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BEP 83 ADV – Previous Experience (Part 2)

Launch Quiz

This is the second in a two-part series on discussing previous experience in job interviews. It is one of an ongoing sequence of podcasts that covers the whole interview process.

In the first part of this series, we examined a bad example of everything that can go wrong when we talk about our previous experience. We used the theme “Don’t let your guard down” to highlight the importance of maintaining an appropriate level of formality and professionalism, even when the interviewer is attempting to strike a casual tone.

In Part 2 today, we listen to a better interview performance by someone who has prepared to talk about their previous experience more effectively. In this good example, Sherry Shen, from Hong Kong, is interviewing with a multinational accounting company for her first job after graduating with a Master’s in finance.

It’s her first round of interviews, and she is being asked all the standard questions by an HR officer. Although Sherry is an all-around good candidate, her résumé has some problems. Her grades aren’t great, and there is a gap with no employment between her college and graduate school careers.



As you listen, focus on the following questions.

Listening Questions

1) Does Sherry let her guard down, or does she answer briefly and to-the-point with an appropriate level of formality?

2) Does Sherry seem well-prepared to talk about her experience?

3) How does Sherry account for the gap in her résumé?

Vocabulary

To start on the wrong foot: To make a bad start. "You need to prepare thoroughly to avoid starting off on the wrong foot."

Spot on (to be): (Informal) To be very accurate or correct. "We were spot on with our projections last year; the final results were almost identical to those we projected."

Extensive experience with/in something: Common collocation, or word partnership. "She has extensive experience programming and managing large databases."

To excel in something: To do very, very well in something. "She excels in getting people to actively participate in the discussion; everyone has something to say when she chairs the meeting."

Software packages: Sometimes called a software suite, ie., a collection of software with complementary functions that work together seamlessly. "Adobe Creative suite is the leading software package for graphic and web design."

Hands-on courses: "Hands-on" means practical. A hands-on course in university is a course that teaches you something that can be applied in the real world. "In addition to theoretical courses, I also took a series of hands-on laboratory courses."

Audit: (Noun or verb) The practice of examining the financial records of a company or individual. "Last year we got audited by head office, and they spent weeks looking through all our records."

Internship: Unpaid temporary employment for a university student or recent graduate; the goal of the employee is to acquire work experience. "She had internships at some top companies, but she still found it difficult to get a full time job."

Team effort: (Common collocation, or word partnership). "Getting this job done is too much for one person; it's going to require a team effort."

To face clients: Also, to face customers. This refers to work or a position that requires employees to interact directly with clients. "Client-facing" is the adjective. "It's very important for all of our customer-facing staff to have good levels of English."

To take time out: This refers to taking a break during your study or work career, or between university and your first job. "After graduation, I took some time out to decide what I really wanted to do."

Time management: The practice or skill of using time efficiently. "Time management is an extremely important skill for successful managers to have; without it, they will never get all their work done and burn out quickly."

Every cloud has a silver lining: (Idiom) Even bad events have a good side. "Well, I had to work overtime last night, so I didn't get to watch the big game. But every cloud has a silver lining – at least I avoided drinking any alcohol last night."

Mature: (Verb or adjective). Become older and wiser. "Because she had to take care of her two younger brothers, she matured quickly."

Grad school: Short for graduate school. A university department for postgraduate (*abv*: postgrad) students to study for MA or PhD advanced degrees. "I went to grad school at Berkeley to do my MA".

Dialog

Interviewer: So, Sherry, how're you doing today?

Sherry: Fine, thank you. And you?

Interviewer: Not bad, thanks. Did you find us okay?

Sherry: Yes, no problem – your directions were spot on.

Interviewer: Great, because it can be a little tricky getting here by MTR. All right. Well, let's get started. Perhaps you can begin by telling me a little about your previous experience?

Sherry: Of course. In my course work and internships, I've had extensive experience with both the theoretical and practical aspects of accounting, and I excel in both areas.

Interviewer: Really? Can you give me some examples?

Sherry: Well, I've taken two advanced applied mathematics courses on risk analysis. They were very challenging, but I managed to get in the top 10% of both classes.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Sherry: But at the same time, in our more hands-on courses, I've also become familiar with many of the leading software packages – particularly the @RISK suite for Excel and ACL for audit analysis.

Interviewer: That's good. We use @RISK for analysis here too.

Sherry: And in my internship last year at the Armstrong Associates, I got to apply these analytical skills. I worked on an audit of a Fortune 500 company.

Interviewer: Yes, I saw that on your résumé. So in what ways did you benefit from this experience?

Sherry: Well, though as an intern my responsibilities were limited, this was a great opportunity to participate in a team effort and to learn practical knowledge about how to face clients.

Interviewer: Great... Now, can you tell me about this gap in your résumé? It looks like you took two years out between college and graduate school.

Sherry: Yes, actually, I had a baby in 2003, a little girl. It was very important to me that she had a good start in life, so I took two years out after she was born. My family helps me to take care of her, but it's taught me a lot about time management.

Interviewer: I bet – children can be a handful!

Sherry: Indeed, but it certainly made me mature faster than most of my classmates. And despite these extra challenges – or perhaps even because of them – I have had quite a successful grad school career. I am always working hard to do my best, so I am confident I will continue to succeed in the future.

Debrief

Sherry is off to a good start in the interview. She maintains a proper level of formality in her replies, even when the interviewer tries to set her at ease with some chit-chat at the beginning. Also, Sherry is prepared to discuss her experience; even though she has no real work record, she can talk convincingly about how achieving university successes and overcoming life challenges make her a strong candidate.

First, let's review how Sherry handles the small talk at the beginning of the dialog.

Interviewer (HR Officer): So, Sherry, how're you doing today?

Sherry: Fine, thank you. And you?

Interviewer: Not bad, thanks. Did you find us okay?

Sherry: Yes, no problem – your directions were spot on.

Interviewer: Great, because it can be a little tricky getting here by MTR. All right. Well, let's get started.

Sherry keeps her responses polite, brief and to the point. In your interview, there may well be more small talk than there was in this one, which is fine. Just be sure to remember that it's an interview, and, aside from a few polite questions, let the interviewer lead the exchange.

We've already discussed small talk in Part 1, so let's move on. What happens next?

Interviewer: Perhaps you can begin by telling me a little about your previous experience?

Sherry: Of course. In my course work and internships, I've had extensive experience with both the theoretical and practical aspects of accounting, and I excel in both areas.

Interviewer: Really? Can you give me some examples?

Sherry has obviously prepared well for this interview. She does a great job of summing up her university experience, and more importantly, of talking about how it translates into benefits to her future employer. She uses the present perfect tense – "have done" – to highlight that her experience is relevant *now*. She employs positive, active language, such as "excel," and she makes good use of word partnerships, such as "extensive experience." Critically, she backs up what she says with examples. Let's listen to more:

Sherry: Well, I've taken two advanced applied mathematics courses on risk analysis. They were very challenging, but I managed to get in the top 10% of both classes.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Sherry: But at the same time, in our more hands-on courses, I've also become familiar with many of the leading software packages – particularly the @RISK suite for Excel and ACL for audit analysis.

Interviewer: That's good. We use @RISK for analysis here too.

Notice how Sherry quantifies – that is, uses numbers – where possible by, for instance, saying she scored in the “top 10%” of her class. And how she uses strong, vivid, words in her description: “advanced,” “challenging” and “hands-on” – to describe her experience. Here's a few more examples of some key words you can use to highlight your experience:

- I was mainly **responsible** for **implementing** new accounting procedures, which **succeeded** in reducing our tax burden by 15%.
- I see my role as a manager as a **facilitator** for **change** – to be supportive of my staff's needs and to make sure they have the **tools** to **adapt** to the changing marketplace...
- By **participating** in the university debate team, I've been able to **develop** both my **communication** and **leadership** skills.
- Over the past year, I have **succeeded** in **rolling out** an **innovative** new system for measuring productivity. It was a challenge, but it really **paid off** with an 18% increase in customer satisfaction.

Now, let's go back to the dialog. Listen to how Sherry talks about a specific case in which she applied her university experience in the real world.

Sherry: And in my internship last year at the Armstrong Associates, I got to apply these analytical skills. I worked on an audit of a Fortune 500 company.

Interviewer: Yes, I saw that on your résumé. So in what ways did you benefit from this experience?

Sherry: Well, though as an intern my responsibilities were limited, this was a great opportunity to participate in a team effort and to learn practical knowledge about how to face clients.

Sherry puts the negative information – the fact that as an intern her responsibilities were limited – inside a subordinate clause: “Though my responsibilities were limited, this was a great opportunity to participate...” Thus, the emphasis of this statement is on what she learned, and on what a great opportunity it was for her. Also, she is careful to underline how her previous work has demonstrated the positive personal qualities of team work and cooperation. When we're asked about our previous experience, in addition to talking about our qualifications, it's important to mention positive personal characteristics. Listen to another example from someone interviewing for a management position:

- Although this industry is different, I think my experience as a team leader demonstrates a lot of management skills that fit well with this job; specifically, my ability to listen, to be flexible and innovative in my approach.

We'll be studying many more positive personal characteristics that you can mention in the next series on job interviews, “Talking about Your Accomplishments.”

Finally, let's have a look at how Sherry deals with a question about the gap in her résumé.

Interviewer: Great... Now, can you tell me about this gap in your résumé? It looks like you took two years out between college and graduate school.

Sherry: Yes, actually, I had a baby in 2003, a little girl. It was very important to me that she had a good start in life, so I took two years out after she was born. My family helps me to take care of her, but it's taught me a lot about time management.

Interviewer: I bet – children can be a handful!

Sherry: Indeed, but it certainly made me mature faster than most of my classmates. And despite these extra challenges – or perhaps even because of them – I have had quite a successful grad school career. I am always working hard to do my best, so I am confident I will continue to succeed in the future.

Although the gap in her career record is a weakness, Sherry does her best to turn it into a strength. Instead of focusing on her personal challenge, she attempts to look at it from the point of view of the employer. How does her history – even when it doesn't fit a traditional career pattern – translate into benefits to the employer? Sherry focuses on how her experience as a mother has taught her time management and maturity.

Before your job interview, examine every gap in your work history and every weakness on your résumé. Nobody's perfect, but usually every coin has two sides. What are the lessons, strengths, or positive experience that you have drawn from your frustrations?

Let's look at more examples of turning weaknesses into strengths.

- One good thing that has come out of my time out is catching up on a lot of training and reading for my work.
- Taking care of my mother during her illness reinforced my commitment to help people.
- I had to take time out for health reasons, but it gave me a chance to re-evaluate my goals.
- I emerged from the experience with a new sense of direction.
- I volunteered to help small local businesses with their taxes, which has given me a deeper perspective on dealing with SME's.

Now, let's finish off today with a little practice on the two key skills we looked at: highlighting your experience and portraying weaknesses in a positive light.

First, we'll practice talking about your experience. Let's use "gap reading" to review key collocations – word partnerships – that can help make your discussion fluent, vivid and strong. In the cues for this practice, you'll hear a series of sentences. One word in each sentence is blanked out with a beep. Repeat the sentence, but say the missing word.

For example, if you hear, "I was mainly responsible for **<beep>** new accounting procedures," you'll say, "I was mainly responsible for *implementing* new accounting procedures". Note that in some cases, more than one correct answer is possible.

Let's begin.

Cue 1: As a manager, I see my role as a **<beep>** for change.

Learner: _____

Cue 2: I work hard to make sure my staff have the **<beep>** to adapt to the changing marketplace.

Learner: _____

Cue 3: By participating in the university debate team, I've been able to **<beep>** both my communication and leadership skills.

Learner: _____

Cue 4: Over the past year, I have succeeded in **<beep>** out an innovative new system for measuring productivity.

Learner: _____

Cue 5: It was a challenge, but it really **<beep>** off with an 18% increase in customer satisfaction.

Learner: _____

Answer 1: As a manager, I see my role as a **facilitator** for change.

Answer 2: I work hard to make sure my staff have the **tools** to adapt to the changing marketplace.

Answer 3: By participating in the university debate team, I've been able to **develop** both my communication and leadership skills.

Answer 4: Over the past year, I have succeeded in **rolling** out an innovative new system for measuring productivity.

Answer 5: It was a challenge, but it really **paid** off with an 18% increase in customer satisfaction.

Next it's time to practice turning weaknesses into strengths. Imagine you are discussing gaps in your résumé with an interviewer. In the cues, you will hear the reason for your gap, followed by a benefit to you and your potential employer. Form a sentence in which you link the gap to the benefit. You can use language we have studied today, such as, "Every cloud has a silver lining," or "I emerged from

the experience with...” or “One good thing that has come out of it is...”. Are you ready?

Cue 1: Unemployed / Took classes in new software.

Learner: _____

Cue 2: Took time out for health reasons / Enabled me to re-evaluate my goals.

Learner: _____

Listen now to some example phrases. Bear in mind that your answers may be different.

Answer 1: One good thing that has come out of being unemployed is that I’ve had an opportunity to take classes in new software.

Answer 2: I had to take time out for health reasons, but every cloud has a silver lining. It really enabled me to re-evaluate my goals.

That’s all for this series on previous experience. We’ve looked at how to deal with the small talk that accompanies the beginning of almost every job interview and we’ve examined how to prepare yourself to respond to typical questions about your previous experience. We’ve particularly emphasized strong, vivid language and turning weaknesses into strengths.

In this series, we’ve looked at the theme “don’t let your guard down”. This is the first of eight themes that we will be exploring on the topic of interviews.

Be sure to use the study notes, which are available for all episodes. In the study notes you’ll find vocabulary explanations and full transcripts. In addition, there is a wide range of additional language and listening development exercises available at www.businessenglishpod.com.

Language Review

A) Key Language

To review common collocations, fill in the blanks with words from the box.

measuring	utilizing	system	increase	expand
big	innovative	satisfaction	resources	succeeded

Over the past year, I have _____ in rolling out an _____ new _____ for _____ productivity. This has helped achieve _____ gains for the company, including an 18% _____ in customer _____ as we've been able to _____ our services by _____ underused _____ .

B) Prepositions Review

In the following passages from this episode, insert the correct preposition in each blank to review the correct usage of key language:

Although the industry is different, I think my experience _____ a team demonstrates a lot of management skills that transfer well _____ this job; specifically, my ability to listen, to be flexible and innovative _____ my approach, and to facilitate communication _____ people with diverse working styles and personalities.

One good thing that has come out of my time out is catching up _____ a lot of training and reading _____ my work. I took a class _____ the Sarbanes Oxley Act, and got certified _____ new software. Also, I volunteered to help small local businesses _____ their taxes, which has given me a deeper perspective _____ customer service.

Study Strategy

Have a look at your résumé. Are there any gaps? Any weaknesses? Were you asked any embarrassing questions about your experience at your last job interview? Make a list of all the parts of your work record that you feel might come up in an interview. Now, for every one, think of a positive way to address the issue. Using some of the language and phrases we practiced in this episode or using your own words, craft short responses to each question. Next, record yourself speaking naturally about each point. Get a friend to listen to the recording and tell you how you sound.

Answers

Listening Questions

- 1) Sherry always answers briefly and to-the-point. For example, she doesn't take the opening small talk as an invitation to be informal; nor does she seem unfriendly.
- 2) Yes, obviously Sherry has carefully prepared for the interview, not just by being able to talk about her successes but also about her potential weaknesses.
- 3) She turns a weakness into a strength by talking about how mothering a child has taught her time management and how to deal with life responsibly.

Language Review

A) Key Language

Over the past year, I have **succeeded** in rolling out an **innovative** new system for **measuring** productivity. This has helped achieve **big** gains to the company, including an 18% **increase** in customer **satisfaction** as we've been able to **expand** our services by **utilizing** underused **resources**.

B) Prepositions review

Although the industry is different, I think my experience **as? in** a team demonstrates a lot of management skills that transfer well **to** this job; specifically, my ability to listen, to be flexible and innovative **in** my approach, and to facilitate communication **between/amongst/among** people with diverse working styles and personalities.

One good thing that has come out of my time out is catching up **on** a lot of training and reading **for** my work. I took a class **on/in** the Sarbanes Oxley Act, and got certified **in** new software. Also, I volunteered helping small local businesses **with** their taxes, which has given me a deeper perspective **on** customer service.

Online Practice

Click the "Launch" button to open the **FLASH** version:

