

Answering the “Tell me about yourself” question

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Let’s face it, interviewing is stressful enough without having to answer stupid interview questions. But unfortunately, many interviewers, because of habit, lack of preparation time, poor training, or yes, even laziness, often ask stupid questions. Of those, one of the most challenging is the oft used “*Tell me about yourself*” interview opener.

What most candidates ask me about this insipid interview question is: “*What do they want to know?*” **They want to know about you the candidate as a potential employee.** They don’t want to know about your family, your last vacation, your hobbies, your religious beliefs, that you like the Cubs, or that you are a proud member of AA. Yes, I have had candidates give each of those responses to the infamous “Tell me about yourself” question. I don’t recall any of them ever getting hired by the employers who interviewed them.

Interviewers also think it is improper, a sign of your lack of preparedness, or even rude, for you to answer their “*Tell me about yourself*” question with a question of your own like, “*What would you like to know?*” If you are prepared, and seriously thinking about making a career change, you will have a prepared and thoughtful answer to this question BEFORE you begin interviewing.

Why? I am glad you asked, and I think one example should convince you I am right.

Let me share just one story about this opening interview question that cost a candidate a job she REALLY wanted. It is a perfect illustration to make you understand why you must plan a response for this question whether you are asked it or not. The scenario was this: The candidate was a financial services professional, her recruiter had a financial services client that was looking to fill a VP position for a 125k base + 25k bonus. The candidate had an ideal background and skill set, and the client thought she was a perfect fit. The candidate knew the client and was thrilled to interview with her. The client joked that when the candidate came to the interview the recruiter should send the candidate with an invoice for the fee, because they thought they might make her an offer on the spot.

You can more or less guess how the story ended. The candidate didn't get the job, but please pay attention as to why, because that is the part of the story that matters most. To start the interview the candidate was asked the dreaded “Tell me about yourself” question. Thinking that it was an inconsequential icebreaker question, she retorted, simply intending to cause an opening chuckle, “Well, as you can obviously see, I am 15-20 pounds overweight.”

She was only joking! Yet, due to the impact this answer had on the client, for all practical purposes the interview was over as soon as she said this. That “amusing” answer

to what the candidate viewed as a seemingly innocuous question convinced the employer that this \$150k VP had an image or low self-esteem problem. Despite the recruiter's insistence that it was just a joke, the employer declined to make the candidate an offer. **The retort was just a joke! But not really.** It was no joke to the candidate who lost the \$150k dream job. It was no joke to the recruiter who had invested so much time in finding the employer this ideal candidate. This candidate attempted to humorously break the ice, but the interviewer misinterpreted the response to a stupid question, and became convinced the candidate was not VP material.

This whole fiasco could have been avoided if the candidate had just been taught a very simple formula for answering this question. Sure, we know this question is a stupid and unnecessary one with which to begin an interview. But because interviewers open interviews with this question, candidates need to know how to respond to it intelligently. The formula I've learned has worked wonders for hundreds of my candidates, and those of thousands of recruiters I have shared it with over the last half dozen years.

Many, in fact a sad majority, of interviewers open with some form of the "*Tell me about yourself*" question. **It would be an easy question to answer if candidates answered with a prepared and well thought-out initial marketing statement of themselves and their skills, which are applicable for the open job.** This sounds pretty straightforward, but few of the thousands of candidates I have interviewed in the last 15 years have EVER been able to answer this question in this intelligent manner. The best candidates typically respond with a narrowing question like: "What would you like to know?" But let's get one thing straight: **It is extremely poor form to answer the opening interview question with another question.** Yet, that is how the BEST candidates do typically answer this question, due to its ambiguous nature. **Though it seems to be a logical approach, you must prepare to do better.**

Candidates must teach themselves to answer this question with a three-part, pre-planned marketing statement that can more or less be reused from interview to interview. Part one of that three-part marketing statement is always a one-sentence summary of the candidate's career history. For example, let me share with you a former candidate's opening sentence:

"I am a five-year veteran of LAN/WAN Admin and Systems Engineering with substantial experience using Novell, NT, Cisco, and Lotus Notes/Domino."

You get the picture; your whole career needs to be condensed into one pithy sentence that encapsulates the most important aspects of your career, the aspects that you want to leverage in order to make your next career step. Few candidates seem to be able to condense a career into one sentence, but it must, and can be, done. Ask any recruiter for help here, this is what we do.

Part two of the pre-planned marketing statement will be **a one-, maybe two-sentence summary of a single accomplishment that you are proud of that will also capture the**

potential employer's attention. It immediately follows your initial career summary sentence from above. This accomplishment should be one that the employer will be interested in hearing, *one that is easily explained or illustrated, and one that clearly highlights a bottom line impact.* When done correctly this will build interviewer intrigue about the accomplishment so that they inquire further, giving you an opportunity to further discuss a significant career success. The above candidate's accomplishment statement was:

"Recently, as a long-term contract employee at a local regional bank, I learned they were about to install Lotus Notes/Domino and were planning to use outside consultants for the project. I let them know I had done a similar installation at my last assignment, outlined how we could get the job done with in-house staff, and successfully completed the install for \$55-65k less than it would have cost with outside consultants."

Part three, the final piece of the marketing statement, is probably the most fluid piece. It needs to be a **one-sentence summary of specifically what you want to do next in your career.** The reason this third part is difficult is that it needs to specifically address what you want to do next, AND it needs to change from interview to interview to make sure it matches exactly what the INDIVIDUAL employers will be interviewing you for. Continuing with the above example of one of my past candidates, two of his final sentences, which were used for two different employers, follow:

"For the next step in my career, I would like to move away from contract work and find myself as a direct employee of a large firm where I could join a substantial IT team and be involved with a group that focuses on email and network security applications, while having access to the knowledgebase that would come with a large, diverse IT group."

But for a second employer, this ending was significantly altered because of the candidate's multiple interests in differing opportunities, to:

"For the next step in my career, I would like to find myself as a direct employee of a small to medium sized firm that was looking to hire an in-house IT generalist so I could continue growing my career by getting exposure to multiple IT areas, such as networking, help desk, security, and application issues for the users of the organization. As the firm's IT needs grew, I would love to apply my past team project management skills to managing the second or third members of a small but growing IT team."

These were two very different endings that perfectly matched two very different employer needs. Clearly you can see why the first ending wouldn't have worked for the second employer or vice versa. With some simple revising, the candidate made sure that each employer heard that they were interested in doing exactly what the employer was interested in hiring them for. That revising is what makes the third piece fluid and sometimes challenging, as candidates don't always see the need for being this specific from job interview to job interview. Most tend to be generalized, hoping that a shotgun approach will work. But it is the rifle sharpshooters, those who get specific in what they want from interview to interview, who get the best results. **With some simple planning**

BEFORE an interview, you, the candidate, will quickly realize the benefit of a targeted third sentence in these pre-planned opening statements, as employers feel you are perfectly suited to do just the job they are interviewing you for.

If you take the time to prepare this way as a candidate, it will be apparent to an interviewer that you are a prepared and serious candidate right at the beginning of the interview when you answer the “*Tell me about yourself*” question with this memorized, brief marketing statement, which combines a career summary, an exceptional accomplishment, and employer-specific career goal as in this example:

“I am a five-year veteran of LAN/WAN Admin and Systems Engineering with substantial experience using Novell, NT, Cisco, and Lotus Notes/Domino. Recently, as a long-term contract employee at a local regional bank, I learned they were about to install Lotus Notes/Domino and were planning to use outside consultants for the project. I let them know I had done a similar installation at my last assignment, outlined how we could get the job done with in-house staff, and successfully completed the install for \$55-65k less than it would have cost with outside consultants. For the next step in my career, I would like to move away from contract work and find myself as a direct employee of a large firm where I could join a substantial IT team and be involved with a group that focused on email and network security applications, while having access to the knowledgebase that would come with a large, diverse IT group.”

Clearly you can understand how the candidate who opens with this type of prepared response to the “*Tell me about yourself*” question will make a significantly better first impression than a candidate who responds by answering, “*What would you like to know?*” or worse yet, “Well, as you can obviously see, I am 15-20 pounds overweight.” **Plus candidates who prepare in this manner are typically more confident at the interview’s start, make a substantial and positive verbal first impression, give a clear indication of their interest in making a career move, and force the interviewer to get past the icebreaker questions to the parts of the interview that will help both parties begin the process of seriously determining if this is a solid match.** As you can see, there is a great deal of bang for your preparation buck.

Clearly these three simple steps—summarizing what your experience is as candidate, sharing an impressive career accomplishment, and then summarizing what would be an ideal next career step for you, one that matches what the employer is looking to hire—are the keys to beginning your interview with a competitive advantage. **Candidates who take the time to do this significantly improve their initial verbal impression, get their interview off to a confident and focused beginning, and more often than not get called back for second interviews, or better yet, for offers of employment with employers who are impressed.**