

How to Answer the “Tell Me about Yourself” Interview Question

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

The “tell me about yourself” question is one of the most common questions you will ever be asked in an interview and generally one of the questions that eliminates most applicants. In fact, the majority of people interviewing for jobs blow it on this one.

When you are going into an interview, the interviewer already knows a lot about you from your resume (where you went to school and where you are working, for example). All interview questions are designed to determine five things:

- (1) **can you do the job,**
- (2) **do you want the job,**
- (3) **will you fit in,**
- (4) **can we manage you,**
- (5) **will you stay at the job long term?**

The “tell me about yourself” interview question is a fantastic opportunity for interviewees to solidify their qualifications.

The interviewer is not looking for your life story. You need to keep the interviewer’s attention. Your answers should generally relate to your professional accomplishments and interest in the opportunity. You should always take special care to avoid making your answers too personal. You need to understand the job and its requirements and tailor your answers to this.

1. Can you do the job?

In my career, I have seen numerous people who looked good on paper. However, when I asked them to “Tell me about yourself” it was clear they could not do the job. The “tell me about yourself” interview question is intended to see if you are *psychologically, physically and emotionally* capable of doing the job. You need to show that you are a good fit.

- I interviewed a person to work in a warehouse carrying heavy boxes of paper. When asked to talk about himself, he launched into a long story about how he had just recovered from back surgery. Does this sound like the sort of person who could do the job?
- I interviewed another guy once for a financial position who had a gap in his resume. When I asked him about himself, he told me he had recently gotten out of federal prison. Does this sound like the sort of person who could do the job?
- I have interviewed numerous people to be legal recruiters. Many of these people show up and state that they are “tired” from practicing law in a large law firm are “looking for more freedom, less pressure and fewer hours.” [Being a good legal recruiter](#) requires a constant commitment to the work and long hours to be really successful. If someone makes comments like this in an interview, there is a problem. The person cannot do the job.

While I hate to say it, many people also show up for interviews and simply act crazy when asked the “tell me about yourself” question. They talk about divorces, child custody battles, overcoming substance abuse problems, lawsuits against former employers and others. While all of this is part of life, someone who is preoccupied with something outside of work is clearly not someone who can do the job.

Interviewers simply want to know that you have the ability to do the work at hand. Anything in your answer that implies you cannot do the work is the wrong answer.

- If a job requires that you work alone, describing yourself as a “social person” is a big no-no. In this sort of case, you would want to describe yourself as someone who works most effectively without interruption and similar characteristics. Conversely, if the job requires you to work closely with others, it is important that you describe yourself as someone who enjoys working in a team environment.
- Some jobs require that people simply follow orders and not question them. For this type of job, you need to stress that you “thrive on structure” and work best when you have clear guidelines. Jobs that do not require structure require the opposite approach. You should emphasize your creativity, your enjoyment of independence, and ability to generate ideas.

You need to put aside your ego and think about your answer from the employer’s point of view. Your answers should be structured to show that you are someone who will do whatever the job takes. Present yourself as someone who is right for the job.

2. Do you want the job?

Your demeanor when answering this question is very important. The interviewer wants to see how seriously you take the question. Someone who really wants a given job will sit up straight, give the question a bit of thought and then give a well thought out reason that takes into account the requirements of the position and their suitability for it. Many people, when asked this question, respond with answers that boggle my mind. I have heard:

- “That’s a very personal question.”
- “What do you want to know?”
- “Why?”
- “Not much to tell. I need a job and here I am!”
- “I’ve had a hard life and am doing my best.”
- “I wish I did not have to work, but I still do.”

Your answer needs to show that you really want the job. Employers are looking for employees who are enthusiastic, appreciative of the work, and positive thinkers. They do not want to hire someone who is defensive, lazy, or resentful.

Your answer needs to demonstrate a commitment to the subject matter and the ability to do the given work. Telling a short story (interviewers like to hear short stories) regarding your interest in the subject matter and company is a good idea. A story that connects you to the employer and shows your interest is very important.

Employers would much rather hire someone who really wants the job than a person who is on the fence or does not seem to want to work at all. The person who wants the job is far more likely to be passionate and bring a higher degree of achievement to the position than someone who does not. A person enthusiastic about the work is very likely to do well.

The “tell me about yourself” interview question is a chance to show an employer how excited you are about the opportunity they are offering. Once, in an interview, I was asked to tell an interviewer about myself. I spoke about how I grew up in Michigan and how my grandfather was a newspaper reporter who had always wanted me to be an attorney. I spoke about how he had been friends with Thomas Dewey (the founder of the now-defunct law firm Dewey Ballantine) in college, and that he had talked with me about what a great career Dewey had. I told the person interviewing me that I had wanted to get a job with Dewey Ballantine since I was young. Because I was interviewing with Dewey Ballantine at the time, this went over extremely well. It showed I wanted the job.

When someone really wants something, you can tell from their body language, the tone of their voice and the effort they put into their answer. When you answer this question you should always be strong and direct. You never want to be milquetoast and not seem enthusiastic. You need to give answers which clearly demonstrate your desire to be successful in the position.

3. Will you fit in?

When asked about yourself, you need to understand the people you are interviewing with. Your answer to the “tell me about yourself” interview question is the perfect opportunity to show how you fit in.

When I was in college, I interviewed for a job as a trader on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. I was interviewing with a firm where all the men were watching sports on televisions in their offices. They also had sports memorabilia all over their offices.

The smartest answer I could have provided to the “tell me about yourself” interview question would have likely been to talk about my love for the Chicago Bears and Chicago Bulls. This would have immediately shown that I could fit in. In fact, you would have to be an idiot to not realize that a love of sports was an important requirement for fitting in with this employer. Instead, I gave the wrong answer and talked about how I was enjoying studying the history of the African diaspora and was very interested in this. This did not go over well.

Employers want to work with people who are similar to them and who they feel comfortable with. In the law firm world, for example, there are many law firms that are predominantly Jewish, Catholic, gay, comprised of people from certain schools and other factors. In order to be part of this group, you need to be like the people you are interviewing with. If you have something in common with the people you are interviewing with, they will be comfortable with you and vice versa. Groups simply organize around each other based on shared interests, cultural and other characteristics.

The answer to the “tell me about yourself” question will show the employer whether you fit in or not. Your answer should be tailored to your audience. Learn something about the people you are interviewing with before your meeting. Do your best to understand the people that work there. Your answer needs to show that you will fit in.

4. Can we manage you?

There are many people who are simply not manageable. If you are going to get hired for any job and work for other people, you need to show that you can take direction and follow instructions. You need to be able to be managed.

As part of my job, I often am working with partners from large law firms who are interested in transitioning to a large corporation as in-house counsel. Many times, these partners are quite well known and have written numerous influential articles in their space. At the same time, when these people interview for in-house counsel jobs inside of corporations they go in and tell the company how things need to be done, what they would do differently and so forth. In theory, offering criticism can be useful; however, in many cases the companies just need soldiers and people to do the work. If someone offers strong opinions right away, they may not be manageable.

I have seen people proudly list various protest movements they participated in on their resume. They take pride in the fact that they shut down a university office or protested a war by getting arrested at a rally. While this sort of behavior serves a social purpose, it also shows an employer that you may be willing to consciously go against the company’s policies and be impossible to manage.

Many people start talking about why they do not like their current (or former) positions. If anything you say is a sign that you cannot be managed, then this is going to be a problem. Most employers (if not all) have a goal and something they are striving to do. They need people who are able to follow directions and do an outstanding job. Employers do not want people who are going to undermine or constantly question the organization’s objectives (unless they are in upper management, for example).

People who are impossible to manage are a cancer inside of many organizations. They are constantly breaking rules, creating issues and making operations chaotic. If you give answers that show you are going to be difficult to manage, you will not have an easy time getting hired.

5. Will you do the job long-term?

If an employer has a “real” job, they generally want to make sure that the person they are hiring is someone who will be happy at the company over the course of their career. This is a very easy one to blow and a question that eliminates countless people at the interview stage.

- I have interviewed people who showed up for our meeting and announced that they lived in a different area but were hoping to relocate to this location at some time in the future.
- When I am interviewing people for writing jobs in Los Angeles, for example, many of these people come into interviews and talk about how they are aspiring screenwriters and love writing screenplays and dream of being in the movie business. If the job I have is related to writing profiles of law firms or law schools, I know the odds of this person lasting very long are next to zero.
- I interviewed a guy once for a position paying \$120,000 a year who told me he wanted to work for “another year or two”

and save his money so he could open a bike shop.

When an employer is hiring someone for a job, they are planning on investing in the person. Generally, employers spend a lot of time and resources finding the right person to fill their openings. Morale may suffer when people leave. Most importantly, why should any employer hire anyone who is not going to be committed to the job (if and when they are hired)? People who are not likely to stay with the company for very long are a real risk.

I remember how much law firms generally liked it when the attorneys working for them bought a house, got married and had children. The reason for this was simple: The attorney was far less likely to suddenly make a change with their career. They were invested in the job, were committed to earning a paycheck, and likely to stay with the firm long term. In fact, someone who has various obligations (family and home) is often the sort of person employers want to hire because it shows they are likely to need to earn money and stay with the company long term.

If someone shows up for an interview and talks about their desire to do something else with their careers, it is a red flag. I know they will not last very long in the job and will not hire them.

Conclusions

Another way of looking at how to answer the above questions would be by answering the following questions:

- *"How do you see yourself?"*
- *"Are you capable of doing the job?"*
- *"Do we identify with you?"*
- *"Are you focused?"*
- *"How long are you likely to last in the position?"*
- *"Are you going to follow directions?"*
- *"How will you get along with others?"*

The answers to these seven questions are essentially the same as your response to "Tell me about yourself." You need to see yourself and your answer to every question from the employer's point of view. Interviewers are looking for the best long-term fit for each job. Anything you say that supports this is likely to get you hired and anything that does not is likely to mean you will still be looking for a job.

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