interviewers will keep a rejected candidate on file in case something suitable comes up; many candidates have successfully landed a job this way.  
.....

Oddly, being yourself in an interview situation is always harder than it sounds. It's risky too, certainly in terms of getting a job. It's not risky in terms of getting the right job.

***It's not about your CV: it's about who you are and what you can become***

Most people start their interview prep by dusting off their CV and thinking of a few things to say about the sentences on that fabled sheet of A4. But if you've been invited for interview,

your CV will suddenly be far less important than it has always seemed to you, because by interview stage, an interviewer has already got most of what they need from your CV. They're now in interview mode, not CV mode. In interview mode, the primary assessment is of you and your personality, less so your work history. Also, your CV is all about the past, about a world of skills and technology and institutions that are either gone already or perhaps soon will be. The future arrives relentlessly.

All that any business can do about the future is to employ people who can cope with change. If you can lead change – relish it, even – you *will* be in demand. Employers want people who will thrive in a workplace that might be unrecognizable three years from now.

That's why anyone who bases their interview technique entirely around the contents of their CV is looking in the wrong direction. The interviewer will be looking forward, into a future they can barely make out. No one knows what's going to happen next. The CEO doesn't know. You don't know. Your interviewer doesn't know either. You can expect job interviews to reflect that uncertainty – and to select on the basis of it too.

The good news for you is that future-proofing yourself is a learnable skill that you can demonstrate in interview. It's all a matter of adopting the right mindset (there's more on mindset in the next section).

***There are only fifteen interview questions that count***

No matter what you read elsewhere, Reed believes there are only fifteen questions that an interviewer might ask you.

Sure, there are hundreds of interview questions you might be asked, but *every interview question out there is just a variation on one of fifteen themes.*

## WHY YOU?

We know because we've counted. When reed.co.uk surveyed thousands of employers and asked which question they're most likely to ask in an interview, the same few themes kept emerging. Many interview questions are just different ways of asking the same thing. Out of the hundreds of questions we received, we found that just fifteen were truly unique. We've called them the 'Fateful 15', for reasons Andy Summers would understand – each one has the potential to change the direction of your life for better or worse, for ever.

This book is going to help you discover honest, personal and impressive answers to all fifteen. Once you've got that knack, you'll see how those fifteen questions fit into every aspect of working life. So equipped, you'll be more productive and employable regardless of what happens in any one interview.

Each one of the fifteen has a 'question behind the question' – an emotional theme that extends beyond the surface words. It is this deeper emotional theme that you must listen for, and to which you must address your answer.

If you can come up with scintillating answers for these fifteen questions – and learn to identify each one in the heat of the moment – then you will be good at interviews. And as we've seen, being good at interviews means being good at life, work and almost everything else. That thought might seem painful and unfair to some, but it's always been true.

But before we start that, we need to be clear about why job vacancies appear in the first place. It's not because someone wants you to have a job. It's because someone, somewhere, has a problem.

### ***To an employer, a job is a problem to be solved***

Jobs exist in two completely different universes at the same time.

In one universe – let’s call it the ‘personal universe’, the one that we experience as interviewees and as people – jobs make life worth living.

In the personal universe, jobs provide us with a home, friends, stimulation, conversation, holidays, a new car and so on. This is the world of work that we recognize and that so many of us crave. Each year the global market-research firm Gallup carries out a survey asking thousands of adults in over two hundred countries a very simple question: ‘**What do you want most?**’ The most common answer, every year and all over the world, is, ‘**A good job.**’ There’s something in us that wants to work. Consequently, no one can be blamed for wanting a job and all the life-affirming things that come from it.

But jobs inhabit a second universe too – let’s call it the entrepreneur’s universe – and in this universe **a job does not exist to keep you happy.**

In this universe, jobs are a by-product of an entrepreneur’s desire to build their own business, a business the entrepreneur hopes will solve all of his or her problems via solving other people’s problems. For entrepreneurs, their business is often all that stands between them and financial ruin, so they fight hard to keep it going. It’s worth remembering that every company, be it Marks and Spencer or your local corner shop, is either run by one of these scrappy individuals or was started by one. Companies differ in the extent to which they retain their founders’ ‘survive-or-die’ ethic, but it’s echoing off the walls in most companies, certainly in the companies that have progressed and survived.

In this universe, your interviewer is best thought of as someone with a stack of problems which they will pay to solve. Collectively, these problems are known as your job and, to be blunt, that’s all any job ever was. It’s a rather stark and unemotional way of looking at life, but it’s no less true for that.

## WHY YOU?

Too bad, then, that many candidates can glimpse jobs in one universe only. They see a job as a means of achieving their personal economic or psychological advancement, and forget that a job is primarily about solving problems on behalf of someone else. This personal bias surfaces in their answers.

It might be going too far to suggest that you should think of your interviewer as a motorist who's broken down by the side of the road and in need of help, but it's not a bad starting point. It's certainly better than thinking of the interviewer as a food truck by the side of the road, as so many candidates do.

A bad interviewee, then, defines a job as something that will solve all their problems. Good interviewees know that a 'job' is what happens when you can solve someone else's problem – so start pitching your answers that way.

## Your 3G mindset

The truth is that interviewing – and impressing employers in general – is much less about hard skills than you've probably been led to believe and much more about how you think. In this book we'll spend whole sections covering questions of motivation and personality as well as softer competencies like decision making, leadership, adaptability and trustworthiness. And what's another word for all these factors, the sum of your approach to your job and your life, the fundamental lens that colours how you view and respond to your work? Your *mindset*.

Talking about your mindset is central to this book because it is also central to my approach to recruitment. In 2011 I co-authored a book with Dr Paul G. Stoltz, a leading expert on human resilience. We conducted in-depth research into the preferences of employers globally, asking them to tell us

what sets candidates apart in today's fast-changing, ultra-competitive job market. What we found is covered in depth in our book, *Put Your Mindset to Work*, but let's now recap a few key points from it.

### **How much does mindset matter?**

It's no surprise that employers would prefer a trustworthy person who shows accountability, but the employers that Paul and I canvassed for their views went much, much further when they spoke about how much a person's mindset accounts for hiring, retention and promotion. When asked if they would choose someone with the right mindset who lacks all the skills desired for a position or someone who has all the skills but not the ideal mindset, an astonishing **96 per cent of employers said they'd pick mindset over skills**. That bears repeating: 96 per cent value mindset over skills.

But how much difference does mindset make? On average, employers said they would trade seven normal workers with a so-so outlook for just one with a great mindset. Having the right approach to your work makes you seven times more valuable to an employer.

In-depth interviews with executives backed up these numbers. Top company boss after top company boss came to the same conclusion as John Suranyi, former president of DIRECTV: 'Mindset is everything.'

Caitlin Dooley, a recruiter for Facebook, agreed that workers at the social networking company 'absolutely have to have the right mindset, period. That's what's driving us into the future.'

If you can wrap your head around just how valuable employers find mindset then you won't be surprised by some of the other findings from the book. Employers repeatedly said that while the right mindset helps you gain and grow the