

How to Talk About Yourself in a Job Interview

*A conversation with
Katherine Burik*

By Mac Prichard
Founder of Mac's List



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The following conversation is transcribed from the podcast, [*Find Your Dream Job, Episode 87: How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Question*](#), featuring Mac Prichard and Katherine Burik. The transcript has been edited for length and style.

Topics covered in this conversation include:

- How to answer the "tell me about yourself" question
- Why you always need to be genuine in an interview
- Why research is the foundation of any good interview
- How to convert an interview into a conversation

For more information on *Find Your Dream Job*, visit macslist.org/podcast

About Katherine Burik



Katherine Burik is a partner at [Interview Doctor](#). She works with both job candidates and employers, and speaks frequently about career development and successful job search methods.

Katherine has published four books on job hunting as part of the *Job Seeker Manifesto* series. Her newest book is [Talent Search Marketing Plan](#).



Mac Prichard:

Today we're talking about the one question that comes up in almost every job interview: "Tell me about yourself." It seems like a such simple prompt. Why do you recommend that people not wing their response, Katherine? Is there an actual strategy for answering this question?

Katherine Burik:

It is a pretty simple question and many job seekers treat it almost like an icebreaker. But it can be much more than just a "get to know you" prompt.

There's a flow and a rhythm to every interview. If you have a really solid response to the "tell me about yourself" question, you set the tone for the rest of the interview. You can even knock a hiring manager off their preset list of interview questions. If you fill your response with interesting tidbits of information, the hiring manager won't be able to resist asking follow-up questions.

You can't wing it though. In order to make the most of this strategic opportunity, you really need to plan it out ahead of time.



**You have the power
to convert the interview
into a conversation.**





Mac Prichard:

So it's a huge opportunity and you don't want to take it for granted. How do you recommend that people prepare for this question? What should they think about?

Katherine Burik:

Organize your answer by thinking about what the hiring manager or the interviewer wants to hear. What is the core reason they are hiring? What characteristics will most contribute to success in the role? Figure this out ahead of time. Then you want to populate your answer with ideas that will speak to the employer's latent needs and wants.

Mac Prichard:

That sounds great. But how exactly do you do that? Is there a specific methodology that a job seeker can use to structure a winning response?



Katherine Burik:

There are five parts to a great response. All five of these parts need to come out in one minute or less. So it's important to select your words carefully and practice in advance.

First, share a few simple facts about yourself. This is something most people already do when they answer the question. They say something like "I used to work here" or "I went to school there."

You want to share the thirty thousand foot, big-picture view of your career, not the stuff the employer can find in your resume.

Share where you grew up, what you studied in college, and maybe a general theme that ties your past work experiences together. Don't share anything too personal—just high-level stuff.

Here are a few facts I might share, for example: I was born and raised in Chicago. I went to Northwestern University, and to Loyola University for my Masters degree in Human Resources and Industrial Relations. I've been in Human Resources and Industrial Relations my entire career, almost always as a director or vice president.

This part is pretty straight forward... just some simple facts.

“Share the thirty thousand foot, big-picture view of your career.”





Mac Prichard:

Okay, step number two?

Katherine Burik:

Step number two is to share an accomplishment you're particularly proud of.

You were already talking about your career, so it's natural to bring up an accomplishment that speaks to your success. Say something like, "I'm particularly proud of..." and describe one accomplishment that you think will just be irresistible to the hiring manager.

So if I was interviewing for a job as VP of Human Resources, I might pick a talent development story. I would say something like, "I'm particularly proud of the talent development program I implemented at my last company that resulted in a five basis point reduction in turnover."

You don't have time for details. Just recall a high-level, accomplishment that speaks to the employers needs.



Mac Prichard:

Your choice is informed by the homework you did before the interview because you need to know what matters to the person sitting across the table. I love the example that you gave, Katherine, because you're not only addressing the concerns of the employer, but also talking about the accomplishment in a measurable way. That's impressive.

Katherine Burik:

You want the interviewer to say, "Really? How did you do that?" This is how you get their attention, break free of the usual interview format, and have a meaningful conversation.

Mac Prichard:

Okay. That's part two. What's next, Katherine?

Katherine Burik:

After you identify your accomplishment, you want to list five words that describe you. You're trying to convey who you are as a person and a professional.

Don't explain or define the terms. Just list five things that are true and positive about you. For example: "I am high-energy, smart, and well-organized. I like to solve problems and I like to be part of a team."

This is a good way to test your cultural fit in the organization. Be honest with your descriptors because you don't want to work at a place that doesn't value who you are.



Mac Prichard:

Why five words? Why not three or seven? Why is five the magic number?

Katherine Burik:

It's too easy to come up with three words; seven words is too many. You're trying to keep your answer short. Five words demonstrate to the hiring manager that you really know what you bring to the table. You didn't come up with five words off the top of your head.

Mac Prichard:

And if your five words don't get a positive reaction from the interviewer that means something, right? Perhaps you need to be at a place where people are excited about the values that you share?

Katherine Burik:

Exactly. Hiring managers are looking for three things: someone who can do the job, someone who brings passion, and someone who is going to fit in with the team.

As an outsider, interviewing for a job, you can never be sure whether you'll fit with the team, so you might as well be honest.

Be up-front with who you are and if the hiring manager doesn't want a high energy, smart, organized, team-oriented problem solver like you, then it's their loss. In the end, you're better off not working for an organization that doesn't appreciate everything you bring to the table.





Mac Prichard:

Okay, let's move on to number four of this five-part formula. What's the fourth thing that people need to do when answering "tell me about yourself"?

Katherine Burik:

Well, the fourth and fifth parts are sort of related. The fourth part is describing what you want and the fifth item is explaining why should they hire you.

What you want should always be the job in front of you. Don't share an interest in retiring or moving to Kathmandu in three years. That's not going to impress the interviewer. They want someone who is genuinely passionate about the job at-hand.

Try to find a creative way of expressing your interest, without just saying "I want this job." One way to do this is to explain your excitement about solving problems similar to those of the hiring organization. You're making it clear that you are up to the challenge.





Mac Prichard:

So know the problem, be clear about why you want that job, and how you can help them. Now, can a candidate really hit all five of these points in just a minute or two?

Katherine Burik:

Absolutely. I actually time my clients and work with them to edit their answer down to a minute or less.

There are certain types of people who struggle with this. People who like to talk a lot need to be coached to stay on message. They need to practice discipline, to select the right words, and to stick to the script.

People who are really shy also need practice. For them, it's about making sure what comes out of their mouth is exactly what they want to say.

It takes work, but you can give a killer answer to the "tell me about yourself" question in under a minute.



About Mac Prichard

Mac Prichard, founder and publisher of [Mac's List](#), has been connecting people to rewarding work for decades. As a transplant to Portland, Oregon in the early 1990s, Mac learned the secrets to finding work in a competitive market. He has since become a recognized expert on job hunting and career management. Mac writes for the [Mac's List blog](#), hosts a weekly podcast, [Find Your Dream Job](#), and is the author of [Land Your Dream Job in Portland \(and Beyond\)](#) and [Land Your Dream Job Anywhere](#).

About Mac's List

Since 2001, Mac's List has been Oregon's premier job search resource, an online community connecting thousands of passionate and talented people to meaningful work opportunities in the Pacific Northwest. A registered B Corp, Mac's List is an organization with a social mission: to give people the tools and knowledge they need to conduct effective job searches. We do this through our [job board](#), a [blog](#), a [podcast](#), and [online courses](#) all dedicated to the nuts and bolts of job hunting and career management. More than 80,000 people a month connect with Mac's List.

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