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How to answer ‘Tell me about yourself’

“Tell me about yourself” is still one of the most frequently asked questions during an interview. Often, it will be the first question to get the ball rolling and, because it can be somewhat disarming, candidates tend to “wing it” by rambling on and on.

My motto for having a successful interview in any situation is, “Prior preparation prevents poor performance.” Realizing you have a 99.5-percent chance of “Tell me about yourself” being asked, why not be totally prepared to create a powerful first impression? Have a great response ready to roll off your tongue and wow the interviewer.

To begin with, you need to understand what the hiring manager is looking for when asking the question. Generally, it means “Give me an overview of your background,” such as past experience and proven successes as they relate to the position/company: relevant strengths, abilities, attributes and accomplishments. Avoid talking about your personal life — where you grew up, family, pets and hobbies — as well as rehashing your résumé. Recognize your response to the question can build rapport and set the tone for the remainder of the interview. This is a great opportunity for you to provide a “sales pitch/branding statement” that illustrates the value you bring to the company in addition to the position for which you are applying. Though the interviewer is not

looking for a 10-minute discussion, an answer of approximately 60-90 seconds, and no longer than two minutes, will be sufficient.

Kathryn Minshew, CEO and founder of The Muse, suggests using a method called the “present-past-future” formula. You start with the present — where you are right now. Then segue into the past, a little bit about the experience you’ve had and the relevant skills you gained from previous positions. Finally, finish with the future: why you are really excited about the current job opportunity for which you are interviewing. Talk about why you are interested in the job and the company, highlight skills and attributes that make you an ideal fit for the position, and discuss any other abilities that enable you to bring value. Be sure to research the company to identify the qualities they value (customer service, collaborative teamwork, leadership, quality, safety, problem solving, critical thinking, etc.). When possible, try to provide a professional success story that demonstrates and supports those qualities.

Consider the following example response: “I have nine years of experience as a professional engineer with specific expertise in civil construction. Currently, I’m involved with bidding, managing, constructing and completing projects on time and under budget. Recently, I led a project team that succeeded in com-

pleting a \$20 million project that was finished on time, under budget and with a safety record of zero recordable incidents. I’ve also functioned as a surveying department supervisor, overseeing field operations on several U.S. Army Corps of Engineers drainage impact studies. I’m particularly interested in working with your organization because of your company’s construction goals and safety track record, and my proven history of contributing in the areas of drainage, water distribution and retaining walls. Outside of the office, I enjoy fishing and hiking.”

In using such a format, you are able to cover the basics in a way that sounds organized and creates interest, in addition to giving you a competitive edge. Make sure you tailor your response to reflect the needs of the position and the company.

Before you race to the interview, you must prepare. Write out your script, and then practice aloud. Rehearse until you feel your answer flows and you are confident it sounds natural and conversational.

Here’s the bottom line: Although “Tell me about yourself” may be a question you dread, it should be one you welcome. It gives you a prime opportunity to promote yourself as the consummate candidate for the position.

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