

Interview Success Through Better Listening

A job interview is a conversation, writes Jake Livengood, and to engage in it effectively, you must be a good listener.

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By Jake Livengood

Job interview success is influenced by how well we listen. What are the common barriers to listening in a job interview? And what are some effective strategies for surmounting them?

Many of you may have experienced this type of scenario before: an interviewer asks a difficult question. As it is being asked, doubt starts to creep into your thoughts and a resounding “Uh ...” or “Um ...” is the first thing that comes out of your mouth. After you finish the answer, you wonder if it was well received. The interviewer then asks another question, and you do not hear its content. All of a sudden, you feel behind and wish you could ask for a do over.

Listening is a challenge when the pressure is on. To best convey your fit in an interview, you must be able to overcome barriers to listening.

These barriers often stem from nervousness. It is natural to feel anxious in a job interview, and the focus should be on how to manage that nervousness. When we are anxious, we tend to focus inwardly on our emotions and how uncomfortable we feel. That situation in turn creates challenges to focus outwardly on the content of interview questions and how we can best contribute in a potential new role.

I've listed below some of the major barriers to listening that I've identified based on my experience interviewing students in mock interviews, hiring for positions and going on my own job interviews. I've also suggested some strategies for conquering such obstacles.

Barrier 1: “When I'm nervous, I do weird things.” People can exhibit odd behaviors when nervous, me included. Sometimes I think there's Jake and then there's Jake having anxiety. (I tend to show a higher energy level when nervous ... so now my cat is out of the bag.) In conducting numerous mock interviews, I've seen students respond in a variety of ways when nervous. They may talk faster, talk slower, use fillers such as “um” or “like,” have nervous laughter, fidget with things and exhibit many other behaviors.

Strategy: Become an expert in yourself and recognize how you respond when anxious. You must first become aware of what you do when you're nervous and then practice addressing those behaviors. That can be done throughout the day in everyday life. For example, you can reduce fillers during casual conversations or practice talking slower. Incorporating such changes into daily conversations will then translate to an interview setting. You can also practice such behaviors via a mock interview with your campus career center or a trusted friend or colleague who has hired employees in the past.

Barrier 2: Worrying about the past, present and future at the same time. We can be anxious on multiple levels when interviewing. For example, we can have doubts about what we said during a previous answer, what we are saying and what we will say. It is natural to doubt your interview answers after the fact. The interview environment does not yield a lot of direct feedback about performance. Concerns about future questions can also lead to additional stress.

Strategy: We cannot change the past, so focus on the present. We cannot predict the future, so give your best answer now. Paraphrase what was said to refocus your attention on the current topic. Practice answering interview questions one after another to simulate this environment in a mock interview with someone in campus career services or a friend.

Barrier 3: Fearing the unexpected, including unexpected questions. “What will the people be like? What happens if I freeze and cannot provide an answer? What questions will they ask?” These questions can cause a lot of stress and doubts. Preparing for a job interview is obviously a good strategy. However, it is unrealistic to think that you can have an answer ready for every potential question. In fact, many interviewers will intentionally ask questions that are unexpected in order to see how you respond in a more ambiguous, unpredictable environment.

Strategy: Practice being in uncomfortable environments. Challenge yourself to experience situations that are ambiguous. You can practice being in an uncomfortable setting when a job is not on the line. For example, I use my experience in leading improvisational workshops with students so they can practice communication in an unpredictable environment -- similar to a job interview -- in a safe situation. This helps students prepare for the unexpected.

Barrier 4: Feeling discomfort when talking about oneself and experiences. Interviewees often do not want to come across as arrogant or bragging about themselves. That discomfort in describing accomplishments and experiences can create a buildup of anxiety and cause a barrier to listening.

Strategy: Reframe. A job interview is a perfect time to discuss your accomplishments. (Typically if a student is concerned about this area, I am not worried that he or she will come across negatively). Increasing comfort and performance about such matters will take practice and preparation. Go into an interview with a list of three accomplishments or highlights and practice how to convey them, including the situation, task, action and result (or STAR method).

Barrier 5: Having concerns about appearance and attire. It is difficult to listen to interview questions when preoccupied with one's appearance and attire. In addition, one's message does not come across as confidently and convincingly as it could in this circumstance.

Strategy: Reduce areas of concern that create potential distractions. Test run your interview apparel to ensure that it fits properly. Check out your concerns with friends and trusted colleagues. Get feedback about your interview attire.

Show up early for the interview and have a staging area if you arrive more than 15 minutes before it starts. That could be a nearby coffee shop or hotel lobby that has comfortable seating and a restroom. By going to a staging area, you can make sure that your appearance is what you want it to be before going to the interview location. It will also give you a chance to relax after your commute to the interview location.

It is also important to recognize that an interview is a multisensory experience. Success requires a firm handshake (but not too firm or too limp). You also want to smell neutral (not like too much of something that is supposed to be a good smell, such as cologne or perfume, or something that is bad, such as smoke or body odor).

Barrier 6: "What if I say the wrong thing?" The anticipation of saying the wrong thing can reduce the likelihood of listening and being in the moment.

Strategy: This barrier implies that there is only one right answer to an interview question. In reality, you can give many responses that would impress an employer. Think of your answers as more of a continuum of quality, and try to prepare examples that move that bar to the higher end of the continuum. To do that, provide answers that are more detailed and include specific examples of your actions and results.

Listening is challenging, especially when a job is on the line. The interview is a conversation. To best engage in that conversation, you need to be a good listener by practicing and overcoming barriers.

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