

# Mastering the Job Interview ... for People Who Stutter

**By Bill Parry and Rachael Resk**

The job interview is one of the scariest challenges for a person who stutters. A common fear is that stuttering will automatically harm a person's chance of being hired. Not true! Stuttering need not be an obstacle to employment if you handle it in an honest, positive, and self-confident way. This brochure offers some practical advice to help you make your best impression, regardless of fluency.

## Preparing for the Interview

Finding a job is like making a sale, except that *you* are the product you are selling. Therefore, the better you know yourself - your strengths, weaknesses, and future potential - the better able you will be to make the sale. You must also know the precise needs of your customer - the potential employer - and which of your skills and experience will best meet those needs.

Learn as much as you can about the job and the exact skills and experience required. Read company literature (current goals, missions, competition, initiatives). Attempt to find out information about the interviewer.

Your resume should be neat, well-organized, easy-to-read, and on good quality white, cream, or ivory paper. Your spelling, grammar, and punctuation should be impeccable. The contents should be specially tailored for the specific job you are seeking. Include volunteer work, if relevant to show your initiative, creativity, or "people skills."

Here are three ways to increase your resume's impact:

- Include a summary statement or purpose statement, if appropriate to the position.
- Add measurable details to your tasks or achievements. (*E.g.*, supervised 8 people, improved sales by 25 percent, managed 10 offices.)
- Use action verbs and descriptive adjectives.

Bring three copies of your resume to the interview. Memorize or have with you a list of all your former employers, when you worked there, and your salary. If you are asked to fill out an application form, be sure to describe all your skills and abilities that meet the job specifications.

It is important to feel that you are not doing this all alone. Before and after the interview, talk about any fears and concerns to someone you are close to. This can make a big difference.

## Practicing the Interview

Most people are nervous before and during an interview, so you are not alone. Doing practice interviews is a good way to reduce anxiety, build self-confidence, and prepare for questions the interviewer might ask. Find someone with whom you feel comfortable to be the interviewer, asking you the questions. If you belong to a stuttering support group, such as a local chapter of the National Stuttering Association (NSA), you might have an opportunity to practice with other group members.

*Role playing* is an especially important exercise for people who stutter. Rather than worrying about your fluency, throw yourself whole-heartedly into the *role* you are playing in the interview. Don't try to hide your stuttering. Instead, imagine yourself to be the *best*

*person for the job* - who just happens to stutter sometimes. (This could very well be true!) Remember, you are not your stutter. Use positive reinforcement in your self-talk to build confidence. With repeated practice, you will feel more and more comfortable and your answers come more quickly to mind.

The following are some important points to practice:

- Maintaining eye contact with the interviewer, even when you are stuttering.
- Providing examples of your strengths and measurable achievements.
- Turning your weaknesses into strengths if you are asked about them.
- Using concrete examples of your ability to communicate with people at work.
- Asking questions that you have for the interviewer.

### **Some Specific Questions To Expect**

Your practice sessions should include all of the questions that the interviewer will be likely to ask, so that you will be ready with the answers. Be sure to include the "Five Things an Interviewer Really Wants To Know":

1. Why are you here?
2. What can you do for us?
3. What kind of person are you?

4. What distinguishes you from the nineteen other people with the same skills?

5. Can I afford you?

Here are some other common questions that you are likely to encounter:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Why should I hire you?
- There is a break in your employment . . .
- What is your greatest strength?
- What is your greatest weakness?
- Do you work well in a team? Give examples.
- Do you work well with little supervision? Give examples.
- Why did you leave your last company?

Some questions are illegal for the interviewer to ask. These include questions about race, color, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, and disabilities. But what about *stuttering*?

### **Stuttering and Oral Communication Skills**

According to guidelines issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under the Americans with Disabilities Act, employers may not ask job applicants about the existence, nature, or severity of a disability. However, applicants *may* be asked about their ability to perform *specific job functions*. Therefore, be prepared

if the interviewer says: "This job requires *excellent oral communication skills*."

Don't be afraid to say, "Yes, as a matter of fact I *do* have 'excellent oral communication skills!'"

The point to be emphasized is that *communication is not the same as fluency!* Most persons who stutter are capable of adequate - and often very effective - oral communication, regardless of their disfluency. You might mention that persons who stutter have achieved great success as communicators - including the actor, James Earl Jones, who is the spokesman for Verizon, and Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric. On the other hand, we all know *fluent* speakers who are *terrible* communicators.

Good oral communication involves many things that are more important than fluency - things at which persons who stutter may excel. These include good listening skills, the ability to empathize with people, being thoughtful and diplomatic in one's speech, and having something valuable to say. Mention that you have these qualities, and talk about the "people skills" you have gained through past work and life experiences.

Ask the interviewer to specify exactly what kind of "oral communication" the job actually involves. Often this requirement is put into job descriptions simply because the employee must occasionally answer the telephone or speak to people. Describe how you have successfully performed such tasks in the past.

If you anticipate that stuttering will actually prevent you from performing some speaking tasks, be prepared to discuss ways in which the employer could make a "reasonable accommodation" that would allow you to perform the essential functions of the job in question. For example, members of a typing pool may be expected to take turns answering the telephone when the receptionist is at lunch. A reasonable accommodation may be to relieve the person

who stutters of this non-essential task, and instead have the person help with another task that doesn't require speaking.

## **Making a Good Impression**

When the time arrives for the interview, remember these basic principles for making a favorable impression:

- Be on time.
- Dress comfortably and conservatively, one step above the position you are seeking. Your goal in dress is to "fit in."
- Look the interviewer in the eye and smile when introduced, and shake hands firmly.
- Don't tie yourself down to presenting a fluent image. Remember your role playing practice: you are the best person for the job, whether you stutter or not.
- Deal with nervousness by breathing deeply and by acting self-confident and assertive.
- Expect to be listened to properly. If you are interrupted, ask to be allowed to finish.
- Don't allow yourself be hurried. Listen to each question carefully and respond in a slow, deliberate way.
- Answer each question directly and fully, based on the job requirements and your skills, experience, and qualifications. If you fail to mention the particular qualifications that the interviewer is looking for, you will not get the job, regardless of how good your interviewing technique may be.

- Demonstrate genuine interest in, and enthusiasm about the job you are seeking. Show that you are there because the prospective job is so appealing - not because of your dissatisfaction with your current or past position.
- Keep focused on the interview, even if you feel that the interviewer is reacting negatively to your stuttering. Remember, the interviewer's attitude is not your responsibility!

### **Be Open and Honest about Your Stuttering**

Attempts to avoid or disguise your stuttering will probably make a far worse impression on the interviewer than being open and honest about it. For example, rather than acknowledging a block, some stutterers may pretend that they have forgotten the word, can't decide what to say, or don't know the answer to a question. Or they might engage in inappropriate word substitutions or circumlocutions (trying to talk around feared words). While they may think they have fooled people by doing this, they really haven't. They have merely confirmed the negative stereotype that stutterers are hesitant, indecisive, or ineffective.

In terms of listener reaction, research has shown that trying to hide our stuttering is actually the worst thing we can do. Studies have shown that listeners have a much more favorable impression of stutterers who acknowledge their stuttering (particularly if it is moderate to severe) than of stutterers who do not. Listeners also have a more favorable reaction to actual stuttering blocks, repetitions, and prolongations than to the kind of interjections ("you know," "like," *um's* and *ah's*, etc.) that we often use when we try to avoid stuttering.

Therefore, it is far better to be open and up front about your stuttering. Let the interviewer know that stuttering is no stigma and nothing to be ashamed of.

### **When Should You Mention Your Stuttering?**

This depends on a number of factors, including the severity of your stuttering and the type of job. If your stutter is relatively mild and not relevant to the job in question, there may be no need to raise the issue. However, the more noticeable or severe your stuttering is, the more comfortable both you and the interviewer will feel if you openly acknowledge it. This will reduce the pressure on yourself and help to put the interviewer at ease. As previously mentioned, it will also create a better impression than trying to ignore what is obvious.

Tell the interviewer that you may stutter and that is okay. Request that he or she just wait for you to finish, rather than trying to fill in words for you. Reassure the interviewer that stuttering does not affect your work performance, and give examples. Never look down when stuttering or act as if you are ashamed.

It might be best to mention your stuttering at the outset, when asked to tell something about yourself. One NSA member begins by matter-of-factly stating, "By the way, I stutter. I'm okay with it. I hope you are also." Interviewers are likely to answer, "Of course. No problem." This invites the interviewer to treat your stuttering with tolerance and acceptance right from the beginning.

If you are asked about your strengths and weaknesses, you can use stuttering as an example of how you are turning a potential weakness into a source of strength. For example, you might describe how dealing with stuttering has improved your patience and perseverance, or increased your sensitivity to the needs of other people. If it seems appropriate, discuss your involvement with the NSA and any speaking or leadership activities this has entailed.

### **Educating the Interviewer about Stuttering**

Although it's good to acknowledge your stuttering, you normally don't want it to become the focus of the interview. Your primary

goal is to tell the interviewer how you can benefit the prospective employer.

But what if the interviewer makes stuttering an issue? What if the interviewer displays an appalling lack of understanding about stuttering? Or indicates his or her belief in some negative stereotype about stutterers - for example, that they are nervous, shy, hesitant, indecisive, unintelligent, or emotionally disturbed? Or expresses doubt that a person who stutters can handle the job? Now is the time when some education and advocacy about stuttering might be appropriate.

In a friendly, non-defensive way, explain to the interviewer that many people have misunderstandings about stuttering. Many people erroneously assume that it's caused by nervousness or uncertainty, because sometimes they themselves stutter or stammer when nervous or uncertain. But this has little to do with real stuttering. Nor does stuttering indicate indecisiveness, lack of intelligence, or emotional disturbance. Stutterers are just as intelligent and emotionally stable as the general population.

Inform the interviewer that, while the precise cause of stuttering is still unknown, it is currently believed to be caused by a *neurological condition that interferes with the production of speech*. Although this interference is sometimes triggered by emotional or situational factors, stuttering is neurological and physiological - *not psychological* - in nature. In all other respects, persons who stutter are perfectly normal. Given a chance, people who stutter have distinguished themselves in all walks of life - including business, law, medicine, science, literature, entertainment, and even politics.

You might further educate the interviewer by giving him or her an informational brochure from the National Stuttering Association (such as *Notes to Listeners or Stuttering - What Employers Should Know*). So it might be a good idea to have one of these handy.

## After the Interview

Consider following up the interview with a letter to the interviewer (*not* a telephone call), expressing your appreciation. Effective follow-up should be:

- Immediate.
- Personal.
- Professional.
- Restate your interest, your strengths, and how you can benefit the company.

Setbacks will happen, so be prepared for them. It is important to be realistic when considering what effect your speech may have had on the outcome of the interview. Remember that fluent people are also rejected plenty of times. If you were unsuccessful, ask yourself if this was because of your stuttering or because another applicant had more skill and experience? If you can get specific feedback about this, it may be helpful when preparing for future interviews.

If the interviewer exhibited rudeness regarding your stuttering, or if he or she expressly told you that you were being rejected because of it, you should complain to the interviewer's supervisor or other executives in the company. If you have specific evidence that you were unfairly discriminated against because of stuttering, you can file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or similar state or local agency. Before embarking on such a course, read the NSA's booklet, *Being Your Own Best Advocate and Stuttering as a Disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act*.

Usually it is more productive just to move on and start preparing for your next job interview. Remember: for every employer who is bothered by your stuttering, there are plenty of others who *won't* be!

Good luck!

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#### **About the authors . . .**

**Bill Parry**, a trial lawyer in Philadelphia, has served for six years on the Board of Directors of the National Stuttering Association and as Chair of its Advocacy Committee. He is the author of *Understanding and Controlling Stuttering: A Comprehensive New Approach Based on the Valsalva Hypothesis*, as well as the NSA's booklet, *Being Your Own Best Advocate and Stuttering as a Disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act*.

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#### **MORE INFORMATION**

There are many organizations devoted to increasing awareness and understanding of stuttering. The National Stuttering Association (NSA) website can provide more information and links to other resources and organization.

The NSA also provides many pamphlets, booklets, and newsletters designed to help people who stutter get the most out of their lives.

Go to [http:// www.WeStutter.org](http://www.WeStutter.org) or call the NSA at (800) 937-8888 for more information.

The National Stuttering Association is the largest self-help/support organization in the US; with over 80 chapters and 3,500 members nationwide. The NSA provides information, advocacy and support for adults and children who stutter, their families, and the professionals who work with them.

The NSA is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization supporting people who stutter and their families since 1977. Contributions are welcome and tax deductible.

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