

Ten Steps to Better Interviews: Strategies That Will Help You

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Many job hunters are poorly prepared to interview. They believe that since they're smart people who can think on their feet, they can "wing it" in interviews and still make a great impression on hiring managers. In most cases, they're wrong.

Unless you've spent a lot of time job hunting (successfully) in recent years, you're probably not ready to convince company interviewers to extend you an offer. Once you're willing to admit that you need help to become more effective in interviews, your education can begin -- with the following 10 proven rules to interviewing success:

1. Know thyself.

I once believed that I was a naturally gifted job hunter because I had good communication skills. I even had proof: I earned job offers for almost every position I interviewed for, so I assumed I must be a good interviewee -- even though I wasn't sure why people were offering me jobs.

Sensing that I had a talent for finessing interviewers, I never prepared properly. I knew to wear my best, most conservative suit, and because my mother raised me right, I was always polite and well-mannered. But with 20-20 hindsight, I now realize that my mistakes were more subtle.

For instance, I was a really bad listener. I was so busy selling myself to prospective employers that I never tried to find out who they were and what they wanted me to do. As a result, I was hired for several jobs that were totally uninteresting and had no future. As a word-processing operator, and later a hands-on supervisor, I was married to a piece of equipment that didn't challenge me to grow or develop my potential.

During the three years I worked in those jobs, I often wondered why I'd taken them. The reason was simple. Like many candidates, I didn't have a career objective, experience in the job market or enough self-knowledge to know what I wanted to do or how to find challenging, meaningful work.

Before launching your next job search, you need to figure out what you're selling and to whom you're selling it. Start by determining your most marketable skills, which typically fall into three categories:

Technical qualifications, including expertise in a specific field: "I know stocks and bonds," "I'm an expert in employee benefits," "I'm formally trained in instructional design," "I'm a licensed CPA and certified financial planner," etc.

General liberal-arts skills: "I'm a good problem solver," "I have solid analytical abilities," "I'm a good writer," "I communicate well," etc.

Key character traits, such as dependability, honesty and loyalty.

While most candidates recognize their technical skills (or lack thereof), they often downplay softer skills because they think saying things like, "I'm a really smart person" or "Everybody likes me," is too self-serving.

Tooting your own horn is important in interviews. But remember that no one likes a braggart, so you have to demonstrate your strengths rather than talk about them. For example, don't say "I'm a good listener" or "I have good communication skills," since interviewers will be able to see those talents for themselves. In fact, if you say you're a good listener, then frequently interrupt the interviewer, you'll lose credibility.

Concentrate on proving who you are by acting appropriately.

When employers ask where you want to be in five years, it's crucial to have a good idea. If your goal is to become vice president of human resources by 2002, you probably shouldn't seek a position as a benefits analyst. You'll have too far to go and not enough time to make it, so your goals will seem poorly formulated.

2. Research prospective employers.

Few candidates learn all they should about a company before arriving for an interview. To avoid basic mistakes, focus your preparation on three areas. First, pay attention to logistics. You need to know where you're going and how long it will take to get there. If you've never been to the building, leave time to get lost. If you've never been to the city, clarify all the details of your trip beforehand. Otherwise, you'll end up, as one of my clients did, with an airline ticket to Dulles when he was supposed to be in Dallas.

Next, conduct basic company research. Although annual reports aren't the most thrilling reading, they provide key information, such as core businesses, profit-and-loss data, future plans and mission statements. Ideally, you should be able to identify in interviews how your personal goals, plans and mission can be integrated into those of the organization. Once you have this kind of information, you're in a better position to tailor your answers to fit what you know about the company. This will make for stimulating meetings.

Finally, find out all you can about each person you'll interview with by talking with networking contacts and researching industry journals and trade magazines. By doing so, you'll create rapport and boost your chances of earning a second interview.

Michael Allweiss, a partner in a New Orleans law firm, says a lack of research killed the chances of two candidates he met when filling a new associate's position recently. His firm has the state's largest domestic practice, yet Mr. Allweiss is a litigator who specializes in employment rather than domestic law. The first candidate had his heart (and career goals) set on practicing admiralty law. Unfortunately, the firm doesn't handle admiralty cases. Had the candidate done some basic research, he wouldn't have wasted everyone's time and energy. The second candidate was a closer fit since he was interested in practicing domestic law. But he was talking to the wrong person.

"All these candidates had to do was look us up in the Martindale-Hubbell Directory to find out what each member of the firm specializes in," says Mr. Allweiss. "It isn't that hard." Candidates who arrive at interviews so completely unprepared are memorable for all the wrong reasons. Instead of showcasing their competence and thoroughness, they display a seat-of-the-pants mentality which doesn't do much to win an employer's favor. To organize your research strategy, review the book "Researching Your Way to A Good Job" (1993, John Wiley & Sons) by business librarian Karmen Crowther. She explains exactly what you need to know to prepare for interviews.

3. Prepare for and rehearse standard questions.

You should be able to manage and control those aspects of interviews that are truly within your control. That means never being surprised by a standard question. Since hiring managers typically ask similar (if not identical) questions, your preparation should involve knowing these queries, scripting a response and tailoring it to each interviewer. To give you a feel for the process, consider the most standard (and often anxiety-provoking) interview query, "Tell me about yourself." It often serves as an icebreaker, an opportunity for interviewers to observe you in action. They may be interested in how you organize your response, what you choose to emphasize and how you present that information. Do you stare at your feet or out the window instead of making eye contact? Do you stumble through your words uncomfortably instead of presenting yourself with confidence? Do you talk too much and ramble on endlessly about your childhood, troubled adolescence, shaky marriage or great kids? Or do you stay focused on what's relevant and interesting to the interviewer?

Most career counselors agree that it's important to limit your presentation to three minutes in which you briefly sketch out your career qualifications ("I have 20 years' experience in retailing with an emphasis in purchasing and management"), your strengths ("My best skills are quantitative and interpersonal"), and a demonstration of those strengths ("When I was working at Dayton Hudson, I was the senior buyer for men's apparel. In that role, I...").

When you cite specific jobs and accomplishments, it's important to focus on positions most relevant to the job you're interviewing for, even if you have to lift that experience out of the middle of your work history. If all of your experience is relevant, then briefly discuss your most recent jobs, since interviewers consider older experience to be less applicable. A former AT&T Co. engineer learned this lesson the hard way.

After she was downsized, she secured interviews with other telecommunications companies. During her first meeting, she started describing her work experience from the beginning. She could tell that the interviewer's attention was wandering, but she plowed on rather than redirect the conversation. Eventually, the interviewer cut her off and asked another question. The engineer was disturbed because she felt her presentation had been cut short before she had a chance to present her most impressive qualifications. The solution is obvious. The engineer should have worked backwards, giving more time and priority to her most valued experience and less attention to earlier events.

4. Keep the conversation flowing.

A good interview isn't a one-way conversation. It's a dynamic interaction between employers and job hunters to determine whether they can work together. From the employer's standpoint, their goal is to find people who have the skills and personality to fit the company's culture and make a contribution. To this end, they'll likely try several techniques to determine whether you're the one, some of which may make you feel uncomfortable and judged unfairly. But an interview isn't supposed to be an interrogation. You're not a criminal on trial for your livelihood, or a beggar looking for a handout. You're a capable person with strengths and skills to sell, and your goal is to find out what the employer really needs, then tailor your responses accordingly.

One of the best ways to get key information is to ask timely, relevant questions during interviews. Don't save your questions until the end of the meeting. Ask them

spontaneously at appropriate times. One great technique is to answer a question, then end your response by asking the interviewer a related question. For example, if the interviewer asks how you like to be supervised, explain how you work best, then ask how your prospective boss likes to supervise people.

You can even use this strategy when discussing money. If the interviewer asks how much you're seeking, you can state a range based on your prior salary and industry standards, then ask how much the position pays. Or, you can answer the question with a question of your own. Rather than state your salary requirements, you can respond by requesting the salary range for the position. When negotiating, you'll always have the upper hand by eliciting information before divulging it. (See rule nine about salary discussions.)

5. Build rapport.

Chemistry, rapport, likeability: call it whatever you want, it's a crucial but unstated factor in interviewing. Hiring managers tend to forgive the faults of people they like and, in many instances, are overly critical of those they don't. Knowing that there can be instant rapport (or, conversely, dislike and mistrust) between employers and interviewees, there are lots of things you can do to establish chemistry. Controlling your emotions is a key factor. As one popular TV ad reminds us, "Never let them see you sweat."

A food chemist was pleased when a company he was targeting decided to fly him in for a day of interviews. The agenda called for him to spend the morning with the research-and-development hiring manager, plus several of his prospective colleagues. After lunch with the hiring manager, he was expected to present his research to a roomful of fellow scientists. Finally, he would meet with the company's head of R&D.

By any job-search standards, it would be a stressful day. The chemist knew he needed to be in top physical, mental and intellectual form. To make sure he was ready, he spent several days preparing. He studied the company, rehearsed his responses and spruced up his appearance by having his interview suit cleaned and buying new wingtips. But all his plans fell apart when the airline lost his luggage. Consequently, he was apologetic and insecure as he presented himself to peers and senior managers while wearing a pair of torn blue jeans. We'll never know how much his appearance influenced the company's decision not to make him an offer, but it showcased his inability to deal with an unexpected crisis since he flubbed his presentation and felt awkwardly self-conscious throughout the day.

Besides reminding you to carry your suit on board the airplane, this lost-luggage story should drive home the importance of the relationship between appearance and performance. When you're uncomfortable with the visual image you present, your timing and rapport can be thrown off-kilter.

Colorado career counselor Debra Benson, author of "Lions Don't Need to Roar!" (1992, Warner Books), says that most people form impressions of each other by evaluating what they see on the outside, then making assumptions about what they're like on the inside. In other words, they take you at face value. This doesn't mean that if you aren't a beauty queen or hunk, you won't get hired. However, it does show the importance of taking steps to present the right image to interviewers.

It takes longer to undo a bad first impression than it does to make one. That's why it's critical to project a professional, self-confident image from the moment you connect with the employer until long after you receive a job offer. From the appearance of your resume

and cover letter to the sound of your voice on the phone to the way you shake hands, you send a message. It can be that you're a confident, polished professional...or something else.

Energy level is another often-overlooked ingredient of a successful self-image. Ms. Benson says that "relaxed energy" is a crucial component when interviewing. Relaxed physical energy (unlike nervous energy) comes from within and is an expression of poise and self-confidence. It can be reflected in the way you sit: rigidly, slumped down or comfortably relaxed but clearly engaged.

Facial gestures count, too. Don't think interviewers don't notice if you never make eye contact, are desperately intense or smile a lot. But always be careful to keep your gestures nonsexual. Subtle flirtations, such as winking or staring, as well as not-so-subtle innuendoes, are likely to get you thrown out of the interviewer's office.

Objective feedback can go a long way toward remedying defects in your body language. To view yourself in action, videotape yourself answering mock interview questions. When you replay the tape, pay attention to how you come across physically. Are you listening carefully, or does your attention seem to wander? Do you fiddle with your clothes or keep your hands relaxed in your lap? Do you gesture wildly or with purpose? Once you see yourself on tape, you'll never forget what you saw. You'll probably begin working on correcting characteristics that bother you. But don't be overly critical or make yourself too self-conscious. How you talk is an important part of who you really are, so let the best parts of your presentation shine through.

6. Put the best spin on the truth.

Employers are a suspicious lot because they don't want to make expensive hiring mistakes that damage their credibility. Since some of the best interviewees are people who talk a good game but don't necessarily perform at the highest level, employers want to unearth candidate weaknesses and ferret out the fakes. Of course, you can help your own cause by being a great communicator and a talented employee.

The key to skilled communication involves knowing how to address your weaknesses and past mistakes without being naively honest. None of us are perfect, but you need to review your work history to identify weak spots that employers might zero in on, then develop a communication strategy that puts the best face on the truth. Although it's never a good idea to lie in interviews, you don't have to tell all, either. Just as good salespeople highlight only the strengths of their product or service, you should focus prospective buyers' attention on what you can do for them, not what you can't or won't do.

Three of the most common areas of candidate vulnerability include:

- lacking a college degree
- having been fired from a job
- not having good references

In each instance, it's important to look beneath the specifics of an interviewer's objections to find out his or her precise concerns. For example, if you're 40 years old but an employer still questions gaps in your educational background, you may want to question why a degree is necessary to perform the job. You can also redirect the interviewer's attention to your years of experience and on-the-job training.

Patrice Becicka, a former tax supervisor with CCH Computax in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, says she was as troubled by her lack of a degree as potential employers. But rather than

defend her non-degree status, she agreed with interviewers that it was a flaw in her background, and she promised to finish her degree as quickly as possible. In other words, she removed the obstacle rather than trying to maneuver around it.

Getting fired from a previous job is another red flag. If you were downsized rather than terminated for cause, you can easily explain the situation. Even if you secretly believe that personal problems at work were behind the termination, you can benefit from the company's official explanation. If your division was sold or your department was eliminated, discuss the reasons that the entire group disappeared rather than your specific situation.

If your termination was related to "boss problems" or other interpersonal difficulties, use a "mismatch" explanation, but never blame your former employer for the problem. For example, you might say, "My boss was a real hands-on type manager, and I prefer to work more independently." (Translation: My boss was micromanaging my work.)

Always stay close to the truth. Don't say there was a mismatch with authority if your real problem was with a colleague, and don't complain about co-workers if you had difficulties with clients.

To avoid future trouble, compare past problems concerning your work style, goals and needs with what a potential employer can offer you. To do that, you have to know what you really want and be willing to express these preferences in interviews. Although some people find this uncomfortable, it's better to find out during an interview that a company's culture isn't right for you than to learn it later. Not only will your admission of honest preferences make your needs clear from the start, it will help avoid your having to look for a new job a year or so later.

References are another thorny area for people with troubled work histories. If you fall into this category, you need to prepare a clear communication strategy. Prospective employers prefer references from current or previous supervisors. If you don't want your boss to know you're looking, plead confidentiality and offer past supervisors instead. If, on the other hand, your past supervisors aren't crazy about you, you must develop a different approach. Since the law dictates that past employers can't say anything that will interfere with your ability to find a new job, you should be able to protect yourself from naysayers.

Legally, a past employer can only confirm that you worked at the company, your job title and your last salary. They can't critique your performance. If you discover that an employer is violating your rights, let them know that you know and ask for them to correct their behavior. You can then tell future employers that, as much as you would like to use your last boss as a reference, the company prohibits any information besides basic background from being released.

Of course, you should supply confirmation that you're a great employee, so seek out past supervisors, customers and colleagues who can attest to your performance. If they're no longer associated with your old company, they should be free to speak openly about what a great person you are. Remember to supply only those references that you trust. Better to give no references than one that's mediocre.

7. Be a good listener.

While most candidates are anxious to sell themselves in interviews, they may underestimate the value of good listening. In an ideal job interview, you should listen as

much as you speak. It establishes rapport, helps you focus on the employer's needs and goals and gives you a chance to learn.

Since no one is born with great listening skills, start developing them immediately. Practice at work with subordinates and colleagues and at home with your spouse and kids, friends and even strangers. When you listen intently, you'll feel more involved with the person who's talking.

A few tips to get you started include:

DON'T BE SO PREOCCUPIED with your own ideas and opinions that you fail to hear what other people are saying. The first sign of bad listeners is that they can't wait for the interviewer to finish talking so they can say more about themselves. They never set their own interests aside to pay attention to what the hiring manager wants.

CONTROL YOUR BIASES. Prejudice is the hallmark of a closed mind and the enemy of good listening. When you assume you know everything, or that the person you're talking to doesn't know anything, there's no room to create a real dialogue.

In an interview with a woman executive, a 53-year-old real-estate development specialist -- who truly believed that a woman's place is in the home -- was asked about his relationship with former colleagues. Had a male interviewer asked the question, the candidate probably would have heard and responded differently. But because a woman asked the question, he refused to take it seriously. Instead, he replied with a series of flirtatious come-ons that the interviewer found offensive and inappropriate.

TRY TO KEEP AN OPEN mind. Some interviewees feel so defensive about the grilling they receive that they attack out of fear of being attacked. They're quick to criticize and reject each company before they're rejected. Despite the perceived inequity in the situation, most employers aren't out to get you. They're simply looking for the best candidate.

If an interview seems unduly stressful, the questioner may be trying to determine how you respond to stress. Recognize the situation for what it is and try not to be too defensive. Your first goal should be to get a job offer. Afterward, if you don't like the way you were treated, you can always say no to a job. On the other hand, you may discover that when you're less defensive, hiring managers can actually be a lot nicer than you expected.

FOCUS ON THEIR NEEDS, not yours. When you need a job badly and are anxious to find out about the size of the salary and health benefits, it's easy to forget that your first task is to show how you can help the company solve its problems. Once you understand what an employer needs, you'll have a much better chance of convincing your new boss to give you what you want. Solve your employer's problems and it'll solve yours.

8. Tell stories.

Odds are, no one has ever told you that storytelling is part of the interviewing scenario. But it's critical. A good story paints a picture of how you work and provides compelling evidence to support your qualifications.

When an interviewer asks, "What are your strengths?" you might say, "I'm a good problem solver." But if you can provide an example of a work problem, how you handled it and the net result, an employer is more likely to believe that you're telling the truth. Stories have another advantage. They anchor information visually in an employer's head in ways that make you memorable. Saying you're a good problem-solver is fine. But it's hard to forget someone who explains how he solved a technical glitch by getting out of bed in the middle of the night, driving to work, opening up the facility, tracking down the bug and fixing it by sunrise.

Seattle career counselor Tom Washington recounts being so impressed with one candidate's story about how she built up a client base from referrals and repeat business, that seven months later he tracked her down to offer her a job. Because her story was so compelling, she stayed in his memory long after other candidates had disappeared.

To develop a good story structure, try the following three-part strategy:

Identify and describe a problem or situation you were asked to handle.

Describe the actions you took to resolve the problem or situation.

Describe the end result of your actions, including why your strategy was effective.

Savvy candidates prepare and rehearse their strategies before each interview. One way to do this is to review your responses to typical questions and script out a story or anecdote that conveys an essential point. Then edit your story and time it. There's nothing more boring than a poorly conceived story that goes on and on and on.

9. Prepare to talk money.

The best time to discuss compensation is after you've received a job offer. Any salary discussions before then should be considered premature, and you should try to defer them until you've had a chance to learn more about the job and organization.

If an employer wants salary information early on, you need to develop a desist-and-defer strategy. Ask if you can defer the discussion of money until you've explored the question of fit. If that doesn't work, pose a turnaround question, asking how much the job pays. If the interviewer persists, you're better off giving in rather than risking potential conflict. In that case, cite a broad range of pay based on your knowledge of the position and industry standards, with the caveat that you can't say exactly what you expect to earn until you've learned more about the job. That way, you can leave the door open for future negotiations.

What happens if the employer is ready to make you an offer and asks, "What are you looking for?" When it comes to talking money, the person who mentions dollars first usually loses.

10. Follow up and follow through.

Many candidates think that after the interview is over, their only task is to wait for a call or letter. Not so. The interview often is the beginning of the hiring process, not the end. Many employers won't even consider extending an offer until they've seen how a candidate follows up.

When outplacement consultant Jim Kacena was an officer at Continental Bank in Chicago, he would only hire candidates who followed up quickly and effectively. To him, a job hunter's post-interview actions indicated his or her level of interest and commitment. "A lack of follow-up is a sign of laziness," says Mr. Kacena. "A candidate

who drops the ball after the interview probably won't follow through on work assignments, either."

By mailing timely thank-you letters, you send the message that you're enthusiastic about the opportunity. Just saying "I want this job" can be a strong stimulus for employers to hire you. Remember, they're looking for someone who genuinely wants to work for them. Good follow-up communicates that you're that person.

To write an effective thank-you note, apply the following four guidelines:

Tell the interviewer how much you enjoyed your meeting.

Express your enthusiasm for the company and job.

Reiterate your strengths and selling points.

Establish your next point of contact.

It's also important to follow up on specific requests. If the interviewer asks you to provide references, be sure to send that information promptly, perhaps with your thank-you note. Before leaving the interview, establish the interviewer's timetable, since it's important to know when a decision will be made. If you haven't heard anything by that day, call to determine whether you're still a candidate. This conversation should be relaxed and nondefensive. Watch your tone of voice. If you can't carry off this discussion without sounding paranoid, insecure or too assertive, don't make the call. But if you can sound positive and interested, it will help you re-establish rapport. You'll also benefit from knowing whether it makes sense to keep hope alive.

Even if you're turned down for a job you really want, it helps to ask for feedback about why you were rejected. Then you can work on your interviewing style and presentation to ensure that you don't make the same mistake again.

An actuary with a major Chicago insurance company learned in his follow-up call that he wasn't hired for a position (that he was clearly qualified for) because he was "too intense." Astonished at this feedback, he worked hard to inject more lightheartedness and humor in his presentation, even to the extent of telling a few benign jokes. Within a few weeks, he received and accepted an even better offer from another company. By being flexible, you can respond successfully to the demands of the job market.

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