



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Dan Binstock, Esq.

The Secret to Effectively Sharing Concerns about Your Current Employer Without Committing the Most Common Interview Blunder

One of the most fundamental pieces of interview advice is “Don’t speak negatively about your current job or employer during an interview—it’s the kiss of death.” I have found that this wisdom, by itself, often falls short on a practical level.

When helping my candidates prepare for interviews, I routinely get asked questions to this effect:

“The fact that the partner I work for is certifiably insane is the only reason I’m looking to move, but if they ask why I’m leaving, I know I’m not supposed to bad-mouth my current employer because it reflects poorly on me. If I lie and say I’m happy, they’ll question my sincerity because, after all, I’m on an interview, so there must be a reason I’m considering leaving. What do I do?”

This is a very common dilemma. Indeed, if you are interviewing for a new position because your existing employment situation is bad—due to no fault of your own—the situation forces you to walk a very delicate and uncomfortable tightrope.

Many candidates bomb interviews because they do not know how to respond to the “Why are you leaving your firm?” question. They either speak too negatively about their current firms (and turn off their interviewers), or they fail to effectively communicate their reasons for seeking new opportunities (out of fear of committing blunders by speaking negatively about their current firms). Neither of these approaches is likely to yield successful results.

This article shares an easy-to-follow four-step process that will help you express your concerns about your current employer without being seen as somebody who committed the “interview kiss of death.”

Why It’s a Bad Idea to Speak Negatively about Your Current or Prior Employer

It’s generally considered a bad idea to speak negatively about a current or prior employer because it can make the interviewee look like somebody who:

- is having a negative experience due to his or her questionable performance and lack of abilities.
- blames his or her firm for personal shortcomings.
- will find fault with employers wherever he or she goes.
- does not hesitate to speak negatively about employers if something does not work out. (Hence, the interviewer thinks, “Will this person speak negatively about us if it does not work out?”)
- pessimistically sees himself or herself as a victim of circumstances.
- is negative and does not portray an air of success.

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In my opinion, the *most significant reason* it is so detrimental to speak negatively about a current or past employer—even if the information is entirely valid—is that it shows interviewers that you are clearly oblivious to the most fundamental rule of interview etiquette: “Thou shalt not trash a current or past employer on an interview.” If you break this commandment, it reflects poorly on your judgment and social competence. An interviewer may think, “Hmm, this person obviously didn’t get the memo on what a bad idea it is to trash your employer. I wonder what other types of judgment mistakes this person might make.”

The PACE Process

To effectively apply the PACE process, you should be a well-performing attorney with a track record of success, and you should be interviewing because you are in a bad work situation—due to no fault of your own. (For example, your current employer is experiencing internal problems, you work for a very difficult person, the firm’s workflow has dramatically slowed down, etc.)

When you are on an interview and asked “So, why are you interested in leaving your current firm?” the acronym PACE should help you remember the four steps that you can apply to help you keep your balance.

Applying PACE to a Common Interviewing Scenario

Let’s assume you’re practicing at a firm that has a very good reputation in terms of the quality of its lawyers and its work product. You really like your colleagues, and they like you. You’ve received very good reviews. However, the firm has been experiencing numerous internal problems and changes since you joined two years ago. For example, partners are divided over the directions in which they want to take the firm, there is tension surrounding a significant increase in billing rates, several large clients (with whom you have worked) have left recently, work is slowing down in your group, and partners and associates have been leaving more frequently than in years past. Morale is very low, and you are finding it difficult to thrive in this type of environment.

Based on the details above, here are some examples of how the PACE process can be applied if the interviewer asks, “So, you’re at a great firm. Why are you interested in leaving?”

“P” – Express the *positives*.

Even though your current situation is not great, it is beneficial to start off by mentioning some positives about it. For example, in this scenario, you could mention how talented the attorneys are, that you like and get along well with your coworkers, etc.

“A” – *Acknowledge* that it’s a faux pas to speak negatively about a current employer.

This is perhaps the most important and delicate part of the process. It is very basic and subtle but very important.

As mentioned above, speaking negatively about a current employer is harmful because you are committing the most fundamental interview faux pas, which may indicate you are lacking in the judgment and social skills departments.

To preemptively discourage any doubt regarding your social judgment, you can simply acknowledge (via implication) that you understand that it’s not a good idea to speak negatively about your employer. It’s that simple, and it is the essence of the PACE process. For example, I’ve heard interviewees say things to the effect of “Even though there are positives about my current job, I’m obviously concerned with a few things, or I wouldn’t be interviewing. It’s certainly not my intention to denigrate my current employer, but I also feel that it would be disingenuous if I did not at least explain some of my concerns and what prompted me to start interviewing.”

When the interviewee says, “It’s certainly not my intention to denigrate my current employer,” the interviewer immediately understands that the interviewee is aware that it’s considered poor form to speak negatively about an employer. At the same time, saying this informs the interviewer that the interviewee wants to speak honestly about his or her concerns.

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“C” – Discuss the *concerns* you have regarding your current position.

Don't start off by going into detail about your concerns. Keep them somewhat general, unless further probing questions are asked. Also, it's best to keep your concerns factual and objective in nature and to avoid getting emotionally charged when discussing them.

In the scenario I've described, saying something like this would suffice: "As you have likely read in the press, there have been a number of changes going on at my firm. For example, they have changed the pay structure and raised the billing rates significantly. It has been challenging to appease some of the firm's clients, who are not happy with the increases in billing rates. As you may have read recently, some of the firm's key clients in the X department have moved their work to Firm XYZ [the name of a competitor firm] within the past six months. These are probably growing pains, and I imagine many other firms are dealing with similar billing rates issues in light of the recent raises in associate salaries, but I'm concerned that these changes may have a long-term effect on the future of my practice group. I am already experiencing a slowdown in work, which has me concerned."

When discussing your concerns, using implication can also be very effective and can prevent you from sounding overtly critical or negative.

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“E” – Show *evidence* that you are a well-performing attorney and that your concerns are not the result of any problems with your performance.

If you have received good performance reviews, it is critical that you mention this during the interview because it will resolve any questions as to whether poor performance is the real reason you are interested in leaving. (If you are working with a recruiter and feel uncomfortable mentioning this, make sure your recruiter communicates your strong performance history to the firm.)

You should have as much factual evidence as possible to support your concerns. For instance, mentioning that similarly situated attorneys are facing the same challenges can justify your own concerns. In our hypothetical scenario, you could mention that more than 50% of the associates in your practice have left the firm within the past six months and that you are one of the few remaining associates in your practice group.

Conclusion

Of course, the PACE process can vary in terms of its applicability, depending on specific circumstances. It can be performed very quickly. All four steps can be completed in as little as 20 seconds, or elements of the steps can be woven throughout the interview, at different points. You should certainly prepare for your interview and the "Why are you leaving your firm?" question, but don't get too consumed with following any particular dialogue or rigid application of the steps, or you will sound too rehearsed.

If you have a good understanding of these steps and can apply them to your interview in ways that sound natural, you will find that the interview is more comfortable and honest—and considerably more effective.

Dan Binstock is the managing director of BCG Attorney Search's Washington, DC, office, where he handles associate and partner placements.