

The Interview Trap: "Tell Me About Yourself."

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One of the most common, yet most frequently fumbled interview questions is the question “**Tell me about yourself?**” And yet, this should be the easiest answer for someone to present in an interview. The question often arises because the hiring manager hasn't really reviewed the resume in a lot of detail. So while he or she are coming up to speed, they throw out a pop quiz question by asking you, “**So, tell me about yourself.**”

This question is an open-ended question and the answer is a free form essay which can easily lead to all kinds of perilous responses. **Yet, answered correctly, it can present a huge advantage.** You have a gift---an opportunity of stating 2 or 3 of your strongest points and then controlling where the conversation goes next with a question at the end.

Your answer demonstrates your ability to communicate on your feet when you're thrown a question, your ability to focus, and your ability to clarify your personal interest and agenda.

This common job interview question should be answered similar to an “**elevator pitch**” with an answer that is **clear**, contains concise, **bullet-points** of information, and is **relevant to the opportunity**. It should be easy to understand and should not generate more questions than answers. It should also be less than 2 minutes.

So the key to handling this question in the interview is to prepare the answer before the interview.

The hiring manager really doesn't want to hear about your life history, the things that are of personal interest to you, a long and boring sequence of your job history, or any irrelevant fluff. You will miss the opportunity this question presents if, instead of answering the question directly, you pause, hesitate, are confused, or ask “what would you like to hear?”

What the hiring manager really wants to hear is a focused summary of relevant bullet-points that can benefit the company and help them solve a problem.

So how do we structure this answer?

Let's create a 5 sentence response, followed by a *steering* question. Here's how we might structure it.

1. If you've prepared properly for the job interview, you've identified **relevant keywords** for products, industries, technologies, tasks and titles that can easily be used to create the bullets in this summary.
2. The *first 3-4 sentences* can list some of these **keywords** and expand them with length of experience (years) or with breadth of experience (for tasks or titles).
3. Then **add some results** and these **keywords** have now become “**bullet-point**” **accomplishments**. Do not try to cover the entire job description. Focus on the 3 major strengths you feel you bring to the table, based on the keywords.

Sentences 4 and 5 should be oriented toward benefits to the manager and areas of possible mutual interest (complementing their agenda) which are to be explored in today's meeting. Focus on what you are able to bring to the table. For example, some of the biggest benefits you can bring to a company and to a manager are:

- Someone who can solve the immediate problem
- Someone that would help the manager achieve their personal agenda
- The ability to start fast based on proven expertise
- An independent worker which requires less management time
- Someone who can take on more responsibilities over time
- Someone who is a low risk hire or has potential for high results.

Then we end with the **appropriate steering question** to move the job interview towards our preferred direction which is usually the TARGET QUESTION.

Tell me about Yourself (Example 1)

1. **TITLE sentence:** Sure. Be happy to. I have 15 years' experience as a Senior Account Manager, Sales Representative and Client Services Manager (**one of them is their title**).
2. My **industry knowledge** covers life safety and bio-medical technologies with product knowledge of fire alarm systems, security systems and medical test equipment (**include their industry or product where possible**).
3. **My expertise** is managing sales teams, customer relationship management, business development and sales/service leadership. I am a master of account management **and I grow business - period!**
4. The **Companies** I have worked for include: Company 1, Company2 and Company3
5. **BRIDGE: What I am looking for** is an opportunity as an Engagement Manager, Sr. Account Manager or Client Service Manager (one is their title) where I can utilize my skills developing accounts, building teams, serving customers, training and business development.
6. **CLOSE to the target question and back in control!! Rather than bore you with two hours of my background**, could you share with me the top 3 tasks that are most important to be successful in your position, and let me focus my background on them?

Here is a sample for an IT professional (Example 2)

Sample sentences 1-3;

(1) **TITLE:** Mr. Manager, I've had 20 years of technical background in information technology, a BS in computer science with increasing responsibilities from **Developer, Project Leader and also a Presales Consultant**.

(2) **My strongest expertise** is in the **Microsoft technologies** including .net development, SQLserver data base and Business Intelligence where I have performed all tasks associated with defining, developing and implementing custom Business applications for the Financial Services industry.

(3) **My Applications experience** included Manufacturing, Cost accounting and Supply Chain.

(4) **COMPANIES:** I have received increasing compensation and responsibilities in the **4 companies** including **Accenture, IBM and Ciber**. I have been with because I completed my projects in a timely and reliable manner. My performance ratings were always top 20%.

(5) **BRIDGE:** My personal goals at this point are to find a company where I can build upon this technical background and bring this expertise to help solve additional problems as well as add some new experiences. That why I'm pleased to be exploring your company where it appears my background will allow me to contribute quickly, and take on some responsibility to help your department accomplish its goals.

(6) **CLOSE to the target question and back in control!! Rather than bore you with two hours of my background,** could you share with me the top 3 tasks that are most important to be successful in your position, and let me focus my background on them?

(7) **Or general CLOSE (where there is no obvious position or description):** I look forward to sharing additional relevant experience with you today but before we start, could you give me some feeling for where you see the need for this kind of background within your department?

So the key to handling this simple, yet treacherous interview question is to be prepared ahead of time. Pick 3 points and your steering question. Structure a very simple 4-5 sentence summary of what you bring to the table that is clear and relevant to the manager and the opportunity at hand. Do not stray into other events. Do not cover the job description in detail. Remember, it is a summary. The manager will get to the detail he needs, rest assured. Good luck and good interviewing.

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