

Career Coaching International

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KNOCK-OUT AT THE INTERVIEW

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Finally you have made it to the shortlist and now the interview. As you sit there fielding intelligent answers a question comes from out of the blue that suddenly has you stunned, tongue-tied and ineffective. You know right then that you have been knocked out of the interview. How could it have been prevented?

The Web Site Example

Alex was pleased with himself because this job opportunity in Nairobi Kenya would draw on his skills in producing effective, inexpensive videos and TV shows to an international audience wherein lay his expertise, not to mention his fluency in three languages. Then the implied question was asked at the telephone interview. "You have seen our web site and the description of 30 projects as asked?" "Yes" he replied, honestly. "Would you pick one and describe to us its strengths and weaknesses." Alex was flabbergasted. He tried to think of all those projects and choose one to focus on, but it was all a jumble; the more he thought the more confused he became. Then sweat, an elongated silence. Finally he said: "Honestly, I would need more time to answer you with knowledge." The interview ended shortly thereafter.

Why did they ask this question?
What were they looking for?
What kind of person would they get responding well to this type of question?
What should Alex have done?

Why this Question?

It is always difficult to know why interviewers ask certain questions. In our opinion this was a stupid question, but our opinion would have been of no help to Alex in any case. They ask it because they think it is clever – that it will separate the wheat from the chaff.

We think it is stupid because it will eliminate otherwise very good candidates and it is not a respectful question – it is sneaky, to say the least and it doesn't relate to on-the-job capabilities – which is really what the interview should be about.

What were they Looking for?

They might have been looking for a rare someone who had the foresight and capability to absorb information of all 30 projects and then offer an intelligent response.

If they were clever about the question, they may have been looking, not for a real answer, but simply to see how the person would field it. So they get to see how a person reacts under stress. Or, perhaps they sought to test honesty (which in Alex's case, they did).

What Kind of Person would they get?

What they would get is either someone with a photographic memory or someone very good under stress or someone who already knew the trick in advance. The photographic memory has very little to do with the most of the needs of day-to-day business in producing videos and TV programs. So that could easily eliminate some very capable video producers. If it revealed someone good under stress they would have to keep things in perspective; stressful situations rarely impact more than 10% of a job, and so this question should be weighted no more than 10% of the interview. And if the question got them someone who knew the trick in advance, what on earth will that prove? It might get a sneaky employer a new sneaky employee.

What should've Alex Done?

Specifically, Alex should have **(1) tried to get some more time**, so that he could cool down to think more rationally. He might have asked: "Did I understand that I am to choose any one of those projects?" While this question is being asked and the answer is being offered, Alex's sky-high adrenaline has a chance to subside to a more normal level and kick his logic into gear (Under stress, emotion takes over and logic usually gets tossed out the window.)

If his logic had kicked in Alex would have realized that he, and most other people in that situation, would not be able to answer the question as asked. Therefore he should try to **(2) find some way around it**. He could have said: "There are so many projects to choose from, I'd prefer if you suggest one and I will comment on it." What this does is reduce the field of 30 projects down to one, making the problem 30 times simpler. If Alex were lucky, he might actually get more information about the chosen project as they outline it to him. Even if he didn't get that extra information, he might recognize the project and be able to comment on it. However, let us assume that Alex was not that lucky and even as the project is being described he hasn't a clue of enough of its details.

He should then have **(3) connected that project to a situation he knows something about**. "Looking at project ABC parallels, I believe, a project XYZ that I once was involved in... Its strengths and weaknesses were...."

What this demonstrates is that:

- Alex can respond under fire
- He doesn't jump into a situation without further clarification
- Alex has been involved in complex projects
- He knows how to assess strengths and weaknesses
- Alex is probably knowledgeable enough for this job

The 'babbling idiot' is thereby transformed into an insightful prospective employee.

A Summary of What to Do

1. Take swift action to buy yourself more time.
2. Ask for clarification so that you know if you are responding to the right thing.
3. Use your own experiences as a means to relate to the questioner's issue.

As well, you should:

4. Let the questioner know that you think they may have overstepped their bounds. "Could you re-state that questions please?" "I am not sure how that question relates to this position, could you clarify that for me?" "30 new projects are quite a few." They may re-phrase or even withdraw the question. If they withdraw it you will know that this extremely tense situation for you was not at all important to them (while it was crucially important to you – something you would remember always). If they rephrase the question, you may discover it is not as difficult as you originally perceived it to be.

5. Turn the question back on the questioner. "30 new projects are quite a few; do you have a favorite?" Or, "Do you expect that I would have memorized all 30?" You are now in control instead of defensive; you have a better chance of providing a meaningful response. You appear more collected and more intelligent – and you are buying more precious seconds.

Conclusion

First, be as prepared as you can before an interview to deal calmly with all the embarrassing issues you have in your life. At the interview itself, when confronted with an uncomfortable question, buy yourself time so you can get you feet back on the ground. Then react the best you can, drawing on your actual experience with examples.

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