

## Speak the truth and nothing but the truth during job interviews

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The practice of law has undergone enormous change in the past two decades, but one thing remains constant: Integrity still counts for a lot in the legal profession. A lawyer who bends the truth in advocating on behalf of a client may find himself facing disciplinary action. A law student who materially misrepresents her credentials at an interview may be shown the door once the misrepresentation is discovered.

Of course, there are different degrees of telling the truth. Does your prospective employer need to know that you stole a pencil from a classmate when you were in second grade? Obviously not. Do you need to disclose to a legal employer that you failed the bar exam? Of course; your bar status is highly material.

In an interview, you need to tell the truth about material facts. You also have an obligation not to mislead an interviewer through omission. For example, suppose an interviewer believes that you left your last firm voluntarily, but the truth is that you were actually asked to leave. In this case, you need to set the record straight.

On the other hand, you are under no obligation to share all of the sordid details of your messy affair with the managing partner's secretary. It is sufficient to state that both sides agreed that the firm was not a good fit. Telling the truth does not require telling all!

### **\* Too much information can unnecessarily weaken your job prospects**

I once screened a candidate for a search and noticed that she had a big gap on her resume. I asked her what she was doing during this time. She answered: "I was a drug addict." While that was the truth, it would have been more effective to tell me that she had taken off some time to deal with personal or family issues.

What if the partner you work for is unbearable? Try this: "Smith & Jones was a difficult place to work." Saying that the partner you work for is a notorious jerk will only raise questions about your ability to be discreet. It will also suggest that you are apt to blame someone else when things go wrong.

What if you received a poor performance review because you were bored? Try this: "Some of the partners I worked with were very impressed with my legal skills. But I did not find residential real estate closings challenging, and I don't think I did my best work for the partners in charge of the residential side of the practice."

In other words, take some responsibility for your demise but do not feel the need to elaborate at great length.

**\* The “whole truth” can prevent an interviewer from drawing negative inferences**

Sometimes the whole truth is best because it provides a good explanation for something that might be perceived as a negative. It also removes any speculation that you have some skeletons in your closet (e.g., the gap in your resume is because your mother was sick and you left work to care for her). I often joke with candidates that in the absence of contrary information, employers will presume that you were institutionalized during any breaks on your resume.

The general rule, though, is that you need to tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but you do not need to tell the “*whole*” truth — as long as you do not mislead.

**\* Are you planning to relocate to Boston permanently?**

What if your significant other is in her third year of medical school in Boston? If she lands a residency in California, in all likelihood you will want to make a lateral move to California in order to be with her. But it is also possible that she will end up doing her residency in Boston. Do you need to disclose this to potential legal employers in Boston?

I would submit that you do not. As long as you have a meaningful chance of staying in Boston, your future employer does not need to know the “whole truth” (i.e., that you would like to remain in Boston for the long term but that it is somewhat out of your control).

What if you like employment litigation but are not crazy about employment counseling? If you are applying to a firm that does mainly litigation but expects you to do some counseling, it is OK to say, “I really enjoy employment litigation, and I’m happy to also spend a portion of my time doing counseling.”

As long as the job would have a litigation focus, no one needs to know that, in a perfect world, you would do 100 percent litigation. The “whole truth” is that you realize that you’ll probably have to agree to do some counseling in order to get the litigation work you desire. You also believe that counseling will make you a better litigator.

***Conclusion***

It is impossible to address every issue that might arise during an interview. But that underscores why interview preparation is critical. Learn what you can in advance about the firm, but also take the time to think about the questions that you might be asked. If you do, you will have much greater success in being truthful. At the same time, you will come across as a straight shooter without providing details that you will later regret.