5 awkward interview moments – and how to bounce back from them

Job interviews are demanding at the best of times, and then your phone rings or you blurt out a swear word! But it's not over when something like this happens – if you know what to do.

The truth is, awkward moments happen to everyone. The key is knowing how to acknowledge it and move on gracefully. We asked career coach Nicole Grainger-Marsh for her expert advice on how to deal with five cringe-worthy scenarios.

1. **Your mobile phone rings.** This happens to the best of us. If your phone rings in the middle of your job interview, Grainger-Marsh recommends dealing with it quickly, to get the conversation back on track. "Saying 'I'm so sorry, I thought I had switched it to silent before I came in here – it must have been a slip of the finger,' will do the trick. It makes it clear that this isn't your standard M.O. and that you don't believe it's appropriate to take calls in important meetings."

2. **You forget a word.** You're in the middle of answering a question when you suddenly find yourself stumped. "Before you start panicking, remind yourself what you're there for. Unless you're interviewing for a job with Webster's Dictionary, it's okay to forget the odd word." You're only human, so just be honest. "Explain that you can't put your finger on the exact word that you're looking for, so instead describe to them what you're trying to communicate. Nine times out of ten, the word will come to you as you talk."

3. **You can't think of an answer.** You can do all the preparation in the world and still get thrown by a question. If this happens, it can be easy to go into panic mode, "which has the opposite effect of what you need; your logical brain shuts down." Grainger-Marsh says what you need to do is "calm the panic with some deep breaths" and "acknowledge that you need some time to think." For example: "'That's a really interesting question. I just need a moment to consider that.'"

4. **You accidentally swear.** Sometimes you can be so jittery in an interview that you let slip a swear word. This is unlikely to go down well with any employer, so if you do this make sure you own up to it straight away. "Apologise, explain that it's not your standard behaviour, and that because you're so keen on this role you're feeling more nervous than usual," Grainger-Marsh advises. "It's tough to explain this away as a positive, but communicating how much it means to you to win this job definitely helps."

5. **You badmouth your previous employer.** This is another example of when it's best to move fast. "As soon as you realise you've badmouthed your former employer, you need to acknowledge it and put on a positive spin. For example: 'I just realised that sounded very critical, which is not how I intended it. There were some great things about working for that company and I have taken away so much that will assist me in my next role.'"

How to bounce back from an awkward moment

- Remind yourself that the interviewer is only human. "They might have a fancy title, but they would have experienced their fair share of awkward moments, so they're far more likely to show you empathy than show you the door."

- "Set some smaller goals for the interview" – such as "to communicate succinctly, or to use body language to demonstrate your engagement" – so that you don't psyche yourself out by only thinking about getting the job.

- Focus on demonstrating that you're fit for the role rather than trying to prove to the interviewer that you're super-human.

These strategies will help you get back into the right frame of mind if you find yourself in an awkward moment, to finish your interview on a positive note.

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