

Acing a Dicy Interview Question: Why Did You Leave Your Last Job?

By Dana Mattioli
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“Why did you leave your last job?”

It's one of the most common interview questions -- and one of the toughest. Flubbing risks harming your candidacy. Don't think you'll be exempt if you're still employed. You may be asked: “Why do you want to leave your current position?”

As employees change jobs more often, hiring managers are increasingly concerned about a candidate's reason for leaving a job carrying into the next. “A lot of employers are realizing it's very expensive to have ‘mishires,’ “ says Paul Falcone, author of “96 Great Interview Questions to Ask Before You Hire” (AMACOM, 1997).

Will your answer stand up to a hiring manager's scrutiny? Here are six tips that can help you prepare for meeting with even skeptical interviewers.

Tip 1: Be concise.

When asked about your reason for leaving, a brief response -- two to three sentences --will do. Candidates who ramble on can sound as if they're trying to justify their answer or explain it away, says Matthew Assael, director of the pharmaceutical search division at Lloyd Staffing in Melville, N.Y.

“If they go on and on, they may be trying to cover something up,” says Mr. Assael.

Your best bet is to be honest, confident and to the point, recruiters say.

Tip 2: Avoid clichés.

One overused phrase employed candidates offer is that there is no room for growth, says Mr. Falcone, a human-resources professional in El Segundo, Calif. This response drives him crazy, he says.

“Most candidates see it as a positive, because it sounds like they are ready for more responsibility. But on the employer side, it translates into bored, tired and not motivated,” says Mr. Falcone.

Rather than explaining your grievances with your current or previous job, talk about opportunities you're seeking, he suggests.

When Stephen Grosso, 32, decided to leave his position as an accountant at a private company for a public company in March, he stressed the benefits of the move to the recruiter.

“I told them I was looking for a long-term opportunity and emphasized some benefits of a big corporation, such as a better structure and promotional opportunities,” says Mr. Grosso, who works as a senior accountant for a large travel company in Parsippany, N.J.

Tip 3. Be up front about a job loss.

If you were let go as part of a large company cutback, emphasize that a group of employees was laid off and give the exact number of job cuts, if available, Mr. Falcone says.

If you were laid off individually, say that you were laid off and leave it at that. "If they don't ask, don't explain," Mr. Falcone says. "Most interviewers won't necessarily think to qualify a layoff."

If you were fired, assume responsibility for the situation and then explain what you learned from the experience, Mr. Falcone says.

Above all, be honest, says Mr. Assael. "You don't want to be caught in a lie," he says.

Tip 4: Avoid raising red flags.

Steer clear of citing more money or a shorter commute as your main reason for seeking a new job. These answers can sound alarm bells to recruiters.

If you list money as your main reason for leaving a current job, the hiring manager may think you are fishing for a counteroffer to win a higher salary, recruiters and hiring managers say.

A candidate motivated most by money may be tempted to jump ship if another offer with a higher pay came along, says Melissa Fusi, a partner at Executive Staffing Inc. in Miami. Recruiters want to avoid placing "job hoppers," she says.

Peter Nissman, principal attorney at the Law Offices of Peter Nissman, a law firm in New York, says he was surprised when a candidate he recently interviewed for an associate position said that she was interested in the job because it would shorten her commute.

"She didn't inspire me to think that she would be committed to this practice," says Mr. Nissman. She didn't get the job.

Instead, focus on the merits of the position and how the position fulfills your needs, says Ms. Fusi.

Tip 5: Resist the urge to talk trash.

Criticizing a past or current employer may seem like an obvious faux pas, but recruiters are surprised at the number of candidates who do it. Such bad mouthing, says Mr. Falcone, shows a lack of maturity that reflects poorly on the candidate. It also raises concerns that the candidate is difficult to get along with, says Mr. Assael.

Tip 6: Prepare for follow-ups.

Experienced recruiters often will probe a bit for a better understanding of your motives.

Before an interview, ask yourself how this position fulfills a need you have at your current job. Ms. Fusi says she asks candidates what their job functions are and why they consider the open position a step up from their current or previous position. Research both the company and the position for which you're interviewing so you are well-prepared for these questions.

Two follow-up questions Mr. Falcone says he asks are:

- What your next move would be if you stayed with your company?
- What you would like to see different in your next position?