

Keep Interview Answers Brief, On Point

By Amy Lindgren

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We've all done it.

We've all gotten too relaxed — or maybe too nervous, too anxious to please or impress — and said more than we should have.

When this happens in a social setting, we usually know what we've done by the expression on the other person's face.

Boredom means we've gone on too long; shock means we've gone into the wrong kind of detail.

It's called TMI in the instant messaging world. That's a very handy acronym for "too much information" as in, OMG, TMI!

Fortunately for our social lives, the damage done by being chatty is reparable, sometimes right on the spot.

"I've been doing nothing but talk about myself. Please forgive me and tell me something about you. What are your favorite movies?"

Having redirected the conversation with a dose of charm, we earn the privilege of being in civilized society for another day.

If only it were that easy in an interview!

Sadly, this is one circumstance where boring the other person or spilling all the beans cannot easily be undone.

Once the interviewer has experienced your going on and on for an hour, he or she is unlikely to sign up for full workdays of the same treatment. Who would?

Sometimes the mistake is more than a social faux pas — it's also an indication of how you might approach your job.

For example, counseling professionals or sales representatives who can't shut up in a job interview don't inspire confidence about their listening abilities in an everyday work setting.

I spoke with an employer recently who had the unfortunate experience of meeting three candidates in a row who talked too much during their interviews.

In one case, he noted, the stories were entertaining enough to make him forget they were superfluous — for a while.

In another case, he realized he hadn't taken a single note during the interview because the candidate was speaking too quickly for him to write.

The third was the most disappointing, as the employer had been the most excited about her resume.

But when she opened her mouth after the first question, he never got another word in.

This just isn't good. There are so many ways it's wrong,

I have to list them to keep from forgetting anything. When you talk too much during an interview — or a networking session or any other job search activity — your mistakes likely include:

- not showing proper respect to the other person
- not catching or responding appropriately to nonverbal signals
- not participating in a give-and-take
- missing opportunities to build a relationship
- missing the hints and information their comments would provide

Most damaging of all? You're making the interviewer want to leave the room as quickly as possible.

It's not a good thing to induce an involuntary wince when someone hears your name.

OK, we know that talking too much is bad. How do you keep from doing it?

Start by asking your more honest friends or former co-workers if they've ever seen you talk more than a situation warrants.

Or ask an interview coach for that analysis.

Assuming that you test positive for ultra-gabiness, you need a strategy for the interview.

Here are a few ideas to try.

1. Record some of your interview answers and then listen to them. Did you include points that weren't relevant? To get an even better idea, transcribe them into your computer or onto a notepad. Now see how much you can edit out while keeping the gist of the answer.
2. Write down your interview stories in advance, then go over them to identify four or five key sentences. Practice telling each story with only these few sentences.
3. Remember: Beginning, middle, end. Structure your answers to have each of these elements, then stop talking after you've reached the end.
4. Make a point to be silent every few minutes, to give the interviewer a chance to respond or ask new questions.
5. If you just can't get this under control, try bringing it up early in the interview. "I'm a little nervous and I've learned that can make me talk too much. Please don't hesitate to stop me or put your hand up if I'm covering something too thoroughly."

Don't despair — you can overcome this. And when you do, you're going to be in demand both professionally and socially. Why? Because we all like to talk about ourselves and we need good listeners.

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