

## **What Not to Say in a Job Interview**

By Kelly Eggers

It's not all that difficult to completely blow a job interview.

Showing up late, wearing inappropriate clothing and answering your cell phone are a few good ways to kill your chances. But sticking your foot in your mouth will do the job as well.

Many hiring managers say that on occasion, candidates that seem perfect at first get crossed off the list by saying something senseless when asked a routine interview question.

Here are a few responses to some of those frequently asked questions that will be sure to kill the conversation and send you straight out the door.

### **1: So, tell me a little about yourself.**

If your answer begins with anything remotely related to your place of birth, experiences in grade school, or your bad relationship with your parents, you can pretty much consider the interview over. And remember, this is often the first question you'll face.

It's hard to know what exactly an interviewer is looking for you to say to this question, but it's safe to assume they want you to give a bit of background on your professional history. "Ask them where they'd like you to begin," says Carolyn Thompson, an executive recruiter and author of *10 Steps to Finding the Perfect Job*. Are they looking for your entire professional background, or just your most recent work experience? "It gives you a point to work forward or backward from," Thompson explains.

### **2: Why do you want to leave your current job?**

First and foremost, you should actually want to leave your job if you're going on interviews. If you meet that qualification, you shouldn't say you are just looking for a change and you definitely shouldn't badmouth your employer.

"It's ok to bring up a problem with your current employer," says J. Patrick Gorman, co-founder of the iFind group, an executive recruiter based in New York, "but you have to show how you attempted to solve it so you don't sound like a whiner."

Rita Boyle, a senior executive search consultant with New Jersey-based Cornerstone Search Group, suggests explaining how the change is the next logical step for your career path.

"Explain why you're running to their company instead of why you're running away from your current one," Boyle says

Other no-nos? Noting that you want to leave your company (or join a new one) because of anything relating to location, pay, or benefits.

### **3. What are your biggest strengths and weaknesses?**

The worst way to answer this question is without the slightest pinch of modesty.

"'Weaknesses? I don't have any weaknesses,' is the worst thing possible to say," says Gorman. A less-obvious-but-still-awful answer? Identifying a weakness, but not explaining how you got through it, he says. It's important to acknowledge your downfalls, but explain how you've been able to work around them as well.

When it comes to discussing strengths, don't give yourself an endlessly glowing review -- but don't go with a one-size-fits-all answer, either.

Mark Herschberg, a career skills professor at the Levin Institute in New York City, says almost every candidate trots out a platitude about being smart or hard-working.

"In those cases, I respond, '95% of the candidates gave me that same answer, can you tell me anything that distinguishes you from them?'" he says.

### **4. How would your current or former colleagues describe you?**

This is not an opportunity to simply re-frame your strengths. "There's a difference between how you and everyone you work with would describe you," says Thompson.

You should also steer clear of responses like "the only employee who did things right," or "a great guy to hang out with after work," says Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA career center at Northeastern University's College of Business Administration.

Think about what people at each level of the workforce look to you for, says Thompson. Your subordinates, for example, might say you're fair, and are always looking to pass along useful knowledge and opportunities to gain experience.

## **5. What is your goal for the short term?**

Never imply that you'll be leaving in short order to start your own business, go back to school, or that you see yourself in the interviewer's job. Another gaffe? Not knowing what your interviewer means by "short term."

You might define short-term as the next six months, and your interviewer might be thinking in terms of the next 18 to 24 months, so it's important to clarify the timeframe upfront. "A lot of people think 'I know what my short-term goal is,' but if you don't know their definition of 'short term,' your answer may or may not be appropriate," says Thompson.

## **6. Are there certain tasks or types of people you don't like?**

This is a particularly loaded question, according to Steven Raz, co-founder of Cornerstone Search Group, so make sure to tread carefully. Steer clear of any answer that is abrasive to authority figures, he counsels.

At the same time, Bruce Hurwitz of Hurwitz Strategic Staffing, a New York City executive recruiting firm, advises not to feign a universally agreeable demeanor. Be honest here, and note the things you tend to avoid -- whether it's people who are overly chatty, or jobs that require

endless data input -- as long as the tasks or personalities aren't going to be an inherent part of the role.

## **7. Do you have any questions?**

If there's a question that's a guaranteed game-changer, it's this one. Coming up blank is a good way to show that you aren't thoughtful or interested in the job, says Raz.

And not just any questions in return are appropriate. No-nos include asking about compensation for the job, what the company does, if you can work from home, how much vacation time you'll get, or if the drug and background testing are really mandatory. Ask queries that will help "match up your skills, experiences and accomplishments with what they're looking for," says Raz.

Instead of fumbling in the final minutes of the interview, be prepared with a few great questions that show you're interested in both the company and the job.