Direct and indirect questions in business

Lesson code: 128U-V64A-DQ7I

Intermediate (B1-B2)

1 Presentation

When we ask for information, we often use **direct questions**: *Where is the boss?*
If we want to be more polite or formal, we can use **indirect questions**: *Can you tell me where the boss is?*

Direct questions	Indirect questions
Direct questions are normal questions:	**Indirect questions** begin with **Could you tell me ...**,**Can you tell me ...**, **I'd like to know ...**, **Do you know ...**, etc.:
What time **is it**?	**Can you tell me** what time **it is**?
How long **does the journey take**?	**Do you know** how long **the journey takes**?
Why **are you** negotiating with that client?	**I'd like to know** why **you are** negotiating with that client.
How long **have you** been working here?	**Could you tell me** how long **you've** been working here?
Is he at the office?	**Do you know** if **he is** at the office?
Did she reply to your email?	**I wonder** if **she replied** to your email.

Rules for forming direct and indirect questions

Direct questions can be **simple questions** (*Are you at the office?*), **subject questions** (*Who sold you the car?*) or **object questions** (*How much did they make?*).

With **simple questions** and **object questions** we use special word order for questions:

If there is a 'helping verb' (*auxiliary verb*), for example **will**, **was**, **have** and **can**, we put the subject after the *auxiliary verb*:

Can you help me? Where **will Kate** be tomorrow? How many languages **can you** speak?

In **present simple** and **past simple** questions, we use **do**/**does**/**did**:

Where **do they work**? **Did the client** call you back?

Indirect questions have the same word order as statements (*subject* before *verb*):

Do you know how long **the journey takes**?

We do not use **do**/**does**/**did** in the question: Do you know how long ~~does~~ the journey ~~take~~ takes?

If there is no question word (**who**, **where**, **why**, **how**, etc.) in the **direct question**, we can use **if** or **whether** in the **indirect question**:

I wonder **if** she replied to your email. I wonder **whether** she replied to your email.

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2 Practice 1

Rewrite the questions below as indirect questions.

1. Where is your office?
   Could you tell me where your office is?
2. How do you say this in English?
   I'd like to know .....
3. Do you offer a discount for new clients?
   Can you tell me .....?
4. How long did the meeting take?
   I wonder .....
5. How did you fix the printer issue?
   Can you explain .....?
6. When are you going to sign the contract?
   Please tell me .....
7. How long has he been waiting?
   I don't know .....
8. Why did you sell your business?
   I'm curious .....

3 Practice 2 - Job interview

Complete the dialogue below.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your previous job. Could you describe _____ [1]
(what were your responsibilities?)

Michelle: Well, my duties included answering the phone, dealing with customers and organising meetings for the director.

Interviewer: And can you tell us _____ [2] (why did you quit?)

Michelle: Well, after 5 years in the same company, I felt that I was ready for a different challenge.

Interviewer: Could you tell us _____ [3]
(why would you like to work for our company?)

Michelle: Yes. Your company is well-known all over the world.

Interviewer: Hmm. I'd like to know _____ [4] . (what are your weaknesses?)

Michelle: Well, I am a perfectionist, and sometimes this can be a problem. But I'm working on it.

Interviewer: OK. Please let us know _____ [5] (can you start next week?)

Audio

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Now listen to check your answers. Scan the code on the right with your mobile device.

4 Practice 3 - Sales meeting

Now do the same with the following dialogue.

Charles: I'd like to know about your company's experience in the market. Could you tell me _____ [1] (how many customers do you have?)

Supplier: We have around 10,000 customers around the world.

Charles: And can you tell us _____ [2] (where are they based?)

Supplier: Our customers are mostly in Brazil, Spain and France.

Charles: OK, great. And could you tell us _____ [3] (how many years have you been in the market?)

Supplier: Oh, our company was established about 15 years ago, so we're quite experienced.

Charles: OK. Could you tell me _____ [4] (do you have any experience with large companies?)

Supplier: Sure. One of our main customers is Samsung.

Charles: Interesting. _____ [5] (I / get a reference from them?)

Charles: Sure, I'll email it to you after this meeting.

Audio

5 Practice 4

Make indirect questions from the direct questions. In pairs, take turns to ask and answer the questions.

1. How do you get to work every day?

   Can you tell me .....?
2. How long have you been working for your company?

   I'd like to know .....
3. What was your first job?

   I'm interested to know .....
4. Do you enjoy your work?

   Could you tell me .....?
5. How often do you use English in your work?

   I'd like to know .....

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6. Are you going to attend any meetings tomorrow?

   Could you tell me ..... ?

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