

The Risk of Talking Too Much

There are two ways to answer interview questions: the short version and the long version. When a question is open-ended, we always suggest to candidates that they say, “Let me give you the short version first, then I can explain in greater detail if you would like more information as I go along.”

The reason you should respond in this way is because it’s often difficult to know what type of answer each question will need. A question like, “What was your most difficult assignment?” might take anywhere from thirty seconds to thirty minutes to answer, depending on the detail you choose to give.

Therefore, you must always remember that the interviewer is the one who asked the question. So you should tailor your answer to what he or she needs to know, without being too verbose. Why waste time and create a negative impression by giving a lecture when a short targeted reply would do just fine?

Let’s suppose you were interviewing for a plant management position, and a vice president asked you, “What sort of plant management experience have you had in the past?”

Well, that’s exactly the sort of question that can get a candidate into trouble if he or she doesn’t use the above approach to just such an open-ended question. Most people would just start rattling off everything in their memory that relates to their plant management experience. Though the information might be relevant to the question, their answer could get pretty complicated and long-winded unless concisely stated.

One way to answer the question might be, “I’ve held plant management positions with three different consumer product companies over a nine-year period. Where would you like me to start?”

Or, they might simply state, “Let me give you the short version first, and you can tell me where you want to go into more details. I’ve had nine years experience in consumer product plant management with three different companies. What aspect of my background would you like to concentrate on?”

By using this method, you show the interviewer that your thoughts are well organized, and that you want to understand the intent of the question before you travel too far off the “beaten path” with a verbose reply. After you get clarification, you can focus your interviewing time discussing in detail the things that are relevant and important, not whatever happens to pop into your mind.