



OCCIDENT GLOBAL

“Tell Me About Your Weaknesses”

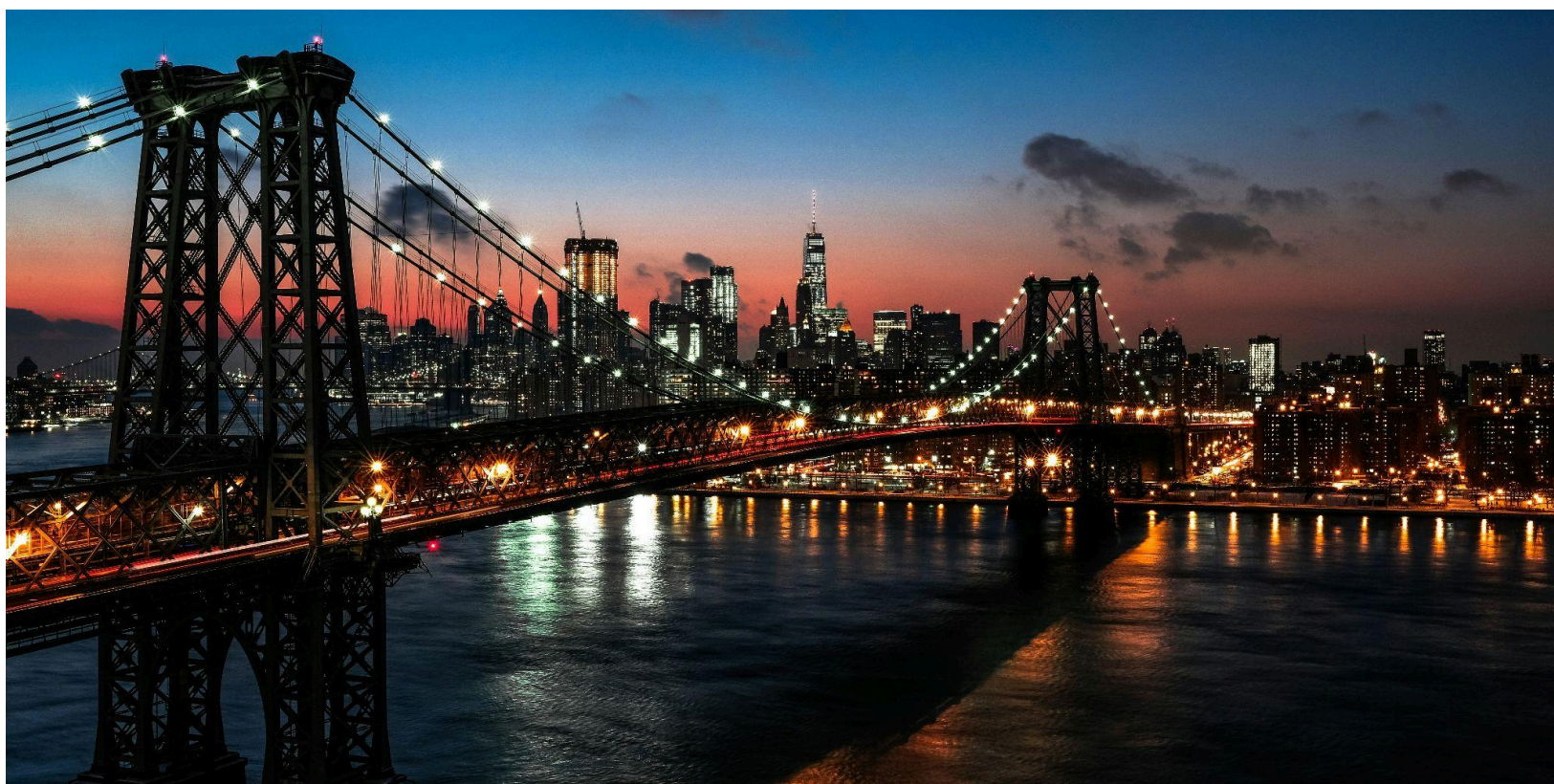


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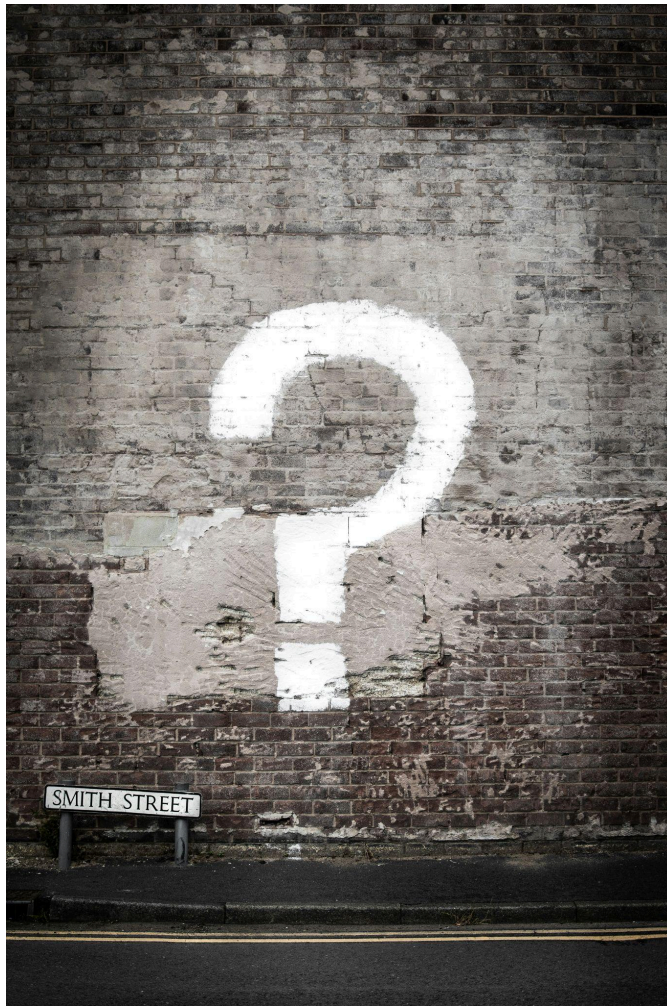
INTRODUCTION

The most important English interview question is the “Tell me about yourself” question. This question sets the tone for the interview and will make a first impression on your interviewers. The high stakes that this question carries makes this the most important question and the most difficult to prepare.

However, arguably the second most difficult question is the “Tell me about your weaknesses” question. This is the question that our clients have the most trouble answering in our mock interview sessions. Almost none of our clients who reach out to us for interview practice answer this question sufficiently when we practice with them.

The problem is that many people are not sure how to respond to this question. Many of our clients give vague answers, answers that are too personal, or say things that are completely irrelevant to the job that

they are applying for. The “Tell me about your weaknesses” question is important because giving a poor answer to this question could easily



ruin your interview. Thus, it is crucial that you know **what** this question is really asking you and **how** you should answer it. In this guide, we will explain this question and give you some strategies for how to answer it.

THE QUESTION

The “Tell me about your weaknesses” question usually comes halfway through your interview or towards the end of your interview. After you have introduced yourself and discussed your skills and experiences, interviewers might be looking for more details about you and will often

ask this question.

This question may be asked by itself, or it may be asked in the form of “Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses.” Some of the other forms of this question include:

- What are your greatest weaknesses?
- What do you say is an area that you need to improve?
- Can you describe an area or challenge where you are still developing?
- What are some skills you are currently working to enhance?

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- How would your colleagues describe an area you could improve on?

Regardless of how it is asked, you should have prepared a compelling answer to this question.

WHAT IS THE QUESTION ASKING

In order to answer this question well, it is important for you to understand what this question is really asking. There are **four** things that this question is really evaluating.

First, it is evaluating your **weaknesses**. Make no mistake, this question is definitely asking you to discuss your weaknesses and potential limitations as an applicant. Everyone, regardless of who they are, has certain weaknesses that will limit them and their ability to do their jobs.

Second, the question is looking to see whether you are **self-aware**. More specifically, it is looking to see if you are mature and intelligent enough to recognize your **relevant** weaknesses as a candidate. Again, nobody is perfect. You will have something that limits you, and this question is essentially asking to see if you are self-aware enough to recognize your relevant weaknesses. We emphasize **relevant** because you should **not** mention weaknesses that are irrelevant to the role (see below on what to avoid).

Third, this question is checking to see if you are someone who is dedicated to **self-improvement**. We will discuss the structure of how to answer this question later, but for now, it is important to know that this question is also evaluating you to see if you can go a step further and work to **minimize the impact of your limitations**. Interviewers do not want you to just say something like "I am bad at dealing with difficult people, and nothing can change that." Instead, they want to see that you are someone who is serious about correcting your shortcomings and dedicated to professional development.

Finally, the question is asking to see if you are **honest**. It is not hard to tell when someone is lying about their answer here. It is also easy to see if someone is trying to avoid giving an answer. If you give a generic answer, it will not come off as a sincere answer. Answers that are too generic, irrelevant, or avoid answering the question will appear dishonest.

Thus, what appears to be a straightforward question is actually asking you to reveal four separate facts about yourself. If you fail to describe any of these four things in your answer, you will not make a good impression on your interviewers and potentially jeopardize your chance at the job.

THINGS TO DO TO ANSWER WELL

While this question is hard, if you think critically and prepare well, you can easily develop a strong answer to this question. In this section, we discuss some ways you can prepare to answer this question and what you should do when you answer it.

Be Prepared

As with any interview question, preparation is crucial. Answering the question demands a balance of honesty and critical thinking.

Start your preparation by reflecting on your professional experiences and identifying real weaknesses that have impacted your work. The key here is selecting weaknesses that do not directly undermine the core competencies of the job you're applying for but are also relevant and appropriate.

Emphasizing Professional Weaknesses

When discussing your weaknesses, it's essential to focus on professional weaknesses rather than personal ones. By keeping the

focus professional, you provide a relevant perspective that relates directly to your work environment.

An example of a personal weakness is saying that you feel uncomfortable in large groups. Mentioning that you do not like large gatherings or interacting in large groups generally will not affect your professional duties unless your job specifically requires managing large public events frequently. Thus, saying this avoids the question and also gives the impression that you might not be a good colleague because you are too introverted.

Highlighting professional weaknesses also allows you to demonstrate your professionalism and maturity. It shows that you can assess your own performance in a work context and are committed to professional growth. This approach reassures potential employers that your weaknesses are manageable and that you are already taking steps to address them.

Discussing Relevant Weaknesses

It is important that you select relevant weaknesses. However, you also need to mention weaknesses that are genuine yet not so significant that they might disqualify you for the position. For instance, if you are applying for a job that requires strong analytical skills, admitting that you struggle with data analysis is not a good idea. Likewise, if you are a software developer, you don't want to say that you struggle to understand syntax or have difficulties reading legacy code. Instead, you could discuss a different area where improvement is desirable but not crucial to the job's primary functions.

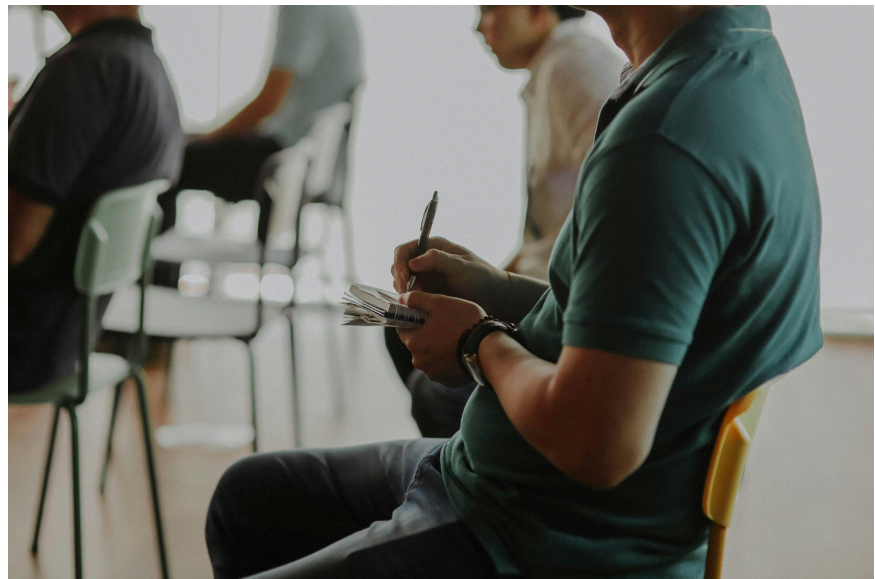
One strategy is to think about weaknesses that are actually improvements in disguise. Perhaps early in your career, you struggled with public speaking. Discussing this past weakness is relevant because it shows your journey of overcoming a common professional hurdle, especially if the job involves presenting or speaking roles. You can

mention that you have become much better at speaking publicly now, but it is still something that you sometimes have to prepare for.

Use Examples

Using examples will greatly enhance the impact of your response. When you mention a weakness, immediately follow up with a past incident that illustrates how this weakness presented itself in your professional life. For example, you can mention a time when you were too fixated on meeting deadlines uncritically that it led you to overlook some aspects of a project that you should have given more attention to.

Providing examples serves two purposes. First, it makes you more credible, and it shows that you're not just making a vague statement. Instead, you are acknowledging real instances where this weakness affected your job performance. Second, it sets the stage for you to demonstrate how you have addressed or are addressing this weakness.



Showing How You Are Improving

Finally, the most critical part of discussing your weaknesses is to show how you are taking steps to improve upon them. This part of your answer transforms a potential negative into a positive, showcasing your proactive nature and commitment to personal and professional growth.

For instance, if you admitted to struggling with a particular software, you could then explain the courses you have taken or the training you

are undergoing to enhance your proficiency. This not only shows that you are taking your weakness seriously but also that you are actively engaged in improving your skills.

When describing your efforts to improve, be **specific** about the actions you've taken and try to quantify your improvements if possible. You can mention any certifications you've obtained or specific improvements in performance metrics that you have improved on at your job. This specificity adds more authenticity to your claims and demonstrates your commitment to self-improvement.

Summary

In answering the "Tell me about your weaknesses" question, your preparation, choice of weaknesses, examples, and dedication to improvement are all integral to crafting a response that is honest and powerful. By following these steps, you ensure that you present yourself as a reflective, proactive, and continually improving professional, which is highly attractive to employers. This approach not only addresses the question effectively but also enhances your overall candidacy by demonstrating your capacity for self-assessment and personal development.



WHAT TO AVOID

When preparing your answer to this question, it's also important to know what to avoid. Here, we will explore common pitfalls and the types of responses that can undermine your chances of success.

Avoid Mentioning Significant Weaknesses Detrimental to the Role

One common mistake is mentioning weaknesses that have no relevance to the job. While it might seem safe to choose weaknesses unrelated to your work, such responses can frustrate interviewers who are looking for insights into your fit for the specific role. For example, mentioning your data analysis skills during an interview for a software development position is irrelevant and seems like you are avoiding the question. Another example is if you are applying for an accounting or

back office role and you say that you are not good at giving presentations. These roles would often not require you to give presentations or speak in front of groups of people, so giving this answer seems like you are dodging the question.

Instead, you should focus on weaknesses that have a connection to professional attributes or skills but are not too harmful (see the following section). This shows that you have a realistic view of your professional capabilities and are thoughtful about your personal development within it.

Avoid Mentioning Significant Weaknesses Detrimental to the Role

It's important to avoid mentioning weaknesses that could be seen as deal-breakers for the role. If you're applying for a position that requires meticulous attention to detail, stating that you often overlook small errors can be a huge problem. Likewise, if you are applying for an accounting role, saying that you struggle with math would not be a good weakness to mention. Such an admission could directly threaten your chances of being considered a suitable candidate.

Evaluate the key skills and attributes necessary for the job and ensure that any weaknesses you discuss do not undermine your ability to perform these essential functions. Instead, mention areas for improvement that are either peripheral to the job's requirements or are in areas where you have already made significant progress.

Avoiding Defensive Responses

It is also important that you avoid responding defensively or trying to justify your weaknesses. If you respond defensively, it can seem like you are not open to criticism or self-improvement. Employers want to hire someone who is focused on growth and improvement, not someone who stubbornly continues to do things that are harmful or ineffective.

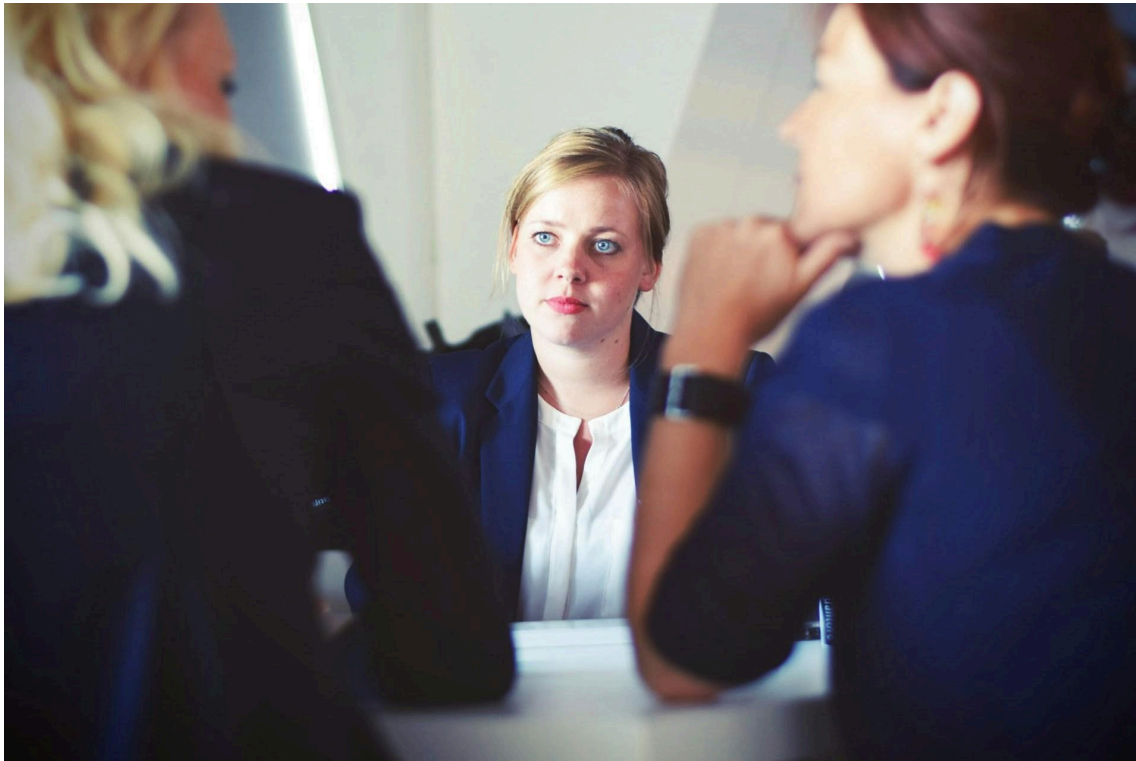
Avoid Cliches Like "I'm a Perfectionist"

You should avoid cliché responses such as "I'm too much of a perfectionist" or "I work too hard." These responses are overly familiar to interviewers and can come across as insincere. They also avoid the question itself. Giving an answer like this communicates that you are either unwilling to discuss real weaknesses or have not prepared sufficiently for the interview.

Instead of saying something generic like these, you should invest time in identifying genuine areas of improvement and prepare to discuss them openly. This preparation shows that you are insightful, honest, and serious about your professional development.

Summary

In sum, effectively answering the interview question about weaknesses requires not just knowing what to say but also what to avoid. Stay away from irrelevant and personal weaknesses, avoid mentioning any significant limitations that could harm your job performance, dodge defensive responses, and steer clear of clichéd answers. By carefully navigating these pitfalls, you can present yourself as a reflective and proactive professional, enhancing your appeal to potential employers and increasing your chances of job interview success.



SAMPLE ANSWER

Here is a sample answer to this question:

“One area I've been working on is my hesitancy to take risks. In the past, I found myself preferring to stick with the 'tried and true' methods rather than exploring new and innovative solutions. I realized that while this approach often ensures consistency, it can sometimes limit opportunities for growth and improvement. To address this, I've been actively pushing myself to step out of my comfort zone.

For instance, I recently volunteered to lead a project that involved implementing a new technology that none of us were familiar with. This was a significant departure from my usual preference for well-established methods. It was challenging, but also very rewarding. Through this experience, I learned a great deal about adaptive

leadership and gained confidence in my ability to manage uncertainty. I now make it a point to engage with new ideas and technologies regularly, which has significantly broadened my skill set and improved my ability to innovate within my role."

This answer is good for several reasons.

First, the candidate says that they are hesitant to take risks ("*One area I've been working on is my hesitancy to take risks*"). This answer gives a **perfect balance between positive and negative traits**. Being hesitant to take risks can sometimes be seen positively because you are not going to recklessly jump into using new technologies or methods that may not actually work. However, it is also a negative because you may be stuck in a mindset that is too conservative and you may miss some opportunities.

Next, the speaker gives a **clear example** of how this affected their work: "*In the past, I found myself preferring to stick with the 'tried and true' methods rather than exploring new and innovative solutions. I realized that while this approach often ensures consistency, it can sometimes limit opportunities for growth and improvement.*" This story is not catastrophic or terribly damaging, but it shows **why** this weakness can be a problem. It also highlights that this candidate is very **self-aware** of the problems of this limitation: "*It can sometimes limit opportunities for growth and improvement.*"

It also shows that the candidate is **actively trying to improve**: "*To address this, I've been actively pushing myself to step out of my comfort zone.*" It also shows **how** the candidate is doing this through another story about their experience: "*For instance, I recently volunteered to lead a project that involved implementing a new technology that none of us were familiar with. This was a significant departure from my usual preference for well-established methods. It was challenging, but also very rewarding. Through this experience, I learned a great deal about adaptive leadership and gained confidence in my ability to manage uncertainty.*"

And finally, it shows specifically what **the outcome has been and how they have improved** because of it: *"I now make it a point to engage with new ideas and technologies regularly, which has significantly broadened my skill set and improved my ability to innovate within my role."*

This answer provides details about everything that the question is evaluating and does so in an appropriate way that does not jeopardize the interviewee's chances of obtaining the job.

ANSWER STRUCTURE

To answer this question, we recommend our clients follow this structure. Once you have come up with an appropriate answer to this question (i.e. one that is not too serious, relevant, and not too personal), follow this structure to deliver a strong answer.

1) Clearly state the weakness in your first sentence.

You should start your answer with a clear statement about what weakness you are going to discuss.

"One area that I am trying to improve on is that I am too detail-oriented and it impacts the progress of projects. I have a natural attention to detail which I am learning to balance better with project timelines"

"I am aware that I am reluctant to speak up in public."

2) Provide details or an example of the weakness.

Follow your weakness with some more details about the weakness or a personal story related to the weakness.

"For example, when I am working on a project, I sometimes get too focused on minute details that are not directly related to the main goal of the project. This can cause the project to be slowed and hold up other group members."

“I sometimes struggle to stand up to my boss if he second guesses or criticizes me or when other colleagues give me feedback in a group setting.”

3) Explain that you are aware of the weakness and working to improve them.

After mentioning more details, it is critical that you explain what you are doing or have done to address them.

“Recognizing this, I have been working on making more decisions with a level of ambiguity and placing greater trust in my team members.”

“I am aware that this sometimes leads me to come off as timid or leads to inefficiencies in the project. To address this I have been building up my confidence by attending public speaking events that force me out of my comfort zone. I have been attending Toastmasters* for the past two months, and I have been doing extra work to make sure that my analyses are correct.”

*Toastmasters is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people improve their public speaking skills.

4) Give an example of how you are improving.

If you can, it is best to provide another example of how you have improved. It would be great to include stories related to your job to really emphasize your improvement.

“For example, on our recent project, as usual, I was concerned about some of the minor details of a project related to a new product. However, I mentioned my concerns to the team members in charge of these, and they clarified that they understood and would not let me down. Frequent communication and giving more trust to my team members allowed me to be more comfortable allocating the job to them, and in the end, I was very happy with the result.”

“Last week, my boss second-guessed my approach and questioned my assumptions. However, I was well-prepared for this and was expecting him to challenge some of my data. I had more than enough data to support my answer, and my newfound confidence in speaking allowed me to address his concerns in a confident and assertive manner. Everyone was a bit surprised by this, even the boss, and they all agreed that my analyses were correct, and everything proceeded smoothly.”

5) Explain what you learned from this

“This has given me more confidence to trust my team members and to remain focused on the big picture.”

“This experience has given me the confidence to stand up for myself and assert my opinions publicly. It has also shown me that being over-prepared and constant practice can help me overcome this weakness.”

Summary

By following this framework, you can answer the weaknesses question appropriately. Coming up appropriate content for this framework is not easy. You should dedicate considerable time to working on your answer and consulting with others in your field to determine if your answer is appropriate.

CONCLUSION

In this guide, we have discussed the “Tell me about your weaknesses” interview question. This question is common in English interviews and it can be difficult to answer it. We have provided several strategies that you can use to answer this question. We have also explained what this question is really asking you, as well as a framework for developing a strong answer to this question.

As with all questions in English interviews, the most important thing you can do is to prepare your answer in advance. We spend considerable time at Occudent Global helping our clients to develop strong and appropriate answers to this question. A poor answer to this question will make you appear unprepared, insincere, and dishonest. Thus, we encourage all of our clients to give this question appropriate time and prepare accordingly.

Thank you for reading our guide!

ATTRIBUTIONS

All images in this guide are courtesy of Unsplash (www.unsplash.com). We would like to thank the following photographers for sharing their works publicly:

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