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'Tell me about yourself:' How to answer with poise, confidence

"Believe it or not, the age-old question, "Tell me about yourself," is still one of the most frequently asked questions during an interview. Often, it will be the very first question and — because it can be somewhat disarming — candidates tend to "wing it" by rambling on and on.

Throughout the years, it has continually amazed me how many candidates have difficulty providing the hiring manager with an effective response. My motto for having

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a successful interview in any situation is, "Prior preparation prevents poor performance." Keeping that in mind, you have a 99.5-percent chance of "Tell me about yourself" being asked, especially at the beginning of the interview. Why not be totally prepared for a great response to roll right off your tongue so you can wow the interviewer?

First of all, you need to understand what the hiring manager is looking for when asking the question. Usually, the question means, "Give me an overview of your background, who you are — professionally speaking." Avoid talking about your personal life — where

you grew up, family, pets, hobbies and so on. Stick strictly to business. Recognize your response to this question can 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, as well as to the position for which you are applying. Though the interviewer is not looking for a 10-minute discussion, an answer of approximately 30-60 seconds, and no longer than two minutes, will be sufficient.

So, where do you start? A few sentences, two to five, should be enough to give your interviewer a good idea of who you are, what you've done and your skill set that relates directly to the job you are applying for. Depending upon the position, items of importance could include your related educational background, past positions, current position, relevant accomplishments, skills and qualities, as well as why you are applying for this position.

For example: "Well, my background encompasses nine years 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. I've also functioned as a surveying department supervisor, overseeing field operations on several Army Corps of Engineers' drainage impact studies. I'm par-

ticularly interested in working with your organization because of your company's construction goals, and my proven record of contributing in the areas of drainage, sewage, water distribution and retaining walls."

In using such a format, you are able to cover the basics in a way that sounds organized, logical and can create interest — in addition to giving you a competitive edge. Always try to tailor your response to reflect the company's needs.

Now, before you race to the interview, you must prepare to successfully respond to the "Tell me about yourself" question. First of all, do not make any attempt to wing your answer. That can be disastrous! Write out your script, then practice aloud. Rehearse until you feel your answer flows, and you are confident it sounds natural and conversational. *Do not memorize!* Doing so can cause you to go blank and unable to think of a single word.

The bottom line: Though "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 in a positive manner.

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