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“JOB INTERVIEW SUCCESS- THE “TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF” TRAP”

By Howard Cattie

One of the most common questions in a job interview, yet most commonly fumbled is the question, “Tell me about yourself,” and yet this is the easiest answer for someone to present in an interview. The question often arises because the manager hasn’t really reviewed the resume in a lot of detail. So while they are catching up, they throw a pop quiz by asking you “tell me about yourself”.

This question is an open-ended question and the answer is a free form essay which can easily lead to all kinds of perilous responses. However, it is also a huge advantage. You have a gift—an opportunity to state 2 or 3 of your strongest points and then control where the conversation goes next with a question at the end. Your answer demonstrates your ability to communicate on your feet when you’re thrown a question, your ability to focus, and your ability to clarify your personal interests and agenda. This common job interview question should be answered similarly to an “elevator pitch” with an answer that is clear, bulleted and relevant to the opportunity. It should be easy to understand and should not generate more questions than answers. It should be less than 2 minutes.

So the key to handling this question in the interview is to prepare the answer before the interview. The manager really doesn’t want to hear about your life history, what you’re interested in, a long boring sequence of your jobs, or any ego trips. An absolute disaster occurs if instead of answering the question, you respond with hesitancy or confusion and ask “what would you like to hear?”

What they really want to hear is a focused summary of relevant bullets that can benefit him and may help him solve a problem. I say “may” because we don’t know enough detail at this stage of the interview to use the word “can”.

So how do we structure this answer?

Let’s say we want to use 5 sentences max and a steering question. Here’s how we might structure it.

A. If you prepare properly for the job interview, you’ve identified keywords for products, industries, technologies, tasks and titles that can easily be used to create bullets in this summary. The first 3 sentences can list some of these keywords and expand them with length of experience (years) or with breadth of experience (for tasks or titles). Then, add some results and these keywords have now become bulleted accomplishments. Do not try to cover the entire job description. Focus on the 3 major strengths you feel you bring to the table based on the keywords.

B. Sentences 4 and 5 should be oriented toward benefits to the manager and areas of possible mutual interest (complementing agendas) which are to be explored in today’s meeting. For example, some of the biggest benefits we can bring to a company and to a manager are: fast start in terms of proven expertise, an independent worker which requires less management time, someone who can take on more responsibilities over time, someone who can solve the immediate problem, someone that would help the manager achieve their personal agenda, someone who is low risk or high results.



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C. Then we end with the appropriate steering question to move the job interview towards our preferred direction.

Here is a sample for an IT professional:

Sample sentences 1-3;

Mr. Manager, I've had 20 years of experience with a technical background in information technology, a BS in computer science with increasing responsibilities from developer, project leader and also a presales consultant. My strongest expertise is in the Microsoft technologies including .net development, SQL server data base and Business Intelligence where I have performed all tasks associated with defining, developing and implementing custom Business applications for the Financial Services industry. I have received increasing compensation and responsibilities, and have received strong performance ratings in the 4 companies I have been with because I completed my projects in a timely and reliable manner.

Sample sentences 4-5:

My personal goals at this point are to find a company where I can build upon this technical background and bring this expertise to help solve additional problems as well as add some new experiences.

Since I've targeted your particular company (or when I read your ad), it appears my background will allow me to contribute quickly, get off to a fast start and take on some responsibility to help the department accomplish its goals.

Sample Steering Question:

I look forward to sharing additional relevant experience with you today, but before we start, could you give me an idea of what the expectations are for this role and how it will help the department reach their goals?

So, the key to handling this simple, yet treacherous interview question is to be prepared ahead of time. Pick 3 points and your steering question. Structure a very simple 4-5 sentence summary of what you bring to the table that is clear and relevant to the manager and the opportunity at hand. Do not stray into other events. Do not cover the job description in detail. Remember, it is a summary. The manager will get to the detail he needs, rest assured. Good luck and good interviewing.

Howard Cattie is Head Coach of CareerOyster, an innovative online career coaching firm. CareerOyster helps job seekers learn powerful, effective resume writing and winning job interview skills through products such as ResumeCoach and InterviewCoach. To get started, and to get your free video career advice and job search tips newsletter, visit <http://www.careeroyster.com>.