Skills 360 – Handling Technical Interviews (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1.   In an interview, what do you usually do if you don't understand a question?
2.   Do you tend to get frustrated if you don't know the answer to a question?
3.   When you make a mistake, do you usually admit it or hope nobody notices?

Vocabulary

Prospect: something possible that might happen; "A sudden increase in the price of oil is a scary prospect, but we should be ready for it if it happens."

To jump through hoops: to do difficult tasks or tests set by other people; "We've had to jump through so many hoops with the federal government to finally get this new development approved."

No way around something: if there is "no way around" something, then your only choice is to do it or face it; "There's no way around this safety inspection. It's absolutely required to get certified."

Pitfalls: possible or likely dangers or problems; "One of the pitfalls of working from home is getting distracted by family or house-related problems."

Heart sinks: if your "heart sinks," you feel very disappointed; "When Eric found out that he was being laid off from the company he'd served for 20 years, his heart sank."

Key: very important or most important; "One of the keys to a good PowerPoint presentation is making sure you don't have too much information on each slide."

To cram: to put a lot of something tightly into a space; "Rather than cramming the entire staff into the board room, let's find a bigger space for our planning meeting."

Clear grasp: a good understanding; "All applicants for the accounting position are expected to have a clear grasp of best accounting practices in the retail sector."

Fundamental: most basic or central to a concept; "The introductory training seminar covers the fundamental principles of cross-cultural communication."

Dumb: stupid or not smart; "At first I thought Jesse was a little dumb, but he has since impressed me with some really bright ideas."

To wing it: to do something or perform without any preparation; "Have I prepared for my presentation? Well, I've honestly done this so many times I think I'll just wing it."

To rephrase something: to say something in different words; "It's okay to give a technical explanation, as long as you rephrase it in simpler words for the non-engineers in the room."

Off base: wrong, not correct, not exact, unrealistic, or not what is expected; "It looks like our sales forecasts were totally off base. We didn't even sell half of what we predicted!"

C++: a general-purpose computer programming language; "Our programmers are constantly arguing about whether C++ is actually better than programming in C and Python."

To fess up: to admit or confess something; "Well, I'm glad that Diane finally fessed up to breaking the photocopier. We all knew she did it."

To maintain dignity: to keep people's respect; "If you have a major disagreement with a coworker, remain calm so that you can maintain your dignity, even if you're angry.'

Frank: honest, especially about difficult topics; "Todd, let me be frank with you: it was obvious in your presentation that you didn't really prepare."

To not sweat it: to not worry about something; "A: Oh Fran, I owe you $20 for lunch yesterday. B: Don't sweat it. You can just buy me lunch next time."

Tight deadline: a "deadline" is a time or date by which you have to do something, and if a deadline is "tight" then there's not much time to finish; "I'm sorry everyone, but with such a tight deadline I'm going to ask you to come in over the weekend."

To crunch something: to calculate, solve, or process something quickly; "Before we decide whether this is the right investment, let's crunch the numbers for the next five years."

To break: to become upset, frustrated, or discouraged; "You need to study really hard if you want to be able to handle the accounting exam without breaking."

To keep your cool: to stay calm; "When a customer complains angrily, it is essential to keep your cool and focus on solutions."

Way off: very wrong, or not even close to accurate; "The hours I estimated for the safety review were way off. I spent twice as much time as I thought I would."

To mess up: to make a mistake or fail at something; "You know, if Tina messes up one more sales presentation I think we should stop letting her go on these trips."

To admit: to say that you have done something wrong; "Okay, I admit that I wasn't very careful with the vehicle but I promise I'll change."

To back up: to go backwards or return to an earlier place or stage in a process; "I'm a bit confused… can you back up and explain that last idea one more time?"

Dependable: sensible and able to be relied on; "Jim hasn't been late once in 10 years. I can't think of a more dependable employee."

To run through: to explain something quickly or to summarize; "Before we try to make a decision on this, let me just run through the three options again."

Upfront: open and honest; "In your evaluation of my presentation, I'd really like you to be as upfront as possible so that I know how to improve."

To keep your head on your shoulders: stay calm and continue to act reasonably; "I know you're really stressed Jane, but I need you to keep your head on your shoulders and just help us finish this job."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to look at how to succeed in a technical interview.

Before we get started, I'd like to point out that this is actually our 50th Skills 360 lesson and the start of our 9-year anniversary. So on behalf of the team at Business English Pod I'd like to say we appreciate your support and enthusiasm for the series. I've really enjoyed doing the lessons and I hope you've gotten some great tips and ideas out of them to help improve your skills. We've also got some great deals on membership during our anniversary so be sure to stop by the website at www.BusinessEnglishPod.com. Now back to the lesson.

A technical interview can sound like a pretty scary prospect. The interviewers will test your knowledge and understanding of technical concepts, and your problem-solving abilities. You'll also need to show them what you know and how you think. This is a pretty high-pressure situation, a difficult hoop to jump through for that job in finance or engineering or tech.

But there's no way around it, so you'd better get used to the idea. Last week, I talked about how to answer those tough questions that you face. Today I want to talk about some of the common *pitfalls* that you might encounter in a technical interview. I mean those moments when your heart sinks because you don't know what's being asked, you don't know the answer, or you make a mistake.

Of course, there's a good way to prevent these things from happening in the first place. It's the same key to success for any interview, presentation, or sales pitch. And that's *preparation*. But even preparation can present challenges. One of the biggest mistakes is to *over prepare* or to cram too much new information into your head. What the interviewers really want to see is a clear grasp of fundamental principles and concepts. So don't go trying to learn a new programming language before your interview.

Still, no matter how wisely you prepare, you might face some challenges. For one thing, you might not be sure exactly what the interviewer is asking. If you're afraid of appearing dumb, you might just wing it and try to answer the question anyway. But that's not such a great idea. It's always best to get clarity first. You might ask "Could you please repeat the question?" Or you might say "could you rephrase that please?" Or even "I'm not sure I understand what you're asking. Could you explain?" That certainly sounds less dumb – and more honest – than giving an answer that's way off base.

So, what if you understand the question, but you just don't know the answer? Or what if you're asked to solve a problem that you're not really so sure about? Well, you can attempt to answer with what you've got. For example, you might say "I'm not certain about the programming language you've asked about, but I know that in C++ you could do it this way…" But if the question requires you to actually know something and you don't, then fess up. You can be honest about your ignorance and still maintain dignity. For example, you might say: "To be frank, I haven't had to

calculate such a thing before." Or maybe: "That's a very interesting question and one that I'd really like to find out an answer to." In fact, many people report getting a job even when they couldn't answer several questions in their technical interview. So don't sweat it too much.

Now, what you *shouldn't* do in these situations is show frustration. You see, it's not just about what you know; it's also about how you deal with pressure. The interviewer may be evaluating whether you're a good person to have on a team with a tight deadline or crunching a tough problem. And in this case a good person is a calm person, one that doesn't break under pressure.

There's another situation in which it's important to keep your cool, and that's when you make a mistake. Imagine, for example, that you're asked to calculate some financial ratios. And when you get to the end of your solution you realize the final number is way off and that you must have made an error. Do you just hope the interviewers don't realize? Do you finish incorrectly and just apologize for messing up?

No, you do neither of those things. Instead, you calmly admit your mistake, back up, and correct yourself as you try again. Everybody makes mistakes. Only smart and dependable people admit it and try to make it right. And remember that the interviewers want to see your thought process. So you might say "Wait a second. It seems that I made a mistake. Let's see… ah yes, here it is." Or you could try: "Well that certainly seems wrong. I need to go back here and check my work…"

Now let's go back and run through what we've just covered. Remember that good preparation goes a long way in tough situations. But if you don't understand something, seek clarification. And if you don't know something, be upfront about it. Do *not* show frustration. Instead, keep your head on your shoulders and face these obstacles calmly. Even when you make a mistake. Just explain what you're thinking and move on. Technical interviews can be tough, but let your interviewers know that you've got a solid understanding of the basic concepts and that you can deal with adversity confidently.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the **wwwBusinessEnglishPod.com** website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1.   What is the key to avoiding problems in a technical interview?
      A   Knowing about the interviewer and the company.
      B   Good preparation.
      C   Predicting the questions that will be asked.
      D   Answering every question regardless of whether you understand.

2.   What do technical interviewers really want to see in an interviewee?
      A   Your understanding of basic concepts.
      B   A deep understanding of advanced technical topics.
      C   How you speak and dress.
      D   Whether you will admit when you don't understand something.

3.   Which of the following is NOT a recommended response when you don't understand a question? [Select all that apply]
      A   "Could you repeat the question for me please?"
      B   "Ah yes, well, that's a very interesting question."
      C   "I'm glad you asked that, and I have a good answer for you."
      D   "To be honest, I'm not sure I understand."
      E   "I'm wondering if you could explain what you mean."

4.   Which of the following might you do if you don't know the answer to a question? [Select all that apply]
      A   Pretend you understand and give your best possible answer.
      B   Tell the interviewer that you don't know.
      C   Explain how you usually deal with stress.
      D   Relate knowledge that you have to the problem.
      E   Ask for another question.

5.   Which of the following will demonstrate to the interviewer that you're good to have on a team?
      A   You have the right technical knowledge.
      B   You don't make any errors.
      C   You show your frustration openly.
      D   You deal with pressure calmly.

6.   What should you do if you make a mistake in an answer?
      A   Hope the interviewers don't realize.
      B   Admit your mistake.
      C   Finish your answer then apologize.
      D   Show your understanding of a related topic.

Review Answers

1.   What is the key to avoiding problems in a technical interview?

      B   **Good preparation.**

2.   What do technical interviewers really want to see in an interviewee?

      A   **Your understanding of basic concepts.**

3.   Which of the following is NOT a recommended response when you don't understand a question? [Select all that apply]

      B   **"Ah yes, well, that's a very interesting question."**
      C   **"I'm glad you asked that, and I have a good answer for you."**

4.   Which of the following might you do if you don't know the answer to a question? [Select all that apply]

      B   **Tell the interviewer that you don't know.**
      D   **Relate knowledge that you have to the problem.**

5.   Which of the following will demonstrate to the interviewer that you're good to have on a team?

      D   **You deal with pressure calmly.**

6.   What should you do if you make a mistake in an answer?

      B   **Admit your mistake.**

Online Practice

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