

BEP 40 – Job Interviews: First Round Interview (Part 1)

Welcome back to BUSINESSenglishPOD! Today's episode is the first in a two-part series that follows job applicant William Chow through his first interview at an international bank.

In this show you'll learn how to deal with some typical first interview questions. Along the way you'll also practice some great new vocabulary and useful phrases.

In today's dialogue we'll listen as William gets interviewed for a position in the business development department of the main Hong Kong branch of Mercantile International. Mike Warner, a HR manager at Mercantile International Hong Kong, is conducting the interview.

Before we listen to the dialog, make a note of these questions and then go to our website at www.BusinessEnglishPod.com to check your answers.

1) How is the traffic today?

2) How long has William been working at his current job?

3) What kind of business does he mainly handle?

4) How does William describe his personality?

5) What does William mean by a participatory and situational leadership style?

Vocabulary

atrocious – Extremely bad

revolving credit – A line of credit usually used for operating purposes, changing each month depending on the customers current cash flow needs.

portfolio – A collection or group of loans

fixed asset loan – A loan to buy something that cannot be easily turned into money, such as building, industrial machinery and so on; furthermore, this thing—the fixed asset—is used as collateral, that is, it is used to secure the loan.

participatory – encourages participation and teamwork.

situational – able to adapt to different situations.

characteristics – a feature or quality of a person or object.

CRM — Short for Customer Relationship Management. CRM refers to all aspects of interaction a company has with its customer, whether sales or service related.

expat — Short for expatriate; a person who lives abroad, away from their country of origin.

Dialog:

Receptionist: Mr. Warner will see you now, Mr. Chow. Let me show you in.

Mike: Nice to meet you.

William: Nice to meet you, too, Mr. Warner.

Mike: It's William, right? Just call me Mike. Have any trouble finding us?

William: No, thanks. But the traffic was bad.

Mike: Atrocious, isn't it. You're right on time though. That's good. Have a seat. Okay, well, shall we get started?

William: All right.

Mike: Let's start off with just a general question about your background. Can you tell me a little about yourself?

William: Yes. Since graduating with honors in Economics from the University of Hong Kong — that was in 1996 — I've been working for 10 years at First United Trust at the Admiralty branch, first as a loan officer and for the past three years as a branch assistant manager.

Mike: Okay. And what are your main responsibilities at First United?

William: I've been mainly responsible for handling revolving credit for over 100 individual local and expat customers and overseeing a portfolio of HK\$400 million per year in new short and long-term fixed assets loans for individuals and for... for small businesses.

Mike: Uh huh. That's great. Maybe you could also tell me something about the way you manage people. What's your management style?

William: Uh, let's see...I'd say my management style is participatory and situational, by that I mean that my style adapts to what each situation requires, but I always place great emphasis on participation from my team. As for my personal characteristics, I thrive on challenge. I work well under pressure and I would describe myself as detail oriented and proactive.

Mike: Interesting. Those are always good qualities to bring to the job. You said that your management style was participatory and situational. Could you give an example of that?

William: Let's see. Let me think about that. Okay, we were installing a major client CRM system which was behind schedule. I had to enlist and integrate the support of my team to ensure the project was finished on time. I called a meeting with all seven team members, described the project status and asked for recommendations for getting the project back on schedule. And, you know, several excellent ideas were proposed. The team decided on the best course of action and the result was that we successfully delivered the project on time. This is a good example of my participatory leadership style... I try to use influence rather than authority to lead.

Debrief:

So how do you think William is doing so far? Is he going to get the job?

Let's go through the dialogue together.

After the receptionist shows William in to Mike's office, what happens next?

Mike: It's William, right? Just call me Mike. Have any trouble finding us?

William: No, thanks. But the traffic was bad.

Mike: Atrocious, isn't it. You're right on time though. That's good. Have a seat. Okay, well, shall we get started?

Mike is trying to make William feel more comfortable by making small talk. First he asks William to call him by his first name. Then he asks if William had any trouble finding their office. "Have any trouble finding us?" is a typical ice-breaker—that is warm-up question—for an interview. Notice that Mike leaves out the auxiliary verb "Did": Instead of saying, "Did you have any trouble," he just says, "Have any trouble...?" Leaving off the auxiliary verb in this way usually occurs in slightly more informal or casual settings, so this is a further signal from Mike to William to relax.

What are some other small talk questions that Mike could have asked William?

- How's the weather out there today?
- Did you catch the game last night between Chelsea and Porto?
Fantastic, wasn't it?
- Would you something to drink before we begin? A glass of water perhaps?

As the small talk continues, William says that the traffic was bad, and Mike responds, "Yes, atrocious, isn't it." "Atrocious" means extremely bad. For example, if it's been raining for 30 days straight, in most parts of the world, that's atrocious weather.

Now, what is the first question that Mike asks William?

Mike: Let's start off with just a general question about your background. Can you tell me a little about yourself?

As you know, this is a typical kind of first interview question, one that you're almost certain to hear many times during your career. It's called an "open-ended" question because there is no structure given by the interviewer; presumably, you could talk about almost anything. Don't fall into the trap, however, of making a long, rambling reply—to ramble means to talk at great length with no clear point. Instead, you should be prepared for this question and have a clear structure in mind for your response, especially when you have to interview in English.

First briefly summarize your current responsibilities, work experience and, if relevant, your education, professional certifications and so on.

Next, you should say something about your management style if you are applying for a management position.

Finally, briefly summarize your personal characteristics with strong, vivid language.

The whole thing should take you under a minute.

Let's listen to William's response to see how he does.

William: Yes. Since graduating with honors in Economics from the University of Hong Kong— that was in 1996 — I've been working for 10 years at First United Trust at the Admiralty branch, first as a loan officer and for the past three years as a branch assistant manager.

So far, so good. Since graduating from college William has worked in the same job. Note how he uses a specific number—10 years—to call attention to this achievement, which is certainly a strong point his application. Using specific numbers where possible is called quantifying your achievements.

Next, Mike jumps in to guide William's response

Mike: Okay. And what are your main responsibilities at First United?

William: I've been mainly responsible for handling revolving credit for over 100 individual local and expat customers and overseeing a portfolio of HK\$400 million per year in new short and long-term fixed asset loans for individuals and for... for small businesses.

Again, William is careful to quantify his achievements: He is handling revolving credit for over 100 local and expat customers. "Expat" is short for "expatriate." That refers to someone who lives and works outside their own country.

What is revolving credit? This is a line of credit usually used for operating purposes, changing each month depending on the customers current cash flow needs. Credit cards operate on the revolving credit principle. Notice the verb-noun collocation: William handles revolving credit. Keep studying collocations to make your English sound more natural and fluent.

What other bank product is William responsible for? He is overseeing a portfolio of HK\$400 million. That's another good collocation—to oversee a portfolio. Portfolio is a list of financial assets. An asset is anything that is worth money. The portfolio consists of short and long-term fixed asset loans. A *fixed* assets refers to assets or property that cannot be easily turned into cash, usually a building, factory, industrial machinery and so on. So a fixed asset loan is money that is lent to buy a fixed asset. The key is that the loan is secured or guaranteed by the fixed asset that you are buying.

What phrase did William use to describe his responsibilities? He said “I’m mainly responsible for...” What are some other ways you can use to describe your responsibilities?

- My main duties include overseeing closing the accounts at the end of the month and assisting in budgetary planning.
- I’m mainly in charge of coordinating the efforts of the marketing and sales departments to ensure a successful product release.
- In addition to my financial responsibilities, I take care of organizing regular inter-departmental review meetings.

So far William has talked about his work history and his current responsibilities. What’s next? Mike steps in again.

Mike: Maybe you could also tell me something about the way you manage people. What’s your management style?

William: Uh, let’s see...I’d say my management style is participatory and situational, by that I mean that my style adapts to what each situation requires, but I always place great emphasis on participation from my team.

“Participatory” and “situational” are good vocabulary words—both of them are buzz words (that is popular terms) in management today. William makes it pretty clear what he means by them, doesn’t he? He says, “By that I mean...” and “I always place great emphasis on...” Explaining your terms is very important in an interview. It helps you control the impression your words have. Let’s practice some more ways to clarify your terms:

- In my management philosophy, I’m a risk taker. What I mean by that is that I am willing to try new things and think in new ways.
- I definitely think it’s good to create a team of people who are self-starters. What I’m saying is that as a manager you should welcome people who are motivated, who have ideas, who work well independently.

Next William describes some of his personal characteristics, the last major point we said you should cover when you are asked an open-ended question about your background.

As for my personal characteristics, I thrive on challenge. I work well under pressure and I would describe myself as detail oriented and proactive.

These are more buzz words that should go directly into your vocabulary notebook. For complete definitions of their meanings, you can refer to the review exercises in the learner’s notes, which you’ll find by going to www.businessenglishpod.com.

Next Mike asks William to give a specific example of his management style. How does William respond?

William: Let's see. Let me think about that. Okay, we were installing a major client CRM system which was behind schedule.

Notice how William says "Let's see. Let me think about that." to give himself some time to think about an answer. Giving yourself some time to think is important in an interview, where you have to speak off the cuff—that is, without a script—and think on your feet—that is, very quickly. What are some more types of phrases that you can use to buy yourself some time?

- That's a good question. Just bear with me for a second.
- Great question. Give me a second to think about that. All right...
- Uh huh, so you're asking about a time when I had to deal with conflict, is that right? Interesting question. Well, let me see...

In the example William chooses to give of his participatory management style, he discusses a time when he was installing a major CRM system. What does CRM stand for? Customer Relationship Management. This refers to all aspects of interaction a company has with its customer, whether sales or service related. A CRM system usually involves special methods, software and usually the Internet to help manage customer relationships in an organized way.

William says that the project was behind schedule. How does he say he dealt with that problem? He had to "enlist and integrate the support" of his team. "Enlist" literally means to recruit into the army. Here it describes engaging the help of his team. To "integrate" means to bring together several things and blend them into one. This is a very strong verb that emphasizes Williams' participatory management.

Finally, listen again to how William finishes up his story.

William: This is a good example of my participatory leadership style... I try to use...use influence rather than authority to lead.

Summarizing your response to an interview question gives a strong impression of structure and orderliness of thought. This is an excellent technique to practice. What are some other ways to summarize your ideas?

- In a nutshell, I think this story really illustrates my strong ability to prioritize tasks.
- In one word, taking the initiative has led me to success again and again in my career, as I think this story illustrates.
- To sum up, much more important than how you deal with easy jobs and harmony is how you manage challenges and conflict. My experience demonstrates a proven track record in coping with challenges and resolving conflict.

Make sure to take note of the many good collocations here: illustrates my ability, taking the initiative, managing conflict, demonstrates a proven track record, resolving conflict.

Great. That's just about all for today's episode. You've practiced how to respond to a common type of interview question. You've learned some useful phrases for defining your terms, giving yourself time to think, and summarizing your experience. And you've covered a lot of great vocabulary for describing your personal characteristics.

Be sure to visit our website at www.businessenglishpod.com to have a look at the learner's notes for this and other episodes. There you can find vocabulary and definitions, a full transcript, additional explanations, and listening and language exercises.

We'll see you again for the second episode in this two-part series on First Interviews. In part 2 you'll learn more useful language and practice dealing with other types of common questions. In the mean time, stay well, take care and keep practicing every day. Thanks for listening!

Language Review Questions:

Exercise A

Match the personal characteristic with its meaning.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1) work well under pressure | a. takes the initiative; independent |
| 2) thrive on challenge | b. describes someone who pays attention to the little things. |
| 3) detail oriented | c. succeeds in a high-stress situation |
| 4) proactive | d. grows rapidly in difficult situations and enjoys that feeling |
| 5) risk taker | e. anticipates difficulties and takes action before they develop |
| 6) self starter | f. does not shy away from new problems, new ideas; willing to gamble |

Exercise B

Rearrange the jumbled sentences to make phrases you can use to give yourself time to think or clarify what you mean.

- 1) question interesting. let me well see...

- 2) good question that's a . bear just with a second me for .

- 3) about think give me a second to that . all right...

Useful Language:

Let's start with some small talk questions you can use at the beginning of an interview:

- How's the weather out there today?
- Did you catch the game last night between Chelsea and Porto? Fantastic, wasn't it?
- Would you something to drink before we begin? A glass of water perhaps?

Here are some other ways you can use to describe your responsibilities:

- My main duties include overseeing closing the accounts at the end of the month and assisting in budgetary planning.
- I'm mainly in charge of coordinating the efforts of the marketing and sales departments to ensure a successful product release.
- In addition to my financial responsibilities, I take care of organizing regular inter-departmental review meetings.

And here's some more ways to clarify your terms:

- In my management philosophy, I'm a risk taker. What I mean by that is that I am willing to try new things and think in new ways.
- I definitely think it's good to create a team of people who are self-starters. What I'm saying is that as a manager you should welcome people who are motivated, who have ideas, who work well independently.

These are some phrases that you can use buy yourself some time:

- That's a good question. Just bear with me for a second.
- Great question. Give me a second to think about that. All right...
- Uh huh, so you're asking about a time when I had to deal with conflict, is that right? Interesting question. Well, let me see...

And to finish off today, here are some other ways to summarize your ideas:

- In a nutshell, I think this story really illustrates my strong ability to prioritize tasks.
- In one word, taking the initiative has led me to success again and again in my career, as I think this story illustrates.
- To sum up, much more important than how you deal with easy jobs and harmony is how you manage challenges and conflict. My experience demonstrates a proven track record in coping with challenges and resolving conflict.

Dynamic Phrases to Describe Personal Characteristics

Using dynamic phrases (mainly adjective-noun combinations) in your cover letters and job interviews will catch an employer's attention. Of course, be sure you check the meaning of these phrases in a dictionary first and then choose 4 or 5 that best describe your own characteristics and are appropriate for the job you are interviewing for – probably not a good idea to say you're a 'risk taker' if you're applying for a job as an accountant!

ability to deal with ...	goal orientated
adapt well to new situations	innovative approach to/thinker
aggressive approach to problem solving <i>[use 'aggressive' only for negative things such as 'problems']</i>	[strong] interpersonal skills
assertive communicator	leadership skills
ambitious	long range vision
broad-minded	methodical
capable	motivational leader
committed individual/team player	people oriented
competitive nature	poised under pressure [of deadlines]
conscientious	problem solver
confident in my abilities	quick thinker/learner
cooperative	resourceful
creative thinker	risk taker
decisive leader	self-disciplined
detail oriented	self-motivated
determined problem-solver	self-starter
dynamic . . . speaker /manager	sensitive to the needs of ...
eager learner	sincere interest in
effective team member/player	success oriented
energetic	team player
enterprising	thrive on challenge
enthusiastic leader/team member	work independently
flexible approach/thinker	work well under pressure
[customer] focused individual	

Example:

"I'd describe myself a dynamic team player, with the ability to thrive on new challenges, and work well under pressure."

Answers

Listening Comprehension

- 1) It's atrocious, which means very, very bad. Mikes says he is impressed that William made it on time.
- 2) For 10 years, first as a loan officer and for the past three years as a branch assistant manager.
- 3) Revolving credit and new and short- and long-term fixed asset loans.
- 4) He says he "thrives on challenge," "works well under pressure" and would describe himself as "detail oriented" and "proactive."
- 5) Participatory and situational leadership style describes a way of managing that tries to use influence rather than authority to lead. Here participatory means encouraging staff to participate. Situational means to act according to how each different situation requires.

Language Review

Exercise A

- 1) a. 2) d. 3) b. 4) e. 5) f. 6) c.

Exercise B

- 1) Interesting question. Well, let me see...
- 2) That's a good question. Just bear with me for a second.
- 3) Give me a second to think about that. All right...

Resources:

There are thousands of websites on the Net that cover job interview skills, but here are some of the best:

1. Monster.com – One of the biggest job hunting sites. Has a section dedicated to interviews and how to handle different questions:
<http://content.monster.com/interview/home.aspx>
2. CollegeGrad.com – This site is designed for new graduates looking for their first job. However, there are 100's of pages of great advice useful for anyone:
<http://www.collegegrad.com/intv/>
3. CareerJournal.com – Another large site packed with useful tips. This one is aimed at people who have already started their careers. Particularly suitable for managers:
<http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/interviewing/>
4. OWL at Purdue University – an excellent resource for all kinds of writing and grammar topics. OWL has a section dedicated to writing Resumes/CV's and other job related letters. The material is also designed for ESL learners with plenty of examples and explanations:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>