

Crafting answers to those tough questions?

"Tell me about a time you had a conflict with a peer."

How would you handle this question during a two-hour, high-pressure interview for a job you passionately, desperately want? Not sure? Perhaps it's time to call in a professional interview coach. The good news: From teaching clients how to tackle tough questions, to persuading them to believe in their own hype, interview coaches boost clients' confidence and offer sage advice. The bad news: Coaches can't fix everything - or everybody.

Out of the loop

A few years ago, Catherine Brohman of Kitchener, Ont., found herself out of law school and headlong into résumés and interviews. Having been a law clerk for the previous 11 years, Ms. Brohman knew her job-hunting skills were rusty. She searched the Web and found Ross Macpherson, president of Career Quest in Whitby, Ont., a career consultancy firm.

At first she only wanted Mr. Macpherson's help writing a killer résumé, but soon realized her interviewing skills could use a pick-me-up too, especially after a mock interview over the phone where she stumbled over her answers.

"At that point I realized how ill prepared I would have been for an interview if I hadn't had a dry

run with somebody. It really opened my eyes," she says.

Mr. Macpherson isn't surprised most clients put 30 hours into developing their résumé but a scant 30-minutes preparing for an interview.

"The amazing thing is, interviews are where the final decisions are made. That's where they pick the winner so that's where you really need to invest your time," he says.

Who sees the light?

Enlightened clients fall into a few categories, says Carole Martin, a career coach and author of *Boost Your Interview IQ*.

"A lot of them are the working wounded," she says. "They've been beat up, hurt, or on 20 interviews with no job offers."

Others stumble across their dream job and they hope an interview coach will give them an edge.

Then there are clients like Ms. Brohman, who have been out of the job market and realize the rules have changed.

Have your stories

Take the kind of questions human resources people ask these days. Say goodbye to queries like, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" Today, questions focus on behaviour and begin

with, "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me an example when," says Sharon Graham, president of Toronto-based Graham Management Group, which offers interview training.

These questions should be answered in a specific, structured way. She coaches customers to use the SAR technique - "situation, action, result" Set up the story, describe the action you took - which is really all they want to hear about - and end the story with a bang.

Ms. Graham recommends examining the job listing and coming up with a story that describes how you've handled a similar situation. "I always tell people to have at least 20 stories in their back pocket," she says.

An answer for everything

Coming up with answers to behavioural questions takes thought, but not nearly as much as what's required for the dreaded inquiry: "Tell me about yourself." "Most people are under the misguided impression it's an icebreaker. It's not," Mr. Macpherson says. "The interview is on, you've sat down, the door is closed and they're listening."

Instead of rambling on about your dogs or offering a boring career chronology, have a well-rehearsed, interesting and relevant 30-second pitch ready.

Crafting answers to those tough questions? *(cont.)*

Those touchy questions

But what if you've been fired? An interview coach can help craft an answer for that possibly embarrassing situation too. Without going into too much gory detail, explain why you got the boot, what you've learned - then move on. And resolve your own feelings about the firing before, or the baggage will come with you, Ms. Graham says. If you're open and sincere, people understand.

More than words

Interview coaches don't just focus on what clients say, but what they're doing when they say it. Ms. Martin audiotapes or video-tapes her clients' mock interviews and plays them back later. Most are appalled by their nervous ticks, she says. Recently, a lawyer came for interview coaching. He watched the videotape - during which he swung back and forth regularly, something he hadn't realized he was doing.

"He was like a pendulum. But I'll tell you, the next time I videotaped him, he kept rod-straight," Ms. Martin says.

Keep it natural

But how does someone sound spontaneous after spending five hours nailing the perfect messages and eliminating all physical manifestations of shot nerves? No one wants to sound like a robot giving canned answers, Mr. Macpherson says. He suggests writing down the messages you want to make in point form, but practice your answers using different wording each time. Sound genuine. Not perfect.

Never memorize your answers, Ms. Graham cautions.

"It's awful being stuck in the middle of a sentence and not remembering the rest of what you want to say," she says.

What they can't fix

Obviously, coaches can't fix what you look like, which might be unfortunate since some candidates are dismissed for physical appearance, consciously or not.

There's one other trait that can't be helped: Those who won't help themselves, says Dora Vell, owner of Vell & Associates Executive Search in Waltham, Mass., which works with U.S. and Canadian clients.

Last year, a senior executive with a large Canadian IT firm hired Ms. Vell to coach him for an interview where he needed to show he could be hands-on. His mock interview took 2 ½ hours. When she mentioned his long-winded ways, he thanked her and hung up.

Ms. Vell says the candidate later called to say the interview went well and that he had ample time.

"Basically he was saying, 'You don't know what you're talking about, lady,'" she says.

He didn't get the job. The interviewers told her they felt he took so long to make his point, he'd never get any work done.

"You can't fix personality," Ms. Vell says.

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Dora Vell is the CEO of Vell Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in recruiting technology executives including: CEOs, COOs, CTOs, CMOs, CROs, board members and others. She works with VC-backed, PE-backed private companies and public companies. She can be reached at dora@vell.com.