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Innovative Interviews: Untangling Puzzle Questions

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, September 2007

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Puzzle interviews, which are most often used for high-tech, engineering and other analytical positions, provide employers with insights into how candidates solve problems in unusual situations. Though their use is unlikely for most HR positions, candidates should be aware of the technique, particularly if they seek HR opportunities at firms known to use such puzzlers.

"If a job seeker is targeting visionary positions with one of the technology gurus, such as IBM, Boeing, or Microsoft, a career professional may want to prepare him for the puzzle interview," suggests the *Career Industry Mega Trends* research study released in 2007 by [Career Directors International](#) (CDI). "Puzzle questions can appear tricky and loaded, especially when coupled with the stress and pressure of the interview," the CDI report says.

Eight percent of human resource professionals surveyed by CDI in 2007 said they used puzzle interview questions.

An [August 2007 article](#) in *Business 2.0* magazine says businesses use puzzle interviews in part because they need people who can think on their feet. "The most common types of questions either ask the applicant to solve puzzles or brainteasers (e.g., "Why are manhole covers round?" or "How many times a day do a clock's hands overlap?") or to solve unusual problems (e.g., "How would you weigh an airplane without a scale?" or "How many golf balls does it take to fill an Olympic-sized swimming pool?")" according to "Puzzle Interviews: What Are They and What Do They Measure?," an article from the Winter 2007 issue of *Applied HRM Research*.

Additional puzzle interview questions can be found on sites such as [Techinterview.org](#).

What Goes Around, Comes Around

Puzzle interviews have been around for years but have recently been hailed as a new phenomenon, says Laura DeCarlo, president and executive director of CDI, a professional association for career professionals. William Poundstone, author of *How Would You Move Mount Fuji?: Microsoft's Cult of the Puzzle-How the World's Smartest Companies Select the Most Creative Thinkers* (Little Brown and Co., 2004) attributes the use of this method to Nobel Prize-winning inventor William Shockley, whose efforts to make \$1 million from silicon-based transistors in the late 1950s are credited with launching Silicon Valley as the center of electronics innovation.

But HR people should not panic in the rare situation where a puzzle or logic question is posed, DeCarlo says. "It's really a matter of staying calm and being eager to try to come up with a solution." Candidates should ask open-ended questions, grab a notepad and begin thinking out loud.

HR people should not be afraid to think outside the box, says Lin Blair, SPHR, HR project leader for Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Little Rock. She recommends practicing regularly with puzzles and brain teasers to stay in the habit of using the brain in different ways. "We can continue to grow connections between the brain hemispheres by doing things outside of our comfort zone and through the process of learning," she says.

"Having been a recruiter for HR people I have yet to see these kind of unusual interview styles trickle into the HR world," says Laura M. Labovich, president of A & E Consulting LLC in Potomac Falls, Va. However, when it comes to interviews, the old idiom rings true: "forewarned is forearmed." "Find out what kind of interview you'll be going on in advance," Labovich says. "Applicants need to do their research on the different methods of interview styles that are out there and find out-if they can-what the company uses." She suggests using social networking sites and chat rooms to search for insights into the interviewing methods companies use.

"If you expect the unusual it won't come as a surprise," DeCarlo says. "The only bad answer is when you don't give an answer."

Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, is online writer/editor for SHRM.

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