

BREAKING IN

Answering the 'biggest weakness' question in interviews

TAG AND CATHERINE GOULET are founders of FabJob.com. Visit www.FabJob.com to discover how to break into the career of your dreams.



It's the question job applicants fear most: "So tell me," says the smiling interviewer, "What's your biggest weakness?"

If you think the best answer is to say, "I am a perfectionist who won't quit

until the job's done right," think again. The interviewer has probably heard the same reply from countless other applicants and doesn't believe it's a weakness any more than you do.

According to Vicky Oliver, author of "301 Smart Answers to Tough Interview Questions," the worst thing you can do is give your interviewer a canned answer. Applicants who give such a typical answer may be perceived as dishonest or lacking in creativity.

Oliver is one of 40 career experts and hiring managers who recently gave us their best tips for handling the weakness question. Here's a summary of their advice:

Understand why employers ask. According to Carole Martin, author of "Boost Your Interview I.Q.," interviewers ask the weakness question to find out what's wrong with you and what risks they are taking by hiring you.

Some employers ask just

to see how you respond. "They may not be as interested in your answer as they are in seeing how well you maintain your composure and think under pressure," says career counselor Deborah Schneider, co-author of "Should You Really Be a Lawyer?"

Be honest. Honesty doesn't just benefit the interviewer, it also ensures you don't end up in a job you'll hate. "If you hate details and find that you lack the interest to focus on them to avoid mistakes, just say so," says Joe Santana, co-author of "Manage I.T."

But don't confess something big. "Interviewees will often blurt potentially damaging information by

revealing real weaknesses," says organizational psychologist Billie G. Blair, president and CEO of Leading and Learning.

The key is not to disclose anything that can make you seem like a problem

worker. For example, the experts recommend you shouldn't say "I'm often late," "I have difficulty getting along with co-workers" or "I'm not good at finishing projects."

Admit a minor weakness. "Confessing that you're 'impatient' is a small weakness that often goes hand in hand with high performance," says Oliver.

But present your weakness with a positive spin. John Putzier, author of

"Weirdos in the Workplace! The New Normal," says instead of saying you're impatient with others, answer, "I am results-oriented and find that I must be more patient with those who are not."

Admit a weakness that can be fixed. After acknowledging your weakness, tell the employer what you're doing to overcome it. If time management is your weakness you could say, "Because I am busy, time management is often a problem for me, so I have recently purchased a PDA to help me become better organized," suggests Tim Augustine, author of "How Hard Are You Knocking: The Job Seeker's Guide to Opening Career Doors."

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They key to answering the 'weakness question' is not to disclose anything that can make you seem like a problem worker.

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Study says NY office space most virus-laden

YOU PROBABLY CLEAN vigorously at home, at least occasionally. But how often does this happen at work, the valiant efforts of the janitorial staff notwithstanding?

Maybe not as effectively as you might wish or suspect, according to a five-city study of germs found in office settings.

Charles Gerba, a microbiologist at the University of Arizona, collected samples from office buildings in Atlanta, Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Tucson, Ariz., last fall to determine how much human parainfluenza 1 virus was present. The virus is responsible for common respiratory infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis.

The survey collected samples from common areas: telephone mouthpieces, computer mice, desktops, doorknobs and handles, conference rooms, light switches and office cubicles.

New York, where half of all office surfaces contained the virus, was the most virus-laden city, followed by Atlanta, San Francisco, Chicago and Tucson.

Conference rooms were found to have far fewer germs than cubicles, while desktops had the most of the tested surfaces. In all office buildings, the light switch was the least contaminated site.

The study involved 328 surfaces and was conducted with a grant from Clorox Co., the Oakland, Calif.-based maker of cleaning products. **AP**

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