

# - Two Minutes that Make the Difference -

## How Job Fair Interviews Can Give You A Jump Start

By David G. Jensen, CareerTrax Inc.

Job fairs can either be a terrific learning experience or an opportunity to find a new position. Which will it be for you? (Most people prefer the new job!) As a professional recruiter, I can tell you that making positive impressions that lead to interviews and job offers is quite a difficult task. You'll need to impress the interviewer within the first *two minutes* of your introduction.

In today's job market, job fairs are busy places. Human Resources staff and hiring managers work hard to screen hundreds or even thousands of applicants for jobs throughout their organizations. It is a lot of effort, and because of this they develop a great instinct for what works and what doesn't work in their companies. To aid this special intuition, most job fair interviewers will ask you to describe yourself. That's the critical two minutes of the interview.

Don't be surprised when suddenly "the question" hits you: "Tell me a little about yourself."

### **A Critical Point In The Interview**

This request is an icebreaker. It is an opportunity for the company interviewer to take a few minutes off to listen and silently determine where to take the questioning next. In short, it's an easy out for him or her. But it can be subtly dangerous for you because this period of intuition on the part of the interviewer reflects emotional decision-making that is hard to overcome later.

A recent article from a Human Resources trade journal pointed out that even in full-day interviews many hiring managers make up their minds about an applicant in the first 5-10 minutes. This being the case, any early opportunity you have to expound on your strengths or state your case is a good thing. But it can also be a trap – if you aren't ready for this one, you could shoot yourself in the foot. Your answer to this "question" plays a crucial role in the successful outcome of your day at the job fair.

It has always shocked me how many technical people are taken by surprise instead of considering this request a certainty and thus preparing for it. I've requested this in many of my own interviews because it offers a glimpse into how prepared my job candidates really are. Some people misinterpret my question to mean "Tell me about your thesis work." Even worse, many misunderstand and believe that I have asked them "Tell me a *considerable amount* about yourself."

## **What the Interviewer is Really Looking For**

When an interviewer asks you to tell her a little about yourself, you are being asked to provide a general framework for discussion. You will set the stage for later questions that will address various aspects of your academic and work life. If you plan properly, this will give you the opportunity to steer the critical, opening portion of the interview into an area in which you will do well.

How do you plan for this? I am normally not a great supporter of “over-preparation” before an interview. (You won’t find my articles full of book recommendations with titles like “Snappy Answers To Tough Interview Questions.”) Sure, you need to be aware of the direction of probable questions. But it is self-knowledge and confidence that you require, not rehearsed and memorized answers.

Except in one area -- *this one*.

If there was ever one answer that you need to work on in advance, perhaps even while standing in line at the job fair, it is your response to someone who asks you to describe yourself.

## **Your Preparation**

You need to have a 2-minute and a 10-minute response to the request “Tell me about yourself.” Use the short version for the job fair and save the longer version for when you get invited to sit down with your prospective boss at the full-day interview. Both of these versions need to be ingrained into your presentation skills as well as you know your email address.

I have found over my career that there are many situations where coincidence will give you a chance to think on your feet -- and having already done this thinking in advance comes in very handy. (I was recently at a homeowner’s association meeting when at the cocktail hour I met a new neighbor who happens to be a biotech CEO. What did he ask me? “Tell me about yourself, Dave.”)

Here is the general framework for a T.M.A.Y. response:

- 1) A brief statement of what you consider yourself to have become at this stage of your life. This is much like the “Qualifications” statement that many people use at the top of a resume.
- 2) In the 2-minute job fair response, you’ll have a chance to touch briefly on only one accomplishment. Choose the most appropriate one for the circumstance, and not the one that you are most enamored with. In the longer version for interview day, focus on three elements: A statement of a problem you were given, the approach you took to solving the

problem, and then the results you achieved. Hit the highpoints only, and you can go back into more details later in your conversation.

3) Add a closure, unique to each situation, where you state one solid reason that you'd be a good fit for the company you are meeting with. What is there about the background you've described which makes you uniquely qualified to work for this firm?

Keep it brief! You'll lose the attention of your job fair interviewer if you go on much longer than two minutes. Writing and speaking succinctly is more difficult than many people think. That's why I fully expect the 2-minute version to be your most difficult. Abe Lincoln, a master orator, once told an interviewer that he could "write a twenty minute speech in about two weeks" but that he would only need one week to write a good forty-minute speech. In fact, he said, "I can give a two hour talk on almost any subject right now."

### **Points to Remember**

- Always ask the interviewer how much time you should use in your answer.
- This is your *only* opportunity to dominate the interview conversation. Use it wisely. Step right up and clearly identify what you consider to be your personal strengths. Many people don't like to "tout" themselves, but this is the time to do just that. Don't let a fear of self-promotion zap your chances in these important few minutes!
- As mentioned above, when relating an accomplishment, dissect it into its three pieces, the "Challenge" (the problem you faced), "Approach" (your critical thinking skills), and the "Results." Perhaps it will help you to remember the acronym C-A-R.

### **In Conclusion**

It may help you to write down this script and read it out loud a number of times. Get comfortable with it, and change the wording after you've read it and identified the rough edges. (What looks good on paper may sound unnatural when it is spoken – rewrite as necessary. The average spoken sentence contains only nine words – but the written one contains twenty-three.)

Your personal answer to the request of "Tell me about yourself" is something that you'll take with you wherever you go. Having a 2-minute version of this ready for your next Job Fair makes perfect sense!

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