

BEP 305 – Talking about Accomplishments (Part 2)



You're listening to the second in a two-part series on talking about accomplishments. This is one of an ongoing sequence of podcasts on job interviews.

The theme for this episode and the last is: **provide examples**. In the first part, we looked at a bad and good version of a recent university graduate talking about his academic successes. We studied how to use our accomplishments to demonstrate skills and characteristics that will be attractive to our potential employer.

In this episode, we examine another good response to the question about previous experience. We'll be looking at someone with a little more job experience: Yala Santos is an HR specialist who is working in a manufacturing company. She now has an opportunity to interview for an HR manager position in a business unit of a fast moving consumer goods company, Fun Beverages International. Let's listen to how Yala deals with talking about her greatest achievement.

Ordinarily, when responding to the question about your most significant accomplishment, it's very important that you prepare to tell a story that is organized and articulate. That means, the story should be well-structured and flow smoothly. Though there are many ways to make your presentation, Yala uses the same general format that I like to follow.

1. You will probably need to set up the story by providing some *context*. Where were you? What was the situation? What was at stake, that is, what did you stand to lose or gain?
2. Recount your *role* in the situation. How were you involved?
3. Discuss *what you did*, including any analysis or problem solving, any process you set up, and any obstacles you had to overcome.
4. Reveal the *outcome* and what made you proud.

Whereas Alex gave us a good example of how someone with limited job experience might deal with the greatest achievement question, Yala shows us how someone with a more traditional employment record might address this query.

Listening Questions

1. What was the project Yala was working on?

2. What was her role in it?

3. What did she do?

4. What was the outcome?

Successful Interviews

Vocabulary

To harmonize: To bring two things into harmony or agreement with each other. "We need to harmonize the efforts of both departments to ensure success."

Integrated system: A system that integrates or includes different parts into a single process. "We need to have an integrated system to facilitate information sharing."

Interlinked database: Interlinked means linked or joined with something else. In the dialog, an interlinked database describes a system of information storage and sharing that is connected between different sites worldwide. "An interlinked database would enable us to locate human resources anywhere in the world."

To get something off the ground: To start a project. "We really need to get this new project off the ground – it's been in the planning stage too long."

Localization: The practice of translating materials into a local language and, importantly, ensuring that they fit local culture. "Localization is an important challenge faced by any business moving into East Asia."

Documentation: Instructions in handbooks or guides that tell us how to use or maintain something, such as a machine, or hardware, or software. "Providing good documentation is an important part of customer relations in the high-tech manufacturing business."

Performance indicators: Measurements of performance (criteria) used in annual reviews, promotions, the award of bonuses, etc. "What kind of performance indicators are most important in considering someone for promotion?"

Seamless transition: A seam is where two pieces of cloth are sewn together to form one garment. Seamless refers to having no seams, so a seamless transition is one that is very smooth. "During the merger, it is important that we have a seamless transition in key finance functions."

Functions: In a department, these refer to basic jobs or tasks that need to be done. We refer, for example, to "sales functions," which are different roles performed in a sales department. "Sales is a critical function of any business."

Hitch: A minor problem. "We had a few hitches in the implementation of the system at first, but now everything is up and running well."

Poised under deadline pressure: The quality of being calm when a deadline is close. "In this frantic business, only people who are poised under deadline pressure will last a long time."

Proactive: The opposite of *reactive*, proactive means to find and fix problems *before* they occur. "It's very important to take a proactive approach to business administration – it's much more costly to fix problems after they happen."

Long-range vision: The ability to see a long way into the future. "What we need in this company is leadership with long-range vision."

Practicing a flexible approach: Being flexible, that is, innovative and adaptable. "One of the main reasons this company is successful is that we practice a flexible approach to sales promotions – we can turn quickly when we need to: decision-making is innovative and fast."

To mediate: To perform a go-between function; to discuss differences between two parties to help them reach an agreement. "I helped mediate a dispute between upper management and my employees, solving things to everyone's satisfaction."

Dialog

Interviewer: Great, Yala, that covers previous experience. Now could you tell me a little about what you consider to be your most significant achievement?

Yala: <1. Setting the context> Hmm... let's see. At the beginning of last year, global headquarters decided to harmonize the assessment and evaluation process for all business units worldwide into one global Performance Management System.

Interviewer: Uh huh. So like a single integrated system?

Yala: Exactly. It's part of a global effort to provide a single interlinked database for human resources.

Interviewer: Sounds like a challenging project.

Yala: Yes, indeed. Especially because we only had 10 months to get it off the ground...

Interviewer: Really!

Yala: <2. Recounting the situation and your role in it> Yeah...ten months from planning to launch. My manager called a meeting, and we immediately formed a taskforce. I was placed in charge of localization and documentation, and I played a key role by analyzing and solving a number of problems.

Interviewer: Uh huh. What type of problems?

Yala: <3. Discussing what you did> Well, for example, I anticipated that Sales and Marketing would need to know all the key performance indicators in advance because training on the new system wouldn't begin until after they had already completed their planning process for 2008.

Interviewer: Sounds like a pretty major issue.

Yala: Yes, and obviously a seamless transition with Sales was very important for our BU's bottom line.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Yala: So I collaborated with the Sales Division to develop sample evaluations for all sales and marketing functions. Then I coordinated with them to develop a series of pre-launch trainings to get everyone up to speed.

Interviewer: Did it work?

Yala: <4. Revaling the outcome and what made you proud> Yes, I'm proud to say it did. We boosted productivity by at least 10% because of our actions. It was hard work, but we got extremely positive feedback throughout the whole process, and despite a few hitches, things went pretty smoothly.

Interviewer: Great. Sounds like a success.

Yala: Yes, I think my role in this project demonstrates a number of important personal qualities... being poised under deadline pressure, being proactive and having long-range vision, practicing a flexible approach... and... definitely being a good team player because so much of it required coordinating and mediating between different departments.

Successful Interviews

Debrief

Yala has done a good job of telling an articulate, organized story. Let's look at it piece by piece. How does she begin? First she sets the context.

Yala: Hmm...let's see. At the beginning of last year, global headquarters decided to harmonize the assessment and evaluation process for all business units worldwide into one global Performance Management System.

Interviewer: Uh huh. So like a single integrated system?

Yala: Exactly. It's part of a global effort to provide a single interlinked database for human resources.

Yala's company has harmonized the employee assessment and evaluation process all across the world. Here *harmonize* means that they have made sure all business units – that is all parts of the company – are using the same system.

From the HR perspective, notice how the interviewer uses the clarifying technique of *echoing* Yala – “So like a single integrated system?” Such echoing both confirms that the interviewer has understood Yala *and* encourages her to keep talking.

Let's look at some more phrases for setting the context of your accomplishment:

- Our company had been undergoing restructuring, so employees needed to adapt to new ways of doing things.
- Towards the end of 2007, we got a big new customer and started receiving huge orders.
- All through 2006, a series of budget cuts really put our department under financial pressure.

Setting the context generally involves giving a time frame and introducing the background to a problem. In the first example phrase we listened to, notice the use of the past perfect continuous tense (“had been undergoing restructuring”) to *set the background*, coupled with the past tense (“needed to adapt”) to *pose the problem*.

Getting back to Yala's story, how does it continue? After having given the background, she now recounts the situation and her role in it:

Yala: My manager called a meeting, and we immediately formed a taskforce. I was placed in charge of localization and documentation, and I played a key role by analyzing and solving a number of problems.

Interviewer: Uh huh. What type of problems?

In this part of his story, Yala focuses specifically on her role in the project. She was in charge of *localization*, that is, of adapting the global system to local circumstances. This generally involves translation and dealing with cultural issues. In addition, she took care of *documentation*, that is, she oversaw the writing of training and user manuals.

Now, listen to some further phrases that we can use for discussing our role in a project:

- Upper management decided that corporate culture was a key to surviving the changes, so a committee was set up to create a training plan. I was put in charge of getting employee feedback on company values.
- Our existing supply chain couldn't really handle the size of the orders, so the key challenge was to strengthen our logistics system, and fast.
- Employee morale really went downhill, so my role was to devise innovative ways to increase team spirit.

In this part of our success story, we will often use such constructions as "I was put in charge of," or "the key challenge was to...," or "my role was to...." Make sure to answer the questions, "*What was the situation?*" and "*How did you fit in?*"

Getting back to the dialog, after recounting her role in the situation, Yala's next step is to discuss what she did. This includes any obstacles she overcame, problems she analyzed and solved, and processes she set up. Listen:

Yala: Well, for example, I anticipated that Sales and Marketing would need to know all the key performance indicators in advance because training on the new system wouldn't begin until after they had already completed their planning process for 2008.

In this section, Yala uses a strong verb for describing foresight, that is, analyzing and predicting problems. She *anticipated* a problem with the launch of the new system, namely, that Sales and Marketing would not have time to set targets for the new year. HR would not start giving trainings in using the new harmonized key performance indicators until *after* the sales force had already prepared their goals for the next year.

Interviewer: Sounds like a pretty major issue.

Yala: Yes, and obviously a seamless transition with sales was very important for our BU's bottom line.

Interviewer: Uh huh.

Yala: So I collaborated with the Sales Division to develop sample evaluations for all sales and marketing functions. Then I coordinated with them to develop a series of pre-launch trainings to get everyone up to speed.

To solve this problem, Yala performed several key management communication functions: she *collaborated* with the sales division and *coordinated* with them to develop pre-launch trainings. Thus, she avoided the problem and insured a *seamless transition*, that is a smooth passage, into using the new performance management system. Making sure that Sales had no problems with the new system, was, of course, important to the *bottom line*, or profit, of the company.

Successful Interviews

Anticipate, collaborate, and coordinate are all great, vivid verbs for describing job success. Let's hear a few more phrases that contain excellent verbs for showing analytical, management and communication skills:

- I **headed up** a team of six to tackle the problem.
- First, we spent three months carefully **evaluating** the issue.
- I **improved** the process **consolidating** several steps.
- We **prioritized** company teambuilding through a series of internal promotions and activities.
- I **organized** a committee and **delegated** key tasks.

In the study notes for this episode, you will find a complete list of over 200 active, vivid verbs for describing work skills.

After discussing how she solved the problem, Yala moves on to the fourth and final step of her story. She reveals the outcome, and what made her proud.

Interviewer: Did it work?

Yala: Yes, I'm proud to say it did. We boosted productivity by at least 10% because of our actions. It was hard work, but we got extremely positive feedback throughout the whole process, and despite a few hitches, things went pretty smoothly.

Interviewer: Great. Sounds like a success.

Yala's efforts were successful. Despite a few hitches – that is, minor problems – things went pretty smoothly. Notice how she *quantifies* her success – her role in the project helped boost productivity by 10%. Using numbers makes your accomplishment vivid and strong.

Let's now listen to a few more examples of positive outcomes:

- As a result of my efforts, we measured a productivity increase of 5% in my department, which translated into savings to the company of \$56,000.
- The new system was successful, and I'm happy to say that our hard work really paid off.
- Not only have surveys shown a great increase in employee satisfaction, but we can all feel the difference.
- It was a very rewarding experience – both professionally and personally.

How does the dialog finish? In the final section of her response, Yala uses the type of language that we studied in Part 1 of this series to discuss how her work reflects positively on her character. She names several positive professional qualities that her performance in this project demonstrate:

Yala: So I think my role in this project demonstrates a number of important personal qualities... being poised under deadline pressure, being proactive and having long-range vision, practicing a flexible approach... and... definitely being a good team player because so much of it required coordinating and mediating between different departments.

She says she is "poised under deadline pressure," and "proactive"; she has "long-range vision" and "practices a flexible approach." Finally, she is definitely a "good team player" and able to "coordinate" and "mediate" communication. Refer to the study notes for full definitions of these phrases and examples of their usage.

Before we finish, let's review what we learned in this episode and the last. We'll practice joining the strong, vivid verbs we studied for describing job successes in this episode with the great phrases we learned for demonstrating personal qualities in Part 1.

You will hear a series of cues that consist of a job accomplishment and one or two professional attributes and skills. Use each cue to construct a sentence relating the accomplishment with the attribute. For example, if you hear, "Coordinate task force meetings... Sensitive to the needs of other people." you can say, "My coordination of task force meetings really demonstrates my sensitivity to the needs of other people."

Let's begin.

Cue 1: Innovate a new database solution / enterprising and energetic

Learner 1: _____

Cue 2: Coordinate a team effort to increase sales / determined problem solver

Learner 1: _____

Cue 3: Collaborated with IT to solve the problem / long-range vision, good team player

Learner 1: _____

How did you do? Let's listen to example answers, bearing in mind that there are many possible correct responses:

Successful Interviews

Cue 1: Innovate a new database solution / enterprising and energetic

Answer 1: The **innovative approach** I took to designing the database **demonstrates** my **enterprising** and **energetic** spirit.

Cue 2: Coordinate a team effort to increase sales / determined problem solver

Answer 2: **Coordinating** this team effort to **increase** sales shows that I am a **determined problem solver**.

Cue 3: Collaborated with IT to solve the problem / long-range vision, good team player

Answer 3: I **collaborated** with IT to solve the problem. I think this demonstrates that I have **long-range vision** and am **a good team player**.

That concludes this two-part series on talking about your accomplishments with the theme: **provide examples**. In Part 1, we studied giving examples of desirable personal characteristics. In this episode, we've looked at a variety of useful language for describing management and communication skills. Also, we learned a four-step process for telling an organized, articulate story that effectively demonstrates a significant achievement. Let's review that structure:

- 1) Set up the story by providing some context.
- 2) Recount your role in the situation.
- 3) Discuss what you did, including any analysis or problem solving, any process you set up and obstacles you had to overcome. And...
- 4) Reveal the outcome and what made you proud.

Refer to the study notes for vocabulary explanations and complete transcripts of this and the other episodes. Also, remember to check out the additional online extension exercises for listening and language available online at www.businessenglishpod.com.

Thanks for listening!

Study Strategy

What is your greatest accomplishment? If you are a student, think about a big project, or perhaps a large challenge you had in your studies. If you have work experience, try to find something that demonstrates strong personal qualities and that is significant to you. In either case, it should be rich in detail. Now, review the four-part structure that we practiced in this episode for constructing a story about your success, and plan out a story using, whenever possible, the vivid verbs and key language we have learned. You may choose to write down your story word for word or simply take notes. In any case, after you have prepared, you should practice without your notes, because you won't be able to take them with you into an interview. Record your story, then listen to it to see how you sound.

Language Review**A) Personal Characteristics**

To review useful language for positive personal characteristics, match columns one and two to form a word partnership (choose the best one); then, match each word partnership with its definition on the right. One has been done for you as an example.

Word Partnership		Definition
1. Risk	a. under deadline pressure	I. Never giving up when figuring out how to address the challenge.
2. Self	b. disciplined	II. Someone who takes chances.
3. Poised	c. problem solver	III. The quality of being calm when a deadline is close.
4. Practicing	d. interpersonal skills	IV. Good communication ability.
5. Determined	e. taker	V. Being innovative and adaptable.
6. Strong	f. a flexible approach	VI. The quality of being strict with oneself.

B) Cloze Practice of Key Language and Phrases

Review the suggested structure for talking about accomplishments by filling in the blanks in the functions and phrases below with words from the box. **Note:** You may need to alter the words to put them into the proper part of speech:

consolidate	head	improve	charge
undergo	evaluate	result	role

- Setting the context
 - Our company had been _____ a series of restructurings, so employees needed to adapt to new ways of doing things.
- Recounting the situation and your role in it.
 - I was put in _____ of getting employee feedback on company values.
 - Employee morale really went downhill, so my _____ was to devise innovative ways to increase team spirit.
- Discussing what you did, including any analysis or problem solving, any process you set up and obstacles you had to overcome.
 - I _____ up a team of six to tackle the problem.
 - First, we spent three months carefully _____ the issue.
 - I _____ the process _____ several steps.
- Revealing the outcome and what made you proud.
 - As a _____ of my efforts, we measured a productivity increase of 5% in my department, which translated into savings to the company of \$56,000.

Answers

Listening Questions

- 1) Yala was working on the launch of a global, harmonized performance management system that would provide a single, interlinked database on employee performance for human resources worldwide.
- 2) Yala worked on localization and documentation for her business unit.
- 3) Yala describes how she anticipated the need to provide the sales team with the new performance metrics in advance so that they could set their goals for the new/next year. She coordinated with the sales team to provide them with pre-training on the system and to ensure that they could set all their targets.
- 4) The launch was successful. Yala's efforts helped ensure that the launch of the new system had no negative effect on the bottom line (profit) of the company because of the seamless (smooth) transition into using the harmonized database.

Language Review

A) Personal Characteristics

1. e, II; 2. b, VI; 3. a, III.; 4. f, V; 5. c, I.; 6. d, IV.

Characteristic	Definition
Risk taker	Someone who takes chances.
Self disciplined	The quality of being strict with oneself.
Poised under deadline pressure	The quality of being calm when a deadline is close.
Practicing a flexible approach	Being flexible, that is, innovative and adaptable.
Determined problem solver	Never giving up when figuring out how to address the challenge.
Strong interpersonal skills	Good communication ability.

B) Cloze Practice of Key Language and Phrases

1. Setting the context
 - Our company had been **undergoing** a series of restructurings, so employees needed to adapt to new ways of doing things.
2. Recounting the situation and your role in it.
 - I was put in **charge** of getting employee feedback on company values.
 - Employee morale really went downhill, so my **role** was to devise innovative ways to increase team spirit.
3. Discussing what you did.
 - I **headed up** a team of six to tackle the problem.
 - First, we spent three months carefully **evaluating** the issue.
 - I **improved** the process **consolidating** several steps.
4. Revealing the outcome and what made you proud.
 - As a **result** of my efforts, we measured a productivity increase of 5% in my department, which translated into savings to the company of \$56,000.

Links (click a link to open the exercise)

[Accomplishments 2 – Listening Quiz](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Gap-fill Exercise](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Dialog & Vocabulary Definitions](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Positive Personal Characteristics](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Setting the Context](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Describing your Accomplishment](#)

[Accomplishments 2 - Structuring your Example](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – 4 Step Guide to a Good Answer](#)

[Accomplishments 2 – Vocabulary Review](#)

[Accomplishments 2 - Flashcards](#)