

Talking about your weaknesses

Turning negatives into positives

In an interview you will almost certainly face challenging questions which attempt to assess your suitability for the job. It is vital to avoid getting caught in the trap of saying negative things about yourself. Preparing for these 'difficult' questions will help you keep your answers positive.

3 a ► 5.8 A recent graduate, Jarek, has been invited for an interview with an international financial company. He arranges to meet up with his friend, Olivia, who has been working there for a couple of years. Listen to their conversation and answer the following questions.

- 1 Who is going to interview Jarek?
- 2 Why did Jarek quit his last job?
- 3 What general advice does Olivia give Jarek?

b Compare Jarek's and Olivia's answers to the question, '*Why did you leave your last job?*' Complete Olivia's answer using the words in the box.

although develop feel further liked position
stretched working

Jarek's answer:

I hated my last job, I couldn't stand the boss. He used to drive me crazy! ... I handed in my notice and left as soon as I could.

Olivia's answer:

(1) Although I really (2) _____ my job, and the people I was (3) _____ with, I didn't (4) _____ I was being (5) _____ enough. I'm looking for a (6) _____ in which I can (7) _____ my professional skills (8) _____.

c In pairs, discuss how you would answer the following questions.

- 1 What are your weaknesses?
- 2 Tell me about something you have found difficult at work.

d In pairs, try to complete the following advice with a suitable word. Do you agree with the advice?

- 1 In response to open questions you should never actively volunteer _____ information during an interview.
- 2 Employers like to ask you to give negative information not to _____ you, but to see what sort of person you are.
- 3 You will seem much more employable if you can show yourself as someone who sees problems as _____.
- 4 Questions about weaknesses are actually a chance to demonstrate how you tackle and overcome _____, and why you are the right person for the job.

e ►5.9 Listen to three different candidates responding to a question about their weaknesses. Match the candidates (1–3) to the techniques they use for tackling this question (a–c). Which answer did you like the most? Why?

- a Talk about a character flaw that could ultimately be viewed as a positive characteristic.
- b Talk about something that is no longer a weakness. Mention how you overcame the weakness and that you have solved similar problems more recently.
- c Talk about a knowledge-based weakness, which is easily overcome. Mention why this weakness isn't a serious problem and what steps you are actively taking to solve the problem.

Candidate 1 _____

Candidate 2 _____

Candidate 3 _____

f In pairs, discuss the advantages of each technique.

g Which of the three candidates in Exercise 3e used the STAR technique to answer this question?

Softening and emphasis

When answering interview questions that require negative information you should soften any negatives in your response and emphasise any positive information.

4 a Look at the first candidate's response from Exercise 3e. In pairs, discuss why the candidate doesn't simply say, '*In the past I used to procrastinate.*' in their first sentence.

Well, in the past I sometimes used to procrastinate a little. There were times when I used to put things off until the last minute, when completing an essay for university for example. But I realised that perhaps this wasn't the most effective way of working and so I started setting a strict schedule for all my projects well in advance and set myself personal deadlines. Using a schedule has really helped me and I'm much better organised now and able to take on more projects at the same time.

b Underline any words or phrases in the extract in Exercise 4a that soften negatives and emphasise positives.

c ►5.9 Complete the second candidate's response using *always*, *really* or *very*. Listen again and check your answers.

Hmm. My weaknesses? Let me think. Well, in answer to your question you mentioned that the staff here use Apple Macintosh computers. I am not (1) _____ familiar with Apple Macs and I'm used to using Windows. However, I managed to learn how to use a number of programs (2) _____ quickly on my own and I'm sure I'd get used to using Apple Macs (3) _____ quickly. I (4) _____ enjoy using computers and new gadgets, and I'm (5) _____ keen to learn how to use new technology.

d ►5.9 Complete the third candidate's response by adding the words in the box. Listen again and check your answers.

a bit of a little a lot of as ... as possible
extremely occasionally very

a bit of

Weaknesses? Well, I can be ~~a workaholic~~ and always get involved in every project that I work on. I'm happy to spend time and energy making sure that every project is successful. So, when I feel that other members of the team might not be working as hard, I can get frustrated. I'm aware of this problem, and I try to solve situations like this by being positive and enthusiastic.

e In pairs, discuss the following questions.

- 1 What structure did the first candidate use to describe a problem that no longer exists? Why is this structure especially suitable here?
- 2 What tense did she use to show the present result of her new strategy for dealing with this problem?
- 3 The second candidate said that he wasn't familiar with Apple Macs. What structure did he use to show what he *is* familiar with? What structure did he use to show how he would become familiar with Apple Macs in the future?
- 4 What modal verb did the third candidate use to show that her weaknesses don't always affect her?

f Rewrite these descriptions of weaknesses using the expressions in brackets to soften the negative information.

- 1 I have difficulty making decisions. (occasionally / a little)
- 2 I used to be too stubborn and it was hard to get me to change my mind. (a bit / sometimes)
- 3 When working on projects I am a 'big picture' person. This means that I miss some details. (from time to time / might / minor)

g ► 5.10 Match the sentences (1–3) in Exercise 4f to the rest of the candidates' answers (a–c). Listen and check your answers.

- a *A former colleague of mine told me that I was becoming difficult to work with. Well, ever since then I have put significant effort into my teamworking skills and now I actively ask for advice and suggestions from my colleagues when making decisions. Last year I was even asked to chair weekly staff meetings while our boss was away on business.*
- b *This is because I pay a lot of attention to detail and make sure that every single decision I make is the best decision possible. Basically, I'm somebody who carefully considers all of the available options before making a choice.*
- c *I've been aware of this for some time. So now when I'm managing a project I make sure that I have the support I need to keep an eye on specific minor details, leaving me free to concentrate on managing the entire project. I think successful management is about getting the right team together and then completely trusting them to do the job you've given them.*

1 ____ 2 ____ 3 ____

h Underline words in the extracts in Exercise 4g that emphasise positives.

i ► 5.11 Listen to a candidate, Adam, answering the question, 'What is it about your job that you dislike?' In pairs, discuss the techniques he uses to turn his response into an impressive positive answer.

j Match the negative expressions (1–6) to the more positive expressions (a–f). Which expressions did Adam use in Exercise 4i?

1 I'm bored with my job. It's too easy.	a I enjoy a great deal about my current job.
2 I can't stand dealing with customers.	b I'm keen to develop my practical skills.
3 The place where I work is too small.	c I'm looking for an opportunity to contribute these skills to a larger organisation such as yours.
4 I don't have many professional skills.	d I feel I'm best suited to working behind the scenes.
5 I only know the theory.	e I'm seeking fresh challenges.
6 There are things that I don't like at work.	f I'm seeking the possibility to develop further professionally.

k In pairs, take turns to ask and answer the following questions. Use the techniques and expressions in this section to soften any negatives and emphasise the positives in your responses.

- 1 What are your weaknesses?
- 2 Tell me about something you have found difficult at university/work.
- 3 What skills do you need to improve?
- 4 What kinds of decisions are most difficult for you to make?
- 5 What did you dislike about university / your last job?