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## 4 Common Interview Questions -- And How to Answer Them

### Tackle these interview favorites without sounding corny, cagey or canned

By Joel Schwartzberg – February 6, 2012



When you're interviewing for a job, there's often a thin line between saying too much and too little, which can be the difference between making a strong impression and making a wrong impression. The good news is that many interviewers rely on the same questions, which can be used to your advantage... if you know how to answer them.

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Below, job experts offer tips for tackling four of the most common interview questions without coming off corny, cagey or canned.

#### 1. What's the Biggest Challenge You Faced and How Did You Overcome It?

With this question, hiring managers are "looking to see if you can persevere in the face of adversity," said Suki Shah, CEO at GetHired.com. Shah's advice is to "describe a specific instance in your career when you were forced to change your original plan of action but were still able to achieve success."

Stick to projects, not people, says Roshini Rajkumar, a communication coach and author of *Communicate That!*. "Steer clear of responding with personnel issues or personality conflicts with previous bosses or co-workers," he advised.. (In other words, keep the story of that tyrant boss and uncooperative tech team to yourself.)

One potential mistake is spending too much time on the challenge instead of the solution. Keep your description of the obstacle tight and focused, but elaborate on how you overcame it.

And there may be more to that solution than you think. Ronald Katz, author and president of Penguin HR Consulting, said it's also important to explain "how the success benefited the department or organization." Shah suggested you explain "what you learned from the experience, and how this helped you to predict other challenges in your career."

**"Honestly tell the interviewer what it is that you don't do best. No one can do everything perfectly."**

#### 2. What's Your Biggest Weakness?

You know this one is coming, but may not know exactly why. Career coach Dorothy Tannahill Moran said the interviewer's goal is not so much to discover a true weakness as it is to understand "if you have self-awareness and can take positive action to solve your own issues."

So, do you go with the old standby of "perfectionism"? Melanie Benwell, managing director of Canadian recruitment firm PathWorks Personnel, said no. "Don't try to use a cliché like your weakness is that you're a workaholic. No one will believe that answer."

Some believe this approach really just circumvents the question: "I'm a hard worker, but sometimes I work *too* hard." But communication expert Lisa Marshall, author of *The Public Speaker's Guide To Ace Your Interview*, said you can't have it both ways. "Do not express a weakness that is also a strength -- that will just communicate your inability to identify areas of growth."

So what do you say? Katz said honesty is still the best policy. "Honestly tell the interviewer what it is that you don't do best. No one can do everything perfectly."

"Tell them how you compensate for this, how you minimize the impact of this weakness, and how you have successfully overcome this gap in your skill set," he continued. For example, someone fessing up to being disorganized should explain how he compensates with to-do lists and calendars.

One caution: Don't let your improvements depart too far from reality. "Any good interviewer will check your references," said Benwell. "If your answers don't match what they hear, you're almost certain to lose the chance for the job."

Marshall recommends staying away from personal weaknesses altogether. "Instead, choose a technical or background experience weakness, since this is viewed as repairable," she said. She points out that these new skills and experiences are often reasons people seek new jobs in the first place.

#### 3. Tell Me About Yourself

Your interviewer doesn't care that you collect vintage tissue boxes, but he or she also doesn't want a recitation of your resume either. Instead, Shah advised preparing a 60-second "elevator pitch" that highlights "some of the more interesting experiences that you've had that make you a great fit for the open position but that may not be as easy to glean from a quick perusal of your resume alone."

Leadership and workplace coach Darcy Eikenberg, author of *Bring Your Superpowers to Work* said, "This isn't an invitation for a life history; it's a shortcut to share your career snapshot. Have two or three lines about your relevant work history ready to share." Eikenberg's example:

"After graduating from Northwestern with my journalism degree, I grew my experience writing for an advertising trade magazine and then becoming an editor there. For the last five years, I've been freelancing for several publications around the country, including yours, and when I saw that you were looking to add permanent staff, I was very interested in exploring the opportunity further."

Diana Booher, CEO and founder of Booher Consultants and author of *Communicate with Confidence*, suggested candidates offer to answer the question both personally and professionally. "Give a brief summary statement or two about your personal life (hobbies, character traits, family) then provide a couple of statements about your professional life in this order: What was your goal when you started your career, what was your plan to get there, and where are you on the journey now?"

Workplace communications expert and author of *Surviving Dreaded Conversations*, Donna Flagg advised thinking about the question like you would a product you're trying to sell. "Talk about what makes you unique, productive and valuable," she explained. "Share what you like about work and also what really gets you jazzed."

Veteran recruiter and author Abby Kohut agreed that the interviewer wants a professional history, not a personal life story. "Think of this question as 'Tell me the highlights of your work history.'" Her suggested recipe: "A 30-second background synopsis, which includes an accomplishment at the end."

**"Express that you're the right one for this specific position, not just any job."**

#### 4. Why Are You the One For This Job?

Employers and hiring managers are looking for specific answers here, not "because I'm a rock star!" So give them what they want. "The key," said Katz, "is to avoid generic answers such as 'I'm a hard worker.'"

Realize also that you're the right one for this specific position, not just any job. So, make sure to connect your answer to the organization and its mission. "Talk about not only what you bring, but what you could add as well," said Flagg.

Preparation is key for all of these questions, but this one in particular. Nancy Range Anderson, president of Blackbird Learning Associates and author of *Job Search for Moms*, advises drawing two columns on a piece of paper. "In the first column, write down the job wording and job responsibilities of the open position. In the second column, write out your accomplishments as they relate to these words and phrases," she said. "This will help you better understand your strengths, weaknesses, challenges, job fit and be better prepared to respond to these types of questions."

You'll get more interview questions than these four, of course, and no single answer will inspire your hiring manager to suddenly stand up and say, "You're the one that I want!" (Unless she's Olivia Newton John). But with these insights and tips, you can possibly stay one good answer ahead of your competition, and one step closer to not only getting the job you want, but the one that wants you.

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