

Answering One of the Trickiest Interview Questions

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"Tell me about yourself."

This seems like such an innocuous question, but many novice job candidates have a hard time giving an answer. Even experienced interviewees can sound like canned ads for the jobs they are interviewing for. Employers ask such open-ended questions so they can see how candidates will present their skills, abilities, and ambitions.

Four Common Errors

First, here are common pitfalls to avoid:

1. "True Confessions": Focus on positives. For example, if you're going to talk about why you are interested in this position, convey your enthusiasm for the new opportunities -- not that you are looking to get away from your current boss. Keep your interviewer's view of you in a positive light.
2. "Home and Personal Life": You are here to convey your skills as an employee. Disclosing personal information, such as how many children you have, won't get the right message across.
3. "The Commercial": Some people have read interviewing books or been trained by career counselors. They may give a 30-second commercial which shows their skills being tailored to the job needs. These often sound too canned and may be too limiting in showing the candidate's abilities.
4. "I'll Tell You Exactly What You Want to Hear": Remember that the [interview](#) process is one of finding a mutual fit. You'll avoid later problems by selling your true strengths and traits, not those you think the interviewer is looking for.

What Interviewers Want

Now that you know how not to answer the question, here is guidance on how to ace it.

The interviewer is looking to see how your skills and personality will fit into and help their organization. So a good starting place is to understand yourself and your personal strengths, and then be ready to tailor these traits as part of your answer. You can try the Keirse Temperament Sorter (free online at

www.keirsey.com) or the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to help understand your personal style.

Review your assessment and highlight areas that demonstrate skills you enjoy using. Write down verbs that show you in action and nouns that show qualities that you exhibit. Next, write down three adjectives that describe you. Then, think of a time when you solved a problem. Employers like to hire people who show initiative. Then organize these items into a 30-second "commercial."

Four Sample Answers

Here are four examples of each of four basic personality types using this information when talking with various interviewers:

Gina, an aspiring [accountant](#), wanted to emphasize her organizational abilities, dedication, and timeliness. She answered, "Last summer I worked as an intern for XYZ Accounting. I was known for being thorough and accurate in my work. We were in a big rush to make a deadline and I noticed that one page was missing from the master I was copying. I let my boss know. We found it, and were able to get the pages in order and the report printed in time for his meeting. I'm sure that my attention to detail and to high-quality work will be an advantage for your company."

Brian was [interviewing](#) for a customer service position, and emphasized his versatility, fast response time, and energetic problem-solving abilities. He answered in this manner. "I've spent 10 years in customer service. People want solutions, and they want them quickly. I'm known as a guy who gets things done. One of our dealers had a customer interested in a luxury used sports car that needed a particular part. He'd had no luck through his usual channels and asked me for help. I made a few calls and the part was on its way to him from across the country in two hours. The sale went through. I'm really energized by solving problems for people."

Interviewing for a Manager of Employee Relations position in a large company, Inez emphasized her ability to work in teams and to coach others to success. Her answer: "This department requires knowledge of legal liability and requirements for businesses. Both employees and managers are uncomfortable with employee relations issues. Education of all parties given with a large dose of tact is necessary to keep problems to a minimum. In my last position we were able to forestall a potential lawsuit. One thing I particularly pride myself on was being able to solve issues of employee/supervisor mismatch. Helping them understand their roles, responsibilities, differences in strengths and weaknesses solved many problems. At times it was necessary to reassign the employee to a different

manager so they could continue to be of value to the company. I'd like to bring my knowledge to serve this company."

Tony was applying for the Manager of Information Systems. He emphasized his ability to analyze systems and strategic issues and to create innovative and pragmatic solutions. He answered, "In general, people who are attracted to IT are self-educating problem solvers. But the rate of change and pressure on the staff can be so high that people get burned out. One of the innovations that I used at my last company was giving spot awards to individuals who volunteered to show new techniques to colleagues. Many people in IT concentrate on their own projects and don't pass information along and the spot awards have encouraged a more communicative environment. I'm now looking for a new challenge in a larger sized company and believe I would be a good fit for your needs."

In each case, the person answering the question gave a true picture of how he or she solved problems and brought value in their last situation. None portrayed themselves in a phony style. Each of them received a job offer.