

# Interviewing Techniques for CISO Roles

Conventional wisdom on Interviewing may be misleading

## Executive Summary

Hiring a Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) is one of the most consequential decisions for a modern enterprise. While conventional interviewing techniques, such as structured behavioral interviews, technical grilling, and resume-led discussions—provide a baseline for candidate evaluation, they often fail to reveal the nuanced qualities that distinguish exceptional CISOs. My experience is unique, as I have interviewed for and been accepted into six different CISO roles, and I estimate that I have had hundreds of CISO interviews from 2002 to 2022.

The purpose of this paper is to share with you the most effective techniques I've found for landing a CISO role. These methods, in some cases, are counterintuitive – they contradict conventional wisdom. I'm sharing them with you because they have been undocumented until now, and CISOs have told me that they have been useful.

Traditional interviews for CISO positions rely heavily on predictable questions:

1. “Describe your experience with regulatory compliance.”
2. “How did you respond to your last incident?”
3. “What frameworks have you implemented?”

While these questions can validate a candidate's experience and technical fluency, they rarely provide insight into how they will navigate ambiguity, inspire cross-functional teams, manage stakeholder expectations, and/or anticipate emerging threats. Furthermore, high-caliber candidates may have rehearsed responses, which can obscure their true depth, adaptability, or innovation. Unfortunately, most CISO candidates believe that their answers to these types of interview questions will be the key to differentiating themselves from other candidates. **They are wrong!**

## Non-Intuitive Interviewing Techniques

1. You differentiate yourself as a candidate through the thoughtful and intimate **questions that you ask** the interviewer, not from your answers to standard questions
2. You should **pursue every opportunity** you have to interview for a CISO role, whether you want the job or not
3. Your answers to questions **must be concise** (use as few words as possible)
4. Focus on getting the interviewer's **commitment to you** as a candidate

5. Share your professional development objectives- specifically the **two skills you wish to invest your time** in mastering in the potential CISO role

#### **Advantages of Asking Questions Over Answering Them:**

1. Interviewers struggle to remember specific answers from candidates to standard questions after the interviews, making it difficult to stand out as a candidate. However, interviewers **do remember the questions** that you ask:

**Prepare a set of 20 questions:** Develop a list of thoughtful questions to ask each interviewer, demonstrating your preparation and interest in the opportunity.

1. **Write down your questions:** Refer to your list during the interview to ensure you cover all the topics you want to discuss.
2. **Curate questions for each interviewer:** Tailor your questions to the specific interviewer's background, interests, and areas of expertise. Genuinely seek their perspective/opinion and listen to it. This plays to their ego and it will reflect more favorably for you
3. **Skip covered topics:** If you identify a predetermined question on a topic already discussed, skip it and select another question
4. **Avoid asking the same question of every interviewer:** Curate your questions for each interviewer to show your breadth as a candidate and demonstrate that you're genuinely interested in each interviewer's perspective.
5. **Customize questions for the interviewer:** Ask for their opinion on a specific issue, such as the company's strategic direction, to demonstrate your engagement and curiosity.
6. **Avoid appearing over-prepared:** Frame your questions in a way that shows you're invested in the opportunity, rather than trying to show off your preparedness for other offers.

#### **Benefits of Interviewing Practice:**

1. **Developing interviewing mastery:** The more you interview, the more you'll develop your skills and increase your confidence.
2. **Improving "muscle memory":** Like a golfer practicing their swing, interviewing is a skill that requires repetition to become second nature.
3. **Changing the dynamic:** When you have a job offer, it's not just about accepting the offer; it's about using it as leverage to improve the interviewing dynamic.

## How Having a Job Offer Changes the Game:

1. **Accelerating the interview process:** You can ask the staffing coordinator to expedite the interview process to accommodate your decision-making timeline.
2. **Reversing the conversation:** Stakeholders will spend more time selling you on the company and less time assessing your competence.
3. **Gaining a positive bias:** Alerting HR professionals to your job offer demonstrates your value as a candidate, encouraging them to recognize that you have a “shelf-life” determined by the market that differs from other candidates
4. **Negotiating leverage:** Having a job offer gives you more bargaining power to negotiate favorable terms, including liability protection and compensation.

1. **Increasing complexity:** CISO negotiations involve more items than ever, including liability protection, compensation, and other factors.
2. **Greater leverage:** Having a job offer means you have more leverage to negotiate the terms of your employment.

## The Interviewer Imposter Syndrome:

1. Several of the stakeholders interviewing you are not highly confident in their ability to choose the best candidate, but they do not wish any of their peers to be aware of this “imposter syndrome.”
  - Therefore, they may take a candidate that appears solid on paper and seek to find a reason to reject the candidate making them appear to be more competent at candidate evaluation
  - You don't want to be that candidate and answering questions with fewer words shrinks your candidate attack surface
  - This approach is counter to the natural response to someone not well-versed in cyber resilient practices for a CISO, which is to provide education and context to the stakeholder

## Answer Questions Using as Few Words as Possible:

1. Providing a concise answer to the question keeps open the option of adding another level of detail to your response if essential, but your goal is to save time for your prepared questions
2. The stakeholders interviewing you may not be the primary decision maker in the evaluation process, but your goal is to turn them into an advocate for you

## Make References to your Professional Development Plan

1. There are always questions that you will have as a candidate that you may struggle to ask in an interview: What is the most likely career path for my next role after I succeed at this one? Is it possible to adjust my reporting relationship? Will the company cover the costs for professional development for me and my team? Will the company pay for executive coaching in specific situations? Reference your development plan objectives (which skills do you choose to master)
2. Share your selected skills in the interview process with stakeholders
3. Demonstrating that you are proactive with your professional development makes you a more attractive candidate and shows a little vulnerability at the same time
4. The feedback from your selected competencies will provide you with answers to some of the questions you were reluctant to ask
5. It allows your potential sponsor to make adjustments to the role to accommodate your development goals

## Expectations for a CISO Candidate

A clear trend over the past several decades in the evolution of the role of a CISO is the increasing emphasis on soft leadership skills vs. technical skills. Most cybersecurity professionals get accustomed to being the subject matter expert (SME) in most situations. They know the risk, they know how to allocate scarce resources to the highest risk and they know how to get transactions done. They demonstrate expertise and have been rewarded for that competence over the years. However, as a CISO, the ability to lead a process of consensus with stakeholders is far more important than having the right technical answer necessary at a point in time. Stakeholder expectation management has grown in importance for any CISO to be successful, and this trend will continue. Providing concise answers and asking thoughtful questions will resonate better in interviews vs. providing the right technical answer to a question.

### **The Shift in CISO Skill Set:**

Over the past few decades, the role of a Chief Information Security Officer (CISO) has undergone significant changes. While technical skills were once the primary focus, there's now a growing emphasis on soft leadership skills.

### **The Rise of Stakeholder Expectation Management:**

As a CISO, you're no longer just a subject matter expert (SME) with a technical answer to every question. Instead, you need to lead a process of consensus with stakeholders, understand their expectations, and manage their concerns.

### **Why Technical Skills are No Longer Enough:**

While technical expertise is still essential, it's no longer the only key to success as a CISO. The ability to lead, communicate, and manage stakeholder expectations is now a critical aspect of the role.

### **The Importance of Soft Leadership Skills:**

To be successful as a CISO, you need to possess soft leadership skills, such as:

1. **Communication:** Clearly articulating complex technical concepts to non-technical stakeholders.
2. **Collaboration:** Building relationships and consensus with various teams and stakeholders.
3. **Emotional Intelligence:** Understanding and managing your own emotions, as well as those of others.
4. **Adaptability:** Adjusting to changing circumstances and priorities.
5. **Strategic Thinking:** Developing and executing long-term security strategies that align with the organization's goals.

### **How to Leverage Soft Leadership Skills in Interviews:**

When interviewing for a CISO role, focus on showcasing your soft leadership skills, rather than just providing technical answers. Here are some tips:

1. **Provide concise answers:** Offer clear and concise responses that demonstrate your understanding of the topic.
2. **Ask thoughtful questions:** Show that you're interested in the organization and its challenges by asking informed and insightful questions.
3. **Highlight your leadership skills:** Emphasize your experience in leading teams, managing stakeholders, and making strategic decisions.

By focusing on soft leadership skills and stakeholder expectation management, you'll be better positioned to succeed as a CISO and make a meaningful impact in your organization.

Market conditions impacting the availability of qualified CISO candidates will continue to evolve. Your ability to demonstrate the mastery of asking compelling questions will be effective regardless of the supply of qualified candidates. Pursue interviews early and often to refine your interviewing competency. Ask thoughtful questions demonstrating

intellectual curiosity and your level of commitment to the opportunity. These techniques will also help you when you in your transition to the new CISO leadership role since you will be demonstrating effective facilitation toward consensus.