

How well do you work under pressure?

All companies are under tremendous pressure as a result of the worsening economic conditions. Many are fighting for their very survival and those who still have healthy balance sheets are in a constant battle to deliver strong results in order to satisfy market analysts and shareholder demands. This pressure feeds down through all levels of an organisation and the ability to manage it effectively is seen as a highly desirable quality by prospective employers.

Why do employers ask this question?

In an economic downturn productivity becomes a focal point for management and employees are often expected to take on more responsibility and a greater work load. Greater economic uncertainty means that traditional ways of operating are challenged, new ideas and practices are implemented; all of which creates unpredictability in what was previously a stable work environment.

An employer will want to know that you can work effectively in a fast changing environment and that you are prepared to go the extra mile when required. To illustrate your ability to work well under pressure, let us first break down the process into its component parts.

Planning

Working well under pressure requires careful and skillful planning. Deadlines must be analysed and enough time allocated to complete tasks, leaving some additional time to take into account unforeseen problems. Consideration needs to be given to conflicting deadlines and if appropriate they need to be adjusted to better fit the time constraints you are working under.

Strategic Thinking

If things *do* arise that you are not prepared for, you must be able to adapt quickly to them. When you find yourself in a highly pressurised environment, stand back, take a deep breath before focusing in on the details. By doing this you can be more effective, anticipate any potential blockages or problems and this saving precious time. Think outside the box - would pulling in functional expertise save time? Should you brainstorm with colleagues before attacking the problem?

Calm Head

Keep calm. No body works effectively when they are in panic mode. Work in intense spurts and then take a break to refresh your mind – stepping away from the project will also give you a fresh perspective when you re-approach the task.

Manage your energy levels. Follow the lead of high performance athletes – they understand the impact of physical and mental strain and carefully pace themselves to avoid burnout and injury.

Prioritise

When facing a tight deadline, you need to quickly identify and prioritise the most important tasks. Keep in mind the 80-20 rule – that 80% of your results will be achieved through 20% of your efforts. This rule means that much of what we do is not adding much real value. Being strategic means identifying the 20% that is critical and investing most time and energy on those items.

Conclusion

When asked this question in interview, remember that the employer is looking to uncover your skills in a diverse range of fields including problem solving, decision making, organizational skills, time management and your ability to work under stress. As always, have a carefully chosen example to highlight your adeptness at working in such an environment, being sure to convey your ability to work calmly and efficiently whilst achieving results.

About the Author

Laura McGrath is the owner of [Interview Techniques](http://www.interviewtechniques.ie), a leading provider of interview coaching services. She has spent the last 15 years in staffing and recruitment and is a regular contributor with Irish Jobs and the Sunday Business Post.

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