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# Landing a Job Can Be Puzzling

Microsoft is legendary for running job applicants through grueling interviews full of brain teasers and bizarre questions. Now, other companies are following suit. By Amit Asaravala.

**WHEN NEIL DOSHI** sat down for his job interview at a major business consulting firm, the last thing he expected was that he'd be calculating the height of the Empire State Building -- not just in feet, but in quarters.

 He wanted to know how many quarters I would have to stack to reach the top of the building," said Doshi of his interviewer. "So I started estimating the number of quarters in an inch and multiplied that with the number of inches in a foot and so on."

When Doshi finally presented his solution, his interviewer barely seemed impressed. "Good," said the manager. "Now tell me the total dollar value of those quarters."

Doshi is not the only job seeker hit with bizarre questions in an interview. With the depressed economy supplying dozens -- if not hundreds -- of qualified applicants for each job, companies increasingly use riddles and puzzles in interviews to narrow the options. The practice is catching applicants off guard.

"In this economy, companies can afford to be choosy," according to author William Poundstone. "The brain-teaser interview is a trend that has reached a broad cross section of the Fortune 500."

Poundstone's latest book, *How Would You Move Mount Fuji?*, examines the legendary Microsoft interview, which long has been associated with grueling puzzles that baffle applicants.

Some of the more commonly used brain teasers include questions like, "If you are on a boat, and you throw your suitcase overboard, will the water level rise or fall?" and "How many piano tuners are there in the world?"

"By asking candidates to solve a puzzle, interviewers hope to gain some insight into how well the candidates think on their feet," explained Poundstone.

However, whether questions like these actually yield important information about candidates is still up for debate.

In one discouraging study conducted by Harvard University psychologists, interviewers were found to make up their minds about a candidate within just two seconds of seeing the person. The revelation could mean that brain teasers -- or any other interview questions for that matter -- add little value to the selection process.

On the other hand, many hiring managers who use puzzles reason that Microsoft's success is due in large part to its employees. The fact that many of those employees were selected through a rigorous interview filled with brain teasers bodes well for the tactic.

"We use these types of questions not necessarily to see if the candidate gets the right answer but to observe the candidate's thought process," said one vice president of a business software firm, who asked not to be named. "How does the candidate think on their feet? Do they work through the problem in a logical manner? Do they have the drive and determination to work through the problem no matter how difficult the question?"

As for Microsoft, a spokesperson said the company believes that the puzzle questions help interviewers determine a candidate's creativity and problem-solving abilities, but that a candidate's responses to those questions are not the only factor in a hiring decision. "The type of question discussed in (Poundstone's) book is one of many

techniques that Microsoft continues to use to identify a candidate's ability to fit into the company and vice versa."

Poundstone cautions that the "vice versa" part of the equation is important for employers to remember should they choose to integrate brain teasers into their own hiring processes.

"You have to be careful not to let it turn into a hazing stunt," said Poundstone. "In businesses where there's a fraternity culture, it sometimes becomes a matter of putting everyone through the same gauntlet of puzzles and high pressure. But you don't want potential employees going away feeling harassed."

Doshi, who didn't get a job offer from the consulting firm, recalled another particularly stressful interview, this time at investment bank JPMorgan. "The manager would ask me a question about my resume, and then when I started to answer, he'd cut me off and say that he was bored, or else he'd start checking his e-mail or reading the paper."

Despite the interviewer's antics, Doshi said he kept his cool and got the job offer, although he eventually turned it down.