

Answering the "Tell me about yourself" question

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, inadequate training, or yes, even laziness, often ask stupid questions. Of those, one of the most challenging is the often used "Tell me about yourself" interview opener.

What most candidates ask us about this 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, hobbies, religious beliefs, that you like the Yankees or a proud member of AA. Yes, we have had candidates give each of those responses to the infamous "Tell me about yourself" question. We 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? Glad you asked; we think one example should convince you we are right. Let us 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 to this question, whether you are asked it or not.

The scenario was this: The candidate was a financial service professional; her recruiter had a financial services client 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 to why it is the part of the story that matters most. The candidate was asked the dreaded, "Tell me about yourself" question to start the interview. 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 finding the employer this ideal candidate. This candidate attempted to break the ice humorously, 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 straightforward 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 intelligently. The formula we have learned has worked wonders for hundreds of our candidates. 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 applicable for the open job. This sounds straightforward, but few of the thousands of candidates we have interviewed in the last 15 years have EVER been able to answer this question in this intelligent manner.

Typical candidates will generally respond with a narrowing question: "What would you like to know?" **But let's get one thing straight: It is in extremely poor form to answer the opening interview question with another question.** Yet, that is how the 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:

Your opening should be a brief one-sentence summary of the candidate's career history. For example, **"I am a professional fullstack developer with 10 years of overall experience building large scale applications with a concentration PHP and JavaScript in an Object-Oriented environment."**

Part Two

We next suggest you start on your education and work your way up your resume/career detailing the technologies you have been involved with and the positions you have held and include accomplishments you are proud of.

Part Three

The final piece of the marketing statement needs to be a one-sentence summary of precisely what you want to do next in your career. This statement should match what the employer is looking to hire!

Candidates who prepare in this manner are typically more confident during the interview and create a substantial and positive verbal first impression. They 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.

These three simple steps—summarizing what your experience is and sharing an impressive career accomplishment, and then outlining what would be an ideal next career step for you, one that matches what the employer is looking to hire. The three steps are essential 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 employment offers with employers who are impressed.