

Tell Me about Yourself



On the Job
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“Tell me about yourself” is one of the most frequent opening questions in the job interview, and it’s the one that should be the easiest to answer. After all, who knows more about you than, well, you? That may just be the problem; most jobseekers don’t know where to begin, and they may give either too little information or way too much. This question is trickier than it sounds, and it’s critical to getting the interview off to a good start.

First, let’s discuss the context of this question. A recruiter is generally asking to get you talking; she wants to get a feel for how articulate you are, how confident, and what makes you tick. Chemistry, the fit between your personality and the team you’ll be working with, is one of the most important – and least tangible – factors in whether you’ll be hired. Any hint that the chemistry might not be right will be cause for possible elimination as a candidate, so it’s important that you don’t start out on a negative note.

Most employers know by now that they can’t probe into your marital status or whether you have children - or are planning to. They also know that some jobseekers will probably tell them everything they can’t ask in the first few minutes of the interview. I’ve had applicants lead with information about nasty divorces, incarceration, and major surgery – all a little overwhelming for the first few minutes of our acquaintance. I’ve also had applicants start off with stories from their childhood. Unless it’s relevant to your job experience, try not to include details about your personal life just yet (the same guidelines you’d apply to your resume.)

Do try to prepare to speak for one to two minutes about your relevant history. It might be a good idea to jot down notes in advance and practice for this part of the interview. Practice will help you time your answer and keep the most interesting elements flowing smoothly. Here are some ideas of what to include, in chronological order, which makes it easy for your listener to follow.

Start out with where you were born and raised. Are you a native – or from some exotic locale? People are always interested, and it gives your interviewer something to comment on, which keeps the conversation going (“Do you miss the New England winters?”) If you are not a Florida native, you might include information on when and why you moved to the area. Next, move on to your education, if it’s appropriate. If your degree doesn’t enhance your qualifications for the position, you can simply name your alma mater.

Next, you’ll move on to a brief career summary. One or two sentences can be all you need for previous work experience. Be sure to tell it in a way that emphasizes why you consider the experience important. “I spent 15 years traveling the world as a consultant, which helped me

understand many different cultures” or “I worked my way from housekeeper to General Manager of the hotel in 10 years.” A good way to organize previous experience: “My early career included work in X, X, and X,” (functional) or “I’ve worked for Y, Y, and Y” (company names or industries.) As you get closer to the current period or experience that’s particularly relevant to the position you’re applying for, you’ll want to talk about it in more depth.

End your discussion of experience with your current job, if you’re employed “I now serve as …” Here’s where you fit in significant community service experience, too. You might also discuss accomplishments you’re proud of: articles written, cases won, offices held, awards – all that fits in here. Think carefully about the tone you take with accomplishments; you’ll want to credit teamwork when you can, and list only the accomplishments that you think will help the employer understand the value you will bring to the job.

Finally, you’ll want to close with an explanation of why you’re in the job market. This is especially important if you’re currently employed. You may simply say something like, “I really enjoy my current job and the team I work with, but your ad seemed like a very exciting opportunity. I couldn’t pass up the chance to learn more about it.” You’ll be off to a great start.

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