

Interviews... the good, the bad, the ugly

By Christine Fader



So you're getting an undergraduate or graduate degree and you're primed to go out there and talk to employers. Hold on a second. Are you ready to show what makes you different from everyone else with the same degree(s)? Can you succinctly answer the question, "Tell me about yourself"? If not, unbutton that new suit jacket and take a few minutes to think about what's ahead.

After doing a bit of recruiting, employers start to develop opinions about what they like to see in a candidate, what are the most over-used and trite answers, and what are real turn-offs. They fall under the general categories of: Interviews... the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The good...

First let's clarify that "the good" refers to good *interviews*, not the "right" answer. Good interviews are dynamic conversations full of interesting information conveyed back and forth between you and the employer(s). Here are some suggestions to help you:

Less is more. Focusing in greater depth on fewer employers that are really of interest to you is a good strategy for success. A significant question for an employer as they enter an interview is "Why does this person want to work with us?" Applying too broadly can dilute your ability to demonstrate how you can and want to do THIS work at THIS organization.

Ask (strategic) questions. Do your homework by investigating the organization's website, annual reports, and talking to people who work in the field or in the organization. Ask questions that will help you confirm the match between you and the work. Think about what is important to you in your work and ask questions that show your interest in what the host organization does and your ability to contribute to it.

Explain the obvious. You do not have to be a social butterfly to succeed in an interview. You *do* need to explain to people what your skills and experiences are, as related to the role. Be authentic and let them see what you are like to work with. You do not need to be perfect. But you must give examples that reassure the employer that you are someone they can work with.

continued

The bad...

Here are some of the common qualities that can make the difference between being first or second on a callback list.

“Lord, I was born a ramblin’ man...”

Verbose candidates can not only annoy a recruiter, but demonstrate that they are not effective communicators. Be succinct and specific. Ask if they want more detail to avoid giving information that may be unnecessary. Phone yourself and leave the answer to a question a day on your voicemail. You will learn a lot about how you come across. Watch out for too many filler words such as “like” and “um...” When they are overused, they might undermine your credibility.

Expecting a firing squad. The best interviewers want to get the information they need, but also help you to relax as much as possible. It’s normal to be nervous but, in North America, candidates who don’t smile or make eye contact, can be viewed as untrustworthy. Interviewers are people too and they want to see what you’re like to work with. Leaving the interview without engaging the interviewer (even while nervous!) might be interpreted as a lack of motivation or initiative.

Keeps ‘em guessing. Good candidates provide consistent evidence to support who they explain and show themselves to be. One candidate repeatedly stated that she was “discrete” yet in almost every story she told, she demonstrated clearly that she lacked discretion. Candidates who leave an employer wondering about inconsistencies after an interview are taking a big risk.

The ugly...

Here are some things that can be career-limiting mistakes.

“I’m a perfectionist”. What’s your greatest weakness? Avoid the much over-used, “I’m such a perfectionist”. Do you have a couple of weaknesses you can talk about (only if asked), with examples? Use weaknesses that will not compromise your candidacy, but are still honest. Describe specifically how you compensate for them. Employers are interested mostly in your strategies for dealing with your weaknesses, rather than the flaws themselves.

Fakes it. Interviewers want to find people who know what they are good at and what they need help with. Sometimes this might mean needing to admit that you do not know something. Getting caught fabricating something in an interview process can end the process right there.

Wants “Just a job”. Employers know that most employees do better work when they like what they do (at least a little). It doesn’t make much sense, therefore, to hire someone who wants “just a job” and doesn’t know why THIS is the job/organization/field that fits. That’s why telling an employer you want “any job” can leave them feeling you don’t really want the job they are offering. Your first after-grad job might not be your dream job, but you have to be able to find some enthusiasm for it to talk about. If you show that you have thought about the “fit”, you stand a better chance of demonstrating that you are serious about contributing.

The Magic Formula

How do you know what will work with each employer when every employer and organization is different? The key is to be your positive, professional, and *authentic* self. Don’t follow a script or memorize answers. Explain who you are and always demonstrate how you can contribute by preparing and using concrete examples from your paid work, unpaid work, learning and extra-curriculars. Politely ask questions and use the interview as part of the process that helps you to determine whether this is work you really want to do.

Now, try to relax, smile, and ...tell me about yourself.

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