

Interview Tips - Selling yourself

This is a general guide to help you get the interview process right.

Some points are glaringly obvious and those of you who have attended a few interviews recently may find it repetitive. However, it does not hurt to spend time thinking about all aspects of interviewing for you rarely get second chances in this game.

PREPARATION

Think of an actor, musician or sports person and the amount of time they spend preparing in relation to the time spent performing. You only have 45 minutes to 1 hour to perform in your interview and it is therefore imperative that you have planned what you want to say and how it is going to be said. There are three main areas to preparation:

i. Researching the company for which you are interviewing

Not only will you have a better idea of what you are potentially letting yourself in for, but it provides you with ammunition to drop into either your answers, or your questions at the end of the interview: e.g. 'I understand that last year your company merged with Company X. How do you see this affecting the finance department and what will it mean in terms of opportunities for advancement?'. It is obvious that if an interviewer is faced with two candidates who are equally suitable for a role, they will favour the one who put in the effort to research the company. Either use the Internet as a resource or contact the company asking them to send relevant information. If you can't be bothered to do the research, expect the job to go to someone who can.

ii. Preparing yourself

It is not common practice for interviewers to focus on key competencies - skills or attitudes that are necessary to the role in question. Most interviews will follow a structure that is designed to bring out those qualities. The questions should be answered by giving specific examples from your background that highlight the relevant competencies. Therefore it is important to have ready-made examples that you can use on cue. Go over your CV and recall your greatest achievements. What were the skills and attitudes that you used to bring about the achievements? How did you use them? What did you learn from the experience? By the time of the interview you should be able to give 90 second to 2 minute stories of when and where you used a wide range of your competencies.

iii. Personal appearance

Within the first 2 minutes of the interview, the interviewer will already have formed a judgement of you and your suitability for the role - make sure it is a positive one.

BODY LANGUAGE

Research has shown that 50% of communication relies on body language. Many interviewees shoot themselves in the foot without realising that they are sending out negative signals. There are several issues to avoid:

- The 'Wet Fish' handshake. Be firm without crushing the other person's hand.
- Shifting around in your seat too much - especially when faced by a tough question. The same goes for wayward hands that fidget with pens, ties, hair etc.
- Nodding too much when the interviewer is talking - it shows impatience on your behalf.
- Folding your arms - it sends the message that you are hiding something or are on the defensive.
- Slouching in your chair.

Areas to concentrate on include:

- Smile - for the duration of the interview, show the interviewer that you are open, friendly and confident by showing your whites every now and again. Confidence will come from being well prepared.
- Maintain good eye contact. Avoid glaring or staring into the interviewer's eyes by rotating your look from interviewer's eyes to their mouth as they speak and to their hands if they make any gestures when emphasising a point.

Interview Tips pg2

- Try to mirror the interviewer's body language, e.g. if they laugh and lean back, do the same making sure that you do not overpower them with the volume of your laughter. Do not mirror negative body language such as interviewer slouching.
- Occasionally show one or both of your palms when making a point. This conveys openness and honesty, however, don't overuse this or you will come across like a bad politician or used car salesman.

The main point is to ensure that you are relaxed and confident. As mentioned above, the best way to ensure this is thorough preparation.

REASONS FOR HIRING

By looking at the interview from the other side of the desk, it is much easier to understand what the interviewer is looking for, and therefore to tailor your answers to what is needed.

The interviewer will have 4 main considerations:

- Ability and Suitability. There are plenty of people with the right qualifications and skills to do the job in hand. On paper, the interviewer may have little to help them differentiate between candidates. Look at the role that you are applying for and list all the technical skills and personal traits that are vital to the job. Now pick out specific examples from your past that highlight these qualities. Make life easy for the interviewer by painting vivid pictures from your past. Specifics will always win over generalisations as they prove to the interviewer that you have what it takes to do the job well.
- Willingness. You have the right credentials to do the job but the interviewer needs to know if you are the sort of person who will go the extra mile in order to help them succeed - a jobsworth who will not do anything that is not in the job description will be a future headache for the interviewer. Have examples ready of when you went beyond the call of duty in order to ensure the success of a project or task.
- Manageability and Teamwork. No manager is looking for a high maintenance employee. They are looking for someone who will fit in well with the rest of the team and not rock the boat. If you do have any particularly strong opinions or beliefs that have caused problems in the past do not bring them up.
- Problem Solving. Anyone who is hired is hired for the same reason: the employer has a problem of some kind that needs solving. Look at the job description and decide what problems will need to be solved by the individual who gets the job. Again go to your past and prepare examples of when you overcame similar problems. Pay particular attention to your approach to the problem, your thought process in tackling it, how you went about solving it and the outcome of your actions.

COMMON COMPETENCIES

Specific competencies will vary from job to job. There are a number of common competencies that you could be questioned on, no matter what job you are applying for. Below are the most common traits that you will need to prove that you possess:

PERSONAL PROFILE / PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

- Drive Reliability
- Motivation Honesty/integrity
- Communication skills Pride
- Teamwork Dedication
- Energy/enthusiasm Analytical skills
- Determination Listening skills

Interview Tips pg3

ACHIEVEMENT PROFILE / BUSINESS PROFILE

- Money that you have saved your company Efficiency
- Time that you have saved your company Economy
- Procedures
- Profit

There are many different questions that the interviewer can use to determine whether you possess certain competencies. However, by matching the above competencies to specific examples from your past in preparation for the interview, you will be able to cover most eventualities.

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Below is a list of questions, some of which will come up in the interview, others that may not. There are no penalties for over-preparation though, so it is important that you have put some thought into how you will answer all of them:

- Why do you want to work here? Once you have researched the company, you will have no problems listing the advantages of working for them.
- What kind of experience do you have for this job? By knowing what is expected for the role in question you can tailor your answer using specific examples from your past that match what is needed for the role. As mentioned above, the job is on offer because a problem needs solving. Give examples of similar problems that you have solved.
- What did you dislike about your old job? This is an invitation to put your head in a noose. By slating your old role/boss/company you are sending out warning signs to the interviewer that you may be in trouble. Keep answers short and positive: e.g. 'I really enjoyed my last job but I felt that I wanted a bigger challenge. One of the things that appeal to me about working with your company is the fact the individuals are stretched to bring the best out of them. I look forward to tackling such a challenge.'
- Have you done the best work that you are capable of doing? By saying 'yes' you give the image of being a spent force. Say something along the lines of being proud of your work to date, whilst assuring the interviewer that you feel the best is yet to come.
- Where do you see yourself in five years time? A good response is to throw a question back: What opportunities are there within your company? If possible and honest, blend this answer with your prepared answer.
- What are your biggest accomplishments? A golden opportunity to sell yourself. It is absolutely crucial that you have several well-prepared stories including facts and figures. The more vivid your story, the better the interviewer can visualise you not only successfully completing that task, but completing such tasks for their company. Be conscious of time and don't ramble - get as much detail into as short a time as possible.
- Can you work under pressure? A simple 'yes' does not separate you from the crowd. Think of specifics from your past including how you dealt with pressure. What are your greatest strengths? Look to the list of competencies above: Which of those are most relevant to the job in question? Have examples prepared for the three that you think are most needed for the role.
- What most interest about your job? Again, this can only be answered if you have done your research.
- Why should I hire you? The interviewer will normally start the interview with a preamble about the company, why the position has come into being, and what they are looking for in a candidate. It is advisable to write down what qualities they are looking for. When it comes to answering this question, incorporate those qualities in your reply.
- Describe a difficult problem that you have had to deal with. This is a chance to show off your approach to problems. Show that you employ a logical thought process by outlining a step-by-step approach to problem solving, e.g. I stand back and examine the problem. Recognise the problem as the symptom of other, perhaps hidden factors. Make a list of possible solutions to the problem. Weigh up pros and cons of each solution and decide on the best. Go to my superior, outline the problem and my recommendation, and ask for my superior's advice and approval. Having stated this, give an example of a problem that you are particularly proud of solving.

Interview Tips pg4

- What have you done that shows initiative? Managers want to hire someone who has the ability to save the company time or money, or make their teams' life easier. It is best to think of some example that is work related, but using examples from outside professional life is absolutely necessary.
- What qualities do you think it needs to be successful in this field? Again, if you have listened to the interviewer's preamble at the beginning of the interview, you will know what they want to hear. Don't disappoint them.
- Do you work better on your own or as part of a team? By knowing about the role, you will have an idea of the balance of work in terms of how much time will be spent working on your own and how much contributing to team efforts. Answer according to the necessary balance. What mistakes have you made that you would change if you had a second chance? If at all possible, draw your answer from outside work. Keep it trivial and short including what you learnt. If you are pressed to give a work orientated answer use an example from a long time ago.
- Tell me of a time when you had to communicate with people from different levels. What problems did you encounter? What were the results? This is not only a question designed to probe your interpersonal skills, but also to determine how you dealt with a problem. As above, show a logical approach to problem solving.
- Give me an example of an event that really challenged you. How did you overcome the challenge? Answer in the same manner as the previous question. Be sure to portray the challenge in its worst light. The darker you can paint the problem, the more you will shine. Distorting the truth, however, is likely to end in a trip up.
- How have you benefited from your disappointments? Resist the temptation to explain specific disappointment in detail.

This is one of those questions where it is better to give a general answer, e.g. 'I treat disappointment as a learning experience. I looked at what happened, why it happened and how I would deal with things differently if I had the chance. Having done that, I put the disappointment behind me and look forward to tackling the next problem with a better understanding.'

- What would you do when you have a decision to make and no procedure exists? Something along the lines of: 'I would only make a decision without my superior's approval if the matter was extremely urgent and my manager was not available. I would update them at the first opportunity...' then relate your problem solving approach and give an example if possible.
- What is your greatest weakness? Keep your answer short and end it on a positive note if possible, e.g. 'I like to give projects 100% and I sometimes find it frustrating when others in the team do not give the same level of commitment. I am conscious of this weakness and aim to overcome it by a positive attitude that I hope will catch on.'

The interview will normally close with the interviewer inviting you to ask some questions. Having researched the company you will be in a great position to really probe and find out if this is the role/company for you, e.g. 'I understand the company has been growing. What does the future hold? Company X is your major competitors, how do you see this rivalry developing?'

Another thing to remember is that people love to talk about themselves. Now is the time to find out about the interviewer - after all you are potentially going to be working with this person. Good questions include:

- Why did you join the company?
- What keeps you here?
- What are the qualities that you have shown in order to get to where you are?

An excellent question is: 'What would my first assignment be?' This not only gives you an insight into the day-to-day mechanics of the role, but also results in the interviewer picturing you working within the company. Avoid asking questions about the salary. This is only to be discussed once the job offer is firmly in your hands.

Show enthusiasm for the role, e.g. 'I understand that you are making a decision on the 15th. What do I need to do in the meantime to ensure that I get the job?'