

Making a negative sound positive:

A little preparation can help leave the right impression

By Robert Holton

Making a positive impression is one of the goals of an effective job interview. Even though negative topics, such as a past bad job experience, may be discussed, there are ways to talk about those negatives in a positive light.

Discussing your past or current employer, talking about weaknesses and stating what you do not want in a job are three areas that have a tendency to turn negative. With a little planning and smart word choice, you can turn the typically negative into the uniquely positive.

Saying good things about a bad job

A poor experience with a past or current employer may be the very reason you are seeking a new job. Though it is unwise to speak poorly of a past employer, you may have to explain a terrible job experience. The key is to focus on yourself rather than on the employer, in this instance. For example, instead of saying, "My boss treated me like a child, constantly yelling at me and never trusting me," you could say, "I feel that I work best in an environment that allows me to understand goals and then pursue them in an independent fashion. That was not a possibility with my last employer." Same meaning, different impression.

Try to avoid blaming your past boss, past employer or past co-workers. Phrase your comments

personally, utilizing "I feel.." or "I believe..." That way, you take responsibility for your employment decisions and avoid sounding spiteful or defensive.

Turning weaknesses into strengths

Most interviews include some question about strengths and weaknesses. Typical responses to inquiries about a weakness are admissions to "being a perfectionist" or "working too hard." These are obvious and overused attempts to avoid admitting any real weaknesses.

A more honest approach is to take time before an interview to list your weaknesses as an employee and think of the corresponding positive. For example, if you find it difficult to focus on one task, the opposite might be your ability to handle many tasks. Then phrase the response in the positive and admit to the weakness. You might say, "I find that I handle multiple tasks better than most, and occasionally that can cause a lack of focus on a single issue." Now you have an focused on an asset and minimized the weakness. You have also shared an honest insight about yourself that most interviewers will sincerely appreciate. Sometimes, self awareness of this type is seen as an additional strength and honesty is always appreciated.

You know what you don't want

Avoid negative language when stating what you do not want in a position. The easiest way is by knowing as much as possible about the duties and expectations of the position. You may have an interview for which you did not have a chance to learn much about a position and are faced with an interviewer who wants to know what you expect from the position without having told you very much about it. Avoid absolute words and statements, such as "never" and "will not." Absolute words and statements can immediately disqualify you and will give an impression of inflexibility. Instead, emphasize the duties you do want, listing several areas of interest directly related to the position.

When asked specifically about performing a duty you do not like, be honest and tactful. If you are willing to take on a task you do not like, say that you will, but admit that the task may not be your favorite. Keep in mind that initial duties for the position may very well change in time, so don't remove yourself from consideration by demanding too much. Focusing on how you want to contribute will allow you to leave an impression of an employee that is flexible, will enjoy the position, and always focuses on the positive.

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