

What is your Greatest Weakness?

Imagine how different things might be if our public representatives had to answer to this question truthfully before going to the polls. Would Bertie's position as Taoiseach have continued for over a decade had he disclosed his close relationship with property developers or declared his weakness for signing blank cheques? Would Iris Robinson have won her seat in Stormont had she admitted her weakness for teenage boys? The list is endless.....

Yet it takes the all the skill of a politician to formulate a tactful and diplomatic answer to this challenging question.

Why is this question asked?

Like so many people, I used to cringe when asked this question and wondered how it could add value to the interview process. After all, nobody in their right mind admits weaknesses in interview – do they?

Interestingly, an employer can learn quite a lot by asking this question. Many times their interest does not lie in identifying the actual weakness...instead they want to see how self aware you are, if you are happy to maintain the status quo or if you are constantly looking for opportunities to learn and develop.

Sometimes the employer is just interested in seeing how well you handle the difficult questions – to see if you can think on your feet, if you maintain your composure and react well under pressure.;

Showing your Achilles heel

Honesty is the best policy but it needs to be delivered with care and finesse. Below are a couple of guidelines to consider when answering this question:

- a) When highlighting your weakness, you need to expand your answer to assure the interviewer that you have taken positive and pro-active steps to overcome it.
- b) Avoid clichés such as “I am a perfectionist.” In general the more personal and genuine your answer to this question, the better. By showing more of your personality you are also helping build a rapport with the interviewer.
- c) Don't choose a weakness which would disqualify you from the position. For example, if you interviewing for an editor's role and cite poor written communication skills as your weakness – you will probably not be asked back for second interview!

Examples

The specific weakness you choose really depends on both your own background and the specific job requirements. I have given three examples below to act as a guideline:

Time Management:

“I am naturally a team player and always used to say yes when asked to take on additional work. Sometimes I bit off more than I could chew and put myself under enormous pressure to meet conflicting deadlines. Now when I accept a project, I request a completion date, review my calendar to ensure nothing overlaps and then accept the task. This way I am able to take on the project, complete the work to deadline and meet everyone's expectations! “

High standards:

"I set myself very high standards and often used to get impatient when I was working with people who didn't operate at the same pace as me. Now, instead of getting frustrated, I help team members who are having problems and by doing this, the project moves forward more quickly."

Attention to Detail:

"I always like learning concepts in depth and in the past it has slowed down my work on projects. To overcome this, I now learn as much of the concept as is required to complete the project to deadline. Once I have the time, I go back to the concept to understand its finer details and complexities. It means I meet all deadlines and yet am constantly increasing my technical knowledge."

Conclusion

Remember Interviewers don't expect you to be perfect. They are not interested in exposing your flaws but instead want to see how you identify and adjust for your shortcomings. By presenting yourself as someone who is constantly looking to learn and develop, you will be seen as a valuable asset in the eyes of *any* employer.

About the Author

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