

Presentation by Bob Costello to the FUMC Jobs Group

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TOPIC: Answering Tough Interview Questions

Interviews should be a time of "equal exchange" of information before a decision is made. The employer is deciding if you have the qualifications and "fit" to work in the organization. You are evaluating the firm as a future employer and making sure you will be comfortable working there.

Most interviewers are untrained and apprehensive. You can use that to your advantage in the interview. The non-HR people doing the interviewing are usually out of their element conducting an interview; it is not what they "really do" on a daily basis! You can put them at ease and "take control" (not in a negative way) by how you handle yourself.

YOU need to TELL THEM what they really need to know, even if they don't ask the question. Bob said to volunteer the answers to these questions (the employer concerns):

- Do you have the skills to do this job? Tell me your qualifications.
- Are you going to blend into this organization (aka "fit")? The response may be like this... "I am the type of person who will.... (Fill in the blank). I will fit well in this organization because.... (Fill in the blank). (They are looking for elements of your personality, normal behavior patterns, etc.)

Bob next talked about "curve balls". Noting that untrained interviewers cannot handle "curve balls" well, that can work to your advantage. Bob reminded us that "There are NO hard interview questions if you are prepared! He referenced his book for ideas on answering some of them.

Remember to plug accomplishments into the interview as a way of selling yourself and use memorable stories to do it. It is acceptable to use "accomplishments" that are not on your resume at this point to answer questions.

Bob asked the group what they thought were the hardest interview questions. They responded with these:

- What is your reason for leaving previous position?
- What is your biggest fault?

Bob said that the money-question usually ranks highest. That is about salary/compensation desired. This question usually happens too early in the interview process for you to give a good response. According to Bob, if it is discussed too early (prior to a job offer), you will likely get the response WRONG 66.6% of the time. Since you really do not know much about the job/environment yet, you need to refer to his system for deflecting the money question until a later time. If the topic comes up early in the process, they are likely shopping based on price and not value. If you answer their question and that answer doesn't match their expectation, you won't get a chance for the job.

Bob's Rule #1 "Never ever, ever give them a number!" It is not a valid parameter to base a judgment on anyway. How do you throw "curve-balls" on the money-question? See handout on Money-Question Strategies. The goal here is to get the money-question out of the way of the interview (you selling yourself). While the first two tactics may work for inexperienced interviewers, the experienced folks (HR backgrounds) will likely start with the last two.

- Delay
- Reverse and React
- Discuss Ranges, but don't violate rule #1. Always ask for feedback to keep the discussion moving.
- Last resort: Total compensation (not just salary). Be vague and ask for feedback on the spot. This is a game.

When they offer you the job is when you want to talk about money, not before. They need to love you first. Remember, too, that managers can offer you from the minimum to the mid-point of the range. Do not expect the high-end of the range. Go back to discussion of fit and skills if necessary. Example: They tell you the range is \$60K to \$90K annually. A fair way to interpret that is \$60K to \$75K (mid-range). If that doesn't match the job they are asking you to do, you will know that the "fit" is not right.

Exception to the money-rule discussion: Recruiters. They need to know up-front what you expect for compensation. They are trying to place you and want the expectations to match to those of the client.

On paper job applications where it says "desired starting salary", write OPEN or NEGOTIABLE. In the boxes for "salary history", leave blank the most recent job and go through the process outlined above.

On computer job applications, if you can, try to avoid listing salary information where possible. Try a range or "*" or something. If you have to do something, Bob says to list total compensation, not just salary.

Strengths and Weaknesses Interview question discussion:

- Discussions of strengths are giant selling opportunities! Make it memorable (high impact). Pick the most relevant strength (to the job you are applying for). Keep the discussion to two minutes. Give situation, action, and result. The interviewer can reach their own conclusion on the strengths. Work it into a story. They are still looking to answer the "FIT" question here; you are beyond the skills qualification portion that they get from the resume. Use The Magic Sixteen to give you ideas for what to emphasize.
- Discussions of weaknesses are a game to play. Think about it before you go into the interview. Take a downside of your strength. Bob's example today was: An Analytical person who tends toward perfectionism. They eventually get overloaded so they work late and take work home on weekends. Note that the problem has been recognized and that you are working to prioritize and learn to delegate more. Show them what you are doing to fix it and move on to a new discussion. If they try to get you to name additional weaknesses, don't let them.

Tell them that you are focusing your attention on this one right now, while not denying that you may have additional weaknesses.

The most powerful tool you have is "tell me about yourself" (2- minute "Capsule Me" handout). Tell what has influenced you and let them conclude 12-14 positive things that they hear about you from that 2-minute summary. The summary should include briefs about personal life, education, early career, relevant key accomplishments, reason for leaving last position, and what you want from this job. Memorize it, but deliver it with energy!

MONEY QUESTION STRATEGIES

BOB'S #1 RULE: Never ever, ever, ever give them a number!

Strategy #1: Delay

- Premature. Let's focus on the job and how I meet your requirements.
- I want to learn more about the job/company and have you learn more about me first.
- Jobs/companies are different....

Then move directly into selling yourself and your accomplishments. Don't wait for "approval". Remember, interviewers are typically untrained and nervous.

Strategy #2: Reverse

- I'm sure you have a range in mind. Can you share it with me?
- What do you normally pay for this position?
- What did the last person make?

And React

- "Surprised. Lower than I expected..."
- "I'm sure we can reach agreement....."
- "In the ballpark...."

Most people won't ask more than once or twice.

Strategy #3: Range

- "I've done some research and found that comparable jobs pay...."
- Range must be reasonable -must have done some research.
 - Bottom of range equal to or greater than your minimum salary requirement. Did you violate Bob's #1 Rule? No, but close.

You must ask for feedback. "How does that range fit with your plans?"

Strategy #4: Compensation (Salary+Benefits+Bonus+Overtime+Commission, etc.)

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|------------------|----------|
| • Salary | \$50,000 |
| • Benefits (30%) | \$15,000 |
| • Bonus | ??,000 |
| Total | \$67,000 |

ALWAYS ASK FOR FEEDBACK AFTER OFFERING AN ANSWER

QUESTION: "WHAT/HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT OUR COMPANY?"

- Always be prepared--demonstrate that you have done some research.
- Library, employee newsletters, annual reports, informational interviews with other employees or former employees are potential sources of information.
- Know product lines, marketing strategy, company history, management philosophy, problems, financial results, etc.

QUESTION: "WHY SHOULD WE HIRE YOU?"

- If the situation is right for you, discuss how quickly you can become effective for them.
- Relate how your experience could be easily applied to their needs.
- Mention accomplishments that are applicable to their needs.

QUESTION: "WHAT IS YOUR MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY?"

- "Participative", "goal-oriented", "relying heavily on delegation" are generally good buzz words to use.
- A technically correct answer is one that matches the style of the company.
- Be honest! Don't "oversell" yourself into a position that you won't be happy in.

QUESTION: "WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR MOST RECENT JOB?"

- Select situations or accomplishments that relate to the new position.

QUESTION: "WHAT WORD WOULD SUBORDINATES USE TO DESCRIBE YOU, OR WHAT DO SUBORDINATES THINK OF YOU?"

- These types of questions are usually designed to get at strengths/weaknesses.
- Identify three strengths and one weakness. (Don't volunteer weakness unless directly asked.)
- Show consistency by relating to management style as discussed earlier.

OBJECTION: "YOU SEEM TO BE OVER-QUALIFIED FOR THIS POSITION."

- First, clarify this objection--are they really saying, "You're too expensive"?
- Don't agree--sell your experience as valuable to them.
- Discuss how this type of position has challenges that interest and motivate you (only if it really does).
- Talk about longer-term goals and your desire to grow with a dynamic organization like this.
- Potential responses:
 - "Your situation requires a strong person."
 - "You could get a quicker return on your investment."
 - "A rapidly growing organization will have a continuing need for experienced people/managers."
 - "I can see why you might say that for the short-term. The immediate challenges can be quickly resolved and then I will be well-placed to deal with more strategic issues."

QUESTION: "WHY DID YOU LEAVE YOUR LAST POSITION?"

- Stick to the truth--be consistent.
- Take the offense--you can't be indecisive or express a fear of discussing this question.
- If applicable, try to present yourself as a small part of a larger action-i.e., reduction in force or reorganization.
- Be sure your former employer/supervisor and your references all have exactly the same story.
- Surprisingly, most potential employers won't press very hard for details unless you lead them to. Keep details to a minimum.
- Everyone/every situation have some value. In discussing former employers/managers, speak only about the positive aspects. Don't "bad mouth."

QUESTION: "YOU'VE BEEN OUT OF WORK FOR A LONG TIME. IS THERE A PROBLEM?"

- Discuss how this has been an opportunity for you to plan and take charge of your career.
- Describe your self-assessment process and how you have some very clear goals. Also be prepared to expand on those goals.
- "While I've had several opportunities, I am disciplining myself and following a plan to locate my ideal position."
- *Have you doing any volunteer work? Now is a great time to mention it.*

QUESTION: "WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST SUCCESS?"

- Refer to powerful accomplishments and, if possible, one that relates to a specific need that this employer has.

QUESTION: "WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST FAILURE?"

- Pick something unrelated to this situation.
- Pick a situation that didn't have the results you wanted, describe what you learned from this situation and, if possible, introduce a new accomplishment that proves you learned something.

QUESTION: "WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS?"

- Avoid discussing anything less than one year away.
- Short-term: 1-3 years
- Long term: 5 years

Unlike most goal-setting exercises, avoid giving specific or quantified results. An appropriate response might be "Continuing my professional development with a growth-oriented company." Don't appear to be an immediate threat. Talk about future potential as the company grows.

OBJECTION: "YOUR BACKGROUND ISN'T REALLY WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR. YOU'RE NOT QUALIFIED!"

- Aggressively introduce accomplishments where you had to learn something new before you could achieve results.
- Be prepared with two or three accomplishments of this nature.
- Discuss how your skills/experience have developed over a long period of time, their uniqueness, and how they are easily transported to this particular situation.
- Also show that you anticipate some difficulties and expand upon how you will deal with them.

QUESTION: "ARE YOU CONSIDERING ANY OTHER OFFERS AT THIS TIME?"

- Don't lie, but show success.
- "I'm pursuing several other opportunities at the moment, and I'm also very interested in this one."
- Avoid giving details about other opportunities, but offer to keep them advised if something becomes "hot."

QUESTION: "WHAT DO YOU READ IN YOUR SPARE TIME?"

- Keep it related to business.
- Mention national newspapers--i.e., Wall Street Journal, trade journals, and books on management.
- Be careful! The interviewer may read the same material and want to discuss it in detail.

QUESTION: "DESCRIBE YOUR DAILY/WEEKLY ACTIVITY."

- Question is normally asked to see how well you plan.
- Discuss your planning system-mention Day-Timer, etc.
- Discuss/emphasize planning and other activities, rather than technical aspects.

QUESTION: "DO YOU PREFER A LARGE, MEDIUM, OR SMALL COMPANY?"

- Where are you right now?
- What advantages/motivators does each situation offer you?

QUESTION: "WHAT FRUSTRATIONS DID YOU EXPERIENCE AT XYZ CORP.?"

- Always speak about former employers in a positive manner.
- No company/position/situation is perfect. Prepare one or two frustrations and include detail on how you dealt with or overcame them.

QUESTION: "HOW DID YOU GET ALONG WITH OTHERS (MANAGERS, PEERS, DEPARTMENTS, ETC.)?"

- The higher up the corporate ladder you aspire, the more important being a team player becomes.
- Identify accomplishments that demonstrate your ability to work with others (task force, team, membership, etc.).

QUESTION: "WHY ARE YOU CHANGING FIELDS?"

- Potential employers want to know if your desires or objectives are realistic.
- Before discussing skills, knowledge, and accomplishments that you know are transferable, develop a list of problems and differences that you anticipate and discuss how you plan to deal with them.

QUESTION: "TELL ME ABOUT YOUR LAST BOSS."

- Be honest. If you didn't get along, say so; but also expand upon the things you did to make the situation work.
- Don't dwell on his/her negatives--stress what you did to make the situation work.

QUESTION: "WHAT DID YOU LIKE LEAST ABOUT YOUR MOST RECENT POSITION?"

- Select a situation/responsibility that definitely won't apply in the new position.
- Stress that even though this area wasn't actually to your liking, you were still able to achieve success doing something that wasn't your favorite activity.

QUESTION: "HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THIS SITUATION OR PROBLEM?"

- Stay out of the woods. Answer with, "I did it this way before." Quantify your answer.
- Relate a similar accomplishment from your past. Stress the results.
- Before answering the question, ask the interviewer, "What have you tried so far?"

QUESTION: "WHY DO YOU WANT TO WORK FOR US?"

- You can solve a problem for them and doing so would provide you with a lot of satisfaction.
- You see long-term growth potential and opportunity to contribute and grow at the same time.
- You appreciate their management philosophy and style.
- You believe in what they are doing and would be challenged by a chance to contribute.
- Do not mention compensation and/or benefits at this time.

QUESTION: "HOW LONG WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO STAY WITH US?"

- Discuss your need to continue developing in a particular field and relate it to their plans for growth/expansion.
- Avoid giving specific years or months.
- Most executives think in terms of four plus years when hiring a manager.

QUESTION: "ARE YOU WILLING TO TRAVEL / RELOCATE?"

- There is an obvious reason they are asking this question.
- Your self-assessment should have addressed these issues. If you're not, what are your chances of being successful in this position?

QUESTION: "ARE YOU A GOOD _____?" (MANAGER, ACCOUNTANT, ARTIST, ETC)

- Prove you are.
- Be prepared with at least two accomplishments to support your positive answer.

The following are typical questions asked by line managers. As a general rule they should be answered with accomplishments. Decide which accomplishments you will use to deal with them.

- "How have you helped increase sales, profits, etc?"
- "How have you helped reduce costs?"
- "How have you helped increase productivity or efficiency?"
- "Tell me about your budget responsibility."
- "How many people did you supervise?"
- "Are you an aggressive person?"
- "How did you do in college?"
- "How do you feel about working under pressure?"
- "How do you feel about working long or irregular hours?"
- "Are you creative?"
- "Are you a strong communicator?"
- "This position is unique in that it requires _____. Would that be a problem for you?"
 - Excessive driving
 - Getting dirty
 - Working in a manufacturing plant
 - Weekend work Excessive paperwork Heavy travel
 - Union/non-union efforts
- "Can you relate to people two or three levels up/down from you in the organization?"
- "This position requires a high energy level. Do you have it?"
- "This isn't the environment you're used to. How would you adapt?"