

# Talking Too Much On a Job Interview May Kill Your Chance

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On the eve of Halloween, here's a scary thought: You can blow a promising opportunity by talking too much during a job interview.

That's how one facilities administrator ruined her employment chances at Clark Nuber, a small accounting firm in Bellevue, Wash. Asked to describe her strengths, the applicant delivered a long-winded reply focused on her cleaning of every cabinet in her home. "She probably went on for three to four minutes," recalls Tracy White, the firm's human-resources director. "I doubted she could get the job done in an eight-hour day."

Many nervous job seekers blabber endlessly about irrelevant information. They create a poor impression and cut short the hiring manager's time for further questions. "That official won't pay any attention to you unless you prove you're sharp during the first five minutes," cautions Robin Ryan, a career counselor, author and speaker in Newcastle, Wash.

"Oversharing in an interview is the most dangerous thing you can do," concurs Annie Stevens, a managing partner at ClearRock, a Boston executive-coaching and outplacement concern.

Don't despair. Here are four ways to steer clear of verbosity during a job hunt:

- **Prepare short statements on how your background matches the job. Rehearse.**

When a hiring manager says, "Tell me about yourself," you can offer a few war stories that recount a work problem, your corrective action and the measurable result. "The stories have to be powerful as well as engaging," lasting no longer than two minutes apiece, says Rich Gee, an executive coach in Stamford, Conn.

He helped Ward Smith, a talkative golf pro and instructor, to win a marketing spot with Black & Decker. During practice sessions with the coach, Mr. Smith supplied elaborate detail about the golf irons that he recommended to students. A hiring manager "doesn't need to know this," Mr. Gee interjected.

Mr. Smith soon realized he should translate "what I was doing into what Black & Decker was looking for," and keep it succinct. During his job interview, he used marketing lingo to describe briefly his teaching methods, explaining how he identified students' objectives, forged a rapport and enabled them to reach solutions. He now is an Atlanta field-marketing coordinator for a Black & Decker unit.

Embracing a similar approach, a jobless organizational-development consultant recently landed follow-up interviews with three possible employers. Callbacks rarely occurred when I "was running off at the mouth," he remembers. Defining yourself concisely also "builds an enormous amount of confidence for the next interview," he notes.

- **Make sure you understand a question. Stop every couple of sentences to check.**

If the interviewer requests your career history, you might inquire, "Do you want me to start with my present situation or at the beginning?" This type of response demonstrates a candidate "is preparing mentally for what's he's going to give me," says Peter D. Crist, head of recruiters Crist Associates in Hinsdale, Ill.

Pausing after you speak lets you collect your thoughts -- and seek permission to continue. Before you resume, Ms. White suggests asking, "Did I answer your question enough? Do you want more examples?"

- **Watch the interviewer's body language for hints that your answers are getting boring.**

He may stop taking notes, check his watch or glance at his computer. A loquacious middle manager ignored such warning signals after spending 15 minutes telling a West Coast recruiter about several extraneous issues, including her husband's problems with his boss.

"I was rolling my eyes and tapping my pen on her résumé to indicate we should get back to work here," the exasperated recruiter says. He finally cut her off because he had many more questions to pose.

- **Solicit feedback following an interview.**

The West Coast recruiter decided against referring the middle manager to a client. "You had a number of stories to tell but they weren't relevant," he told her. "Use each minute to its best advantage to sell your background."

With practice, you'll be able to polish your pitch, adjusting the length of your responses until someone says, "You're hired!"