

What's a 'Weakness'? A Way to Show Strength

A Common Interview Question Can Be Used To Boost Your Image

By LILY WHITEMAN
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What's the most odious job interview question of all? Many would say it's the old "what are your weaknesses?" question — which is still frequently asked in interviews for all types of jobs, from internships to professorships.

But even interviewers who use the weakness question recognize its limitations. "No one realistically expects to get brutally honest answers like, 'I'm below-average intelligence and difficult to work with,'" said Heidi McAllister, a local environmental educator who has hired dozens of professionals into government and nonprofit organizations.

So why do interviewers keep asking a question that — without the help of a truth serum — rarely elicits full disclosure? Because interviewers say that even skewed answers can help reveal whether applicants possess key qualities such as self-awareness, humility, sincerity, zest, and skill in managing shortcomings and mistakes.

By reflecting such qualities in your response, "you can really distinguish yourself and stand out from the pack," said Robin Sawyer, who helps screen applicants for a D.C. nonprofit conservation group.

Sawyer said, "The worst answers are 'I don't know' or 'I have no weaknesses' — which I hear frequently." (Sorry, Superman, the credibility meter just hit zero.)

"When I get unbelievable or evasive answers, I suspect that the applicant isn't the straight shooter I want to hire," McAllister said.

What, then, is a strong answer to the weakness question? Conventional wisdom has long recommended responses such as "I'm a perfectionist" or "I'm a workaholic, so my boss has to peel my fingers back from my computer one by



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one every night to make me go home." But by now, interviewers recognize those canned clichés as such, McAllister said.

Therefore, to remain credible, many interviewers now suggest counterbalancing a true but noncritical gap in your knowledge against your desirable traits. For example, Rajul Pandya, who manages the National Center for Atmospheric Research's internship program, hired an applicant who described how she had bolstered her understanding of a technical issue by taking classes and re-

questing additional job assignments that addressed the issue.

Her answer won over Pandya because "I want to hire people who can say, 'I've thought about what I don't do so well and have taken action to do it better.'"

Similarly, Peter Feldman, an adviser at Plan International Cambodia and an experienced interviewer, recommends tackling weakness questions by saying, "In my last job, I underestimated the importance of X. So in the future, I'll focus more energy on that."

McAllister advises "showcasing your

commitment to staying current in your field, a prized quality." Say: "I try to continually update my skills. This year, I'd like to take training in the latest techniques in X, so that I will do Y faster and more efficiently."

Alternatively, Erin Weinman, a federal information technology project manager, recently landed a choice job after acknowledging, "I've never worked for this organization before, so I have a lot to learn about it. But I offer new perspectives and energetic approaches."

You can also conquer such questions by packaging strengths within weaknesses. Nancy Bachrach, an advertising account manager for a national publication, has impressed hiring managers by revealing that her inclination to quickly complete projects can cause errors, so she double-checks and proofreads all her work.

In addition to confronting open-ended weakness questions, you may be asked about skills that you do, in fact, lack. "Don't just say, 'No, I can't do that,'" advised Howard Hyman, who directs a large federal accounting office. "Give me reasons to believe in you: Explain how your knowledge, willingness to do extra and ability to learn quickly will help you improve. Describe how you'd swiftly catch up and have done so previously."

And what if you sense that an unspoken liability, if left ignored, may silently doom you? Perhaps, for example, you suspect that you're perceived as too young, too old, an outsider, too entrenched, overqualified, overly aggressive or too passive.

"Anticipating a concern is a good idea because it shows insight and that you're on the same wavelength as interviewers," said Ray Kurzweil, founder of nine high-tech companies and a best-selling author. But he warned, "Don't reveal key weaknesses that interviewers wouldn't otherwise notice."

Join Lily Whiteman on Wednesday at noon for a live online discussion about interviewing for government jobs, part of the week-long Hiring Squad special feature at washingtonpost.com/jobs.

Making the Most of a Potential Minefield

The top reason for interview failure is lack of preparation, interviewers say. So be ready to discuss your weaknesses by:

- Selecting one technical or administrative weakness for your answer. Just one — this is no time to get effusive!
- Practicing an explanation of how you compensate for weaknesses and liabilities, and what you have learned from mistakes. Craft earnest pitches that omit deal-busting deficiencies and will withstand further questioning and reference checks.
- Role-playing with friends your answers to weakness and other common interview questions. The paradox of practice: The more you rehearse, the more spontaneous and smarter you will sound.