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[Sabina Nawaz](http://www.sabinanawaz.co/index.html), a global CEO coach who worked at Microsoft for more than 14 years, said it is the first question for which she preps people when they come to her for interview guidance. “It’s the opportunity for the candidate to take control of the narrative and tell their story in a way that really matters to their audience,” Nawaz said.

It takes hard work and extensive preparation to answer this question well, but it can be done. Here’s how:Top of Form

**Avoid this major trapBottom of Form**

When you go to a job interview, your interviewer has presumably read your résumé, so don’t repeat the information.

In other words, don’t just say, “I have experiences with this, or I got my education at that place, or I have this degree, or I did this kind of special project,” said [Josh Doody](https://fearlesssalarynegotiation.com/), a salary negotiation coach and former hiring manager. “That’s what most people will do. It’s easy. It’s your instinct to recite things that are already on your résumé.”

By doing this, you’re missing out on a key opportunity to give a hiring manager new information about yourself. “You don’t want to give an information dump,” Humphrey said.

**Give a clear message.**

Humphrey suggested forming the answer around a compelling message about yourself and having a set of three points to prove this message. If your main message is that you’re an entrepreneur, your points could be something like, “I believe I have the qualities [of] a good entrepreneur. I have some experience in this area. And I’m looking forward to this next position that will give me an opportunity that will hone my skills,” Humphrey said.

To differentiate yourself from the pack of candidates, you need to tell a story about how the team you are interviewing for will be better off if you’re hired. That means doing prior research on their goals so that the story you tell is one they want to hear.

Imagine you’re applying to join a marketing team that is trying to use social media more, an example Doody offered. When asked to “tell me about yourself,” Doody said you could say, ”‘I’m really passionate about social media; I’ve been using social for 10 years, personally and professionally. One of my favorite things to do is find new opportunities to reach new audiences with new platforms. And I know that your team is currently branching out and using Instagram as an advertising platform. That’s something I’m really interested in helping facilitate.’ You’ve told them a lot about yourself there, but everything is specifically aimed at a goal or need of that team, as opposed to something that’s only about you.”

By leading with the message of your story up front, you prime your interviewer on what to listen for. Nawaz suggested professionals could start the answer this way: “‘There are three things about me that I have used repeatedly throughout my career that are particularly relevant for this job.’” Then, you talk about how you’ve applied these three strengths, like: “In 2017, we were faced with a crisis. This was the crisis. Here was the problem. Here’s how I used A, B and C to address the crisis. So as you can see A, B, C are really strengths that I rely on.”

**Do your homework on two crucial fronts.**

You are not just telling someone a fact about yourself. You’re telling a story, and stories take work to create.

Coming up with a good story means getting reflective about what made your career accomplishments something you’re proud of and what strengths those accomplishments highlight. Nawaz said candidates should ask themselves-“Which of those past strengths do you still want to carry forward with you?”

Don’t pick a generic strength to elaborate on. “Everyone is going to say, ‘I’m smart, I work hard and I get things done,’” said Nawaz. “[Pick] those that will really set you apart and answer the question why. Why does it matter for this particular job?”

To come up with multiple career accomplishments or examples for different interview questions, Nawaz suggests talking with others. “I especially encourage them to talk to people who know them. Partners, friends, co-workers who will bring up different stories than the ones you remember.”

The other part of that research equation means knowing what’s at stake for the company with this job opening. “What they really are asking you is ‘Tell me why you are going to help me,’” Doody said. “If you are a prepared candidate, what you’ve done is you’ve figured out those things.”

If you are preparing for the first interview in the process, Doody suggested reading the job description, Googling the company, reading the first page of their Form 10-K if they are a public company in the U.S, and reading blog posts and news clippings from the team you are joining. “What you’re looking for is what is the company up to, what are they trying to accomplish, what are the things that are preventing them from accomplishing those things.”

**How long should it take to answer?**

Citing short attention spans, Humphrey said a minute should be your maximum. Doody said that under a minute could seem rushed, while over two minutes will start to feel “more like a monologue than an answer to a question.“

The length of your answer is not an exact science. It takes using your emotional intelligence to know when someone is interested or when someone is nodding off. Read the room, and keep your career story focused and tailored to your audience. You don’t want to have a hiring manager wondering if there’s a point to what you are saying. If it becomes a meandering dialogue, Humphrey said, it “implies that the candidate doesn’t have a real sense of herself.”