

Seven Keys to Interview Preparation

It's been said that Napoleon won his battles in his tent; that is, he did all the planning the night before the battle was joined, so that every contingency could be adequately covered. Interview preparation is similar. You never know exactly what will happen on the battlefield, but by being ready, you can eliminate a lot of the uncertainty, and know how to react to different scenarios.

Later, we'll look at ways to effectively conduct the interview itself; but for now, let's focus on the list, each item at a time.

One: The Resume

Of course, bring a couple of copies, and be sure to read your resume before the interview, so you're completely familiar with everything you've written. Nothing is more embarrassing (or potentially fatal to your candidacy) than being quizzed on some aspect of your background that appears on the bottom of page two -- and not being able to remember the details.

You might also bring materials that would be particularly good at illustrating an important aspect of your work, such as creative designs, writing samples, and so forth. Just remember to use your better judgment.

I once interviewed an engineer who brought with him a lawn and garden string trimmer made by his current company, so he could show me the design improvements he'd made on the product. It turns out his engineering efforts had lowered the trimmer's cost to manufacture, which resulted in increased profits for his company. His version of "show and tell" was a bit extreme (my whole office was buzzing for weeks about my Weed Eater candidate), but at least his real-life picture told me a thousand words.

Be careful, though, not to overdo it with the props. College diplomas, letters of commendation, and company bowling trophies should be left at home. When in doubt, just bring your resume and your business card -- they're the most important props you'll ever need.

It's a good idea to carry a leather folder or day runner with you so you can take notes or store written materials the company might hand you during the course of your interview. A briefcase is also fine, although I prefer a folder, which is lighter to carry, and less cumbersome. Always remember to bring a pen or pencil.

Two: Appropriate Dress and Appearance

Much as I find some aspects of the *New Dress for Success* (Warner Books, 1988) formula as espoused by author and wardrobe consultant John T. Molloy a bit disheartening, there's simply no practical excuse for dressing any way other than the book suggests. Sure, we'd all like to think that we're being judged on our qualifications, skills, and depth of character. But the truth is, when it comes to interviewing, in most cases, clothes make the man. To think any other way is to ignore reality.

Three: Directions To the Interview Location

Try to get directions at least a day before your interview, so you don't get lost and arrive late. And here's a tip: Always bring some cash to pay for parking. Never ask an employer to validate your parking stub, or reimburse you for parking. Not only is it impolite, you'll create a negative impression, since it's considered common courtesy to pay your own expenses for a local interview.

If you're coming from out of town, then it's especially important to get directions. Naturally, if the expenses for your interviewing trip are going to be covered by the employer, wait until the interview has concluded (or better yet, the next day) to settle up. Usually, the company will prepay the air fare, or other major expenses, and will reimburse you for the rest, such as your car rental, cab fare, hotel room, and meals. It's customary that you pick up certain non-essential expenses, such as long distance phone calls from your hotel room, or the bar tab from the lounge in the hotel lobby.

A few years ago, a client company of mine flew a candidate to Los Angeles for an interview. The candidate, unfortunately, was unemployed at the time, and was in pretty dire financial straits. He charged the phone calls he made to his wife back in Wyoming and all his dry cleaning expenses (he only brought one shirt with him for two days of interviewing) to the company. When they got his expense voucher a few days later, they got pretty upset -- they never expected to pay for all these add-ons. It was too bad, too, because he was generally well received when he interviewed. I'd hate to think it was these little charges that were responsible for his not getting a job he really wanted.

The best time to arrive for an interview is precisely when you're scheduled, not early or late. It can irk an employer to be told that the candidate for a 2 o'clock appointment is waiting in the lobby at one thirty-five. The employer will either become distracted knowing there's someone hanging around waiting to see him, or he'll scramble to rearrange his schedule to accommodate the candidate, which disrupts the rest of his day. If your appointment is at two, then arrive at two.

If for some reason you're running late, call ahead to ask if you can reschedule for later the same day, or if not, later in the week. If something unexpected happens that you have no control over, simply explain the situation to the employer when you arrive.

I placed a candidate named Alan recently, who was over an hour late to his first interview. He'd been caught in a monstrous traffic jam and was unable to call ahead; but fortunately, he handled the situation like a real pro. When he arrived, he apologized for being late, and got right down to the business of interviewing. He simply put all the anxiety and frustration behind him, so that he could concentrate on the reason he was there, not the reason he was late.

If you're ever caught in a situation like Alan was, stay cool, take a deep breath, and remove whatever misfortune befell you from your mind.

Four: Name and Title of the Interviewer(s)

When you arrange the interview, find out who you'll be talking to, and what their function is within the company. Will you be speaking with the hiring manager? The manager from another department? The personnel director? The internal recruiter? A peer level employee or subordinate? A staff industrial psychologist?

You might already know the person. If that's the case, you're ahead of the game. If not, send out feelers among your own contacts within your industry, or look in your industry's trade publications to see if the person you're going to be meeting is distinguished in any way.

It's also helpful to find out whether you and the person you'll be meeting have any commonalities or interconnecting points of interest, in the way of origins ("Hey, you're also from Wisconsin?"), schools ("My brother went to Duke, too. How did you like it?"), professional achievements ("My article appeared in Ad Week a month after yours did."), or personal interests ("I heard you were the Nebraska state ping pong champion. We'll have to get together sometime for a match."). These tidbits can break the ice when an interview begins, and create a bond with the interviewer.

Five: Understanding the Company's Hiring Procedure

To correctly gauge the sequence of events surrounding or following your first interview, ask these questions:

- Can you describe to me, step by step, the hiring procedure for this position?

This is important to ask, because you want to find out if (and when) the company needs to schedule a second or third level interview. Some companies will make hiring decisions on the spot; others will take months of meetings and endless signatures to process a simple request for a second interview.

- Will I be asked to take any tests?

And if so, what are they, and how long will they take to administer? Proctor & Gamble, for many of its professional positions, requires candidates to take a one-hour math and abstract reasoning test. Some companies require a full day of psychological, aptitude, technical skill, and intelligence testing. With most companies, failure to pass the tests means automatic elimination from consideration.

Most drug tests are simply referred to as "physicals," and may take several days to schedule and process. Often, you'll have to use your own doctor or clinic.

- How long will it take before you reach a decision?

This will help you measure your progress through the hiring process, and could spare you from getting the jitters if you don't hear something immediately.

I once got bent out of shape because a new client company was taking a long time to make a decision whether to bring back one of my candidates for a second interview. Later, I found in my original notes that the company was right on schedule; they'd told me up front that it would take them several weeks to reach a decision. As it turns out, I had no reason to complain.

- Do you currently have any finalists?

This question lets you know if you've entered the race late, and your interview with the company is only a formality. In a situation like this, isn't it best to know where you stand?

- Who will be making the hiring decision?

Find out if the decision will be made by a committee. If it is, must the committee come to a unanimous agreement? Or, will the decision be based on the recommendation of a single person?

The more information you can dig up about the hiring procedure, the better you'll be able to give a more confident, thoughtful interview. What's more, arriving at an interview armed with a bastion of facts will help you shield yourself from the fear that occurs as a result of feeling out of control.

Six: Background Information On the Company

While the amount of background information you can gather about a company is practically endless, it would be ludicrous to try to become a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia. However, knowing something in each of these categories should significantly improve your odds of getting hired:

- The company's personnel -- who the major players are, who was recently hired or let go. It's also a good idea to know something of the history of the company, and who the founders were. For example, if you were interviewing for IBM, it might be considered a *faux pas* to look puzzled and ask, "Who?" at mention of the name Thomas Watson, Sr.
- The company's basic structure -- what products or services they provide to which customers, what the various divisions are, and whether they're privately or publicly held.
- The company's vital signs -- how the company is doing financially. Are they solvent or struggling? Are they involved in a hostile takeover, or merging with another company? How's their stock faring? You get the idea. Many of my candidates like to look through Value Line before they interview, so they can talk intelligently about the company's financial picture.
- The company's divisional or departmental details -- the changes that are taking place that could potentially affect the position you're interviewing for. Is there a new product introduction or marketing strategy in the works? Or how about an overhaul in the company's accounting methods, capital equipment, or computer system?

By arriving for your interview adequately briefed, you'll make a strong impression on the interviewer. Best of all, you can spend your interviewing time discussing your background and the company's needs, not the corporate biography, or company financial report.

Seven: A Complete List of Questions You Want to Ask.

During the course of an interview, your dialogue with the other person will spawn a number of questions spontaneously. However, there may be important issues to discuss which will never come up unless you take the initiative. For that reason, you should bring a list of questions with you that will address these issues, so that you don't leave the interview uninformed.

Premeditated questions can be grouped into four different categories:

- [1] Company questions deal with the organization, direction, policies, stability, growth, market share, and new products or services of the prospective company or department;
- [2] Industry questions deal with the health, growth, change, technological advancement, and personnel of the industry as a whole;
- [3] Position questions deal with the scope, responsibilities, travel, compensation policies, and reporting structure of the position you're interviewing for; and
- [4] Opportunity questions deal with your own potential for growth or advancement within the company or its divisions, and the likely timetable for promotion.

You may have specific interests or concerns surrounding topics in each category. For example, if you're interviewing with a computer manufacturer, you may want to ask about the future growth of the industry. Or, let's say you're interviewing for a position with a company that's known for its high rate of personnel turnover. You might want to prepare a carefully worded question that deals with that issue.

Leave Your Laundry List at Home

Naturally, you need to be careful not to come on too strong by asking too many questions -- it may turn the interviewer off. Presumably, if there's mutual interest, you'll get all your questions answered at a subsequent interview. The general rule of thumb is to limit the number of premeditated questions to about a dozen or less. While it's true that you'll be interviewing the company as much as they'll be interviewing you, the last thing you want to do is turn a dialogue into an inquisition, or come across as a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia.

You should also be aware that there's one specific taboo to first-level interviewing, in terms of the questions you should ask. Never, ever bring up the issue of salary or benefits. If the employer initiates a dialogue surrounding these issues, and asks if you have any questions, fine.

But if it appears to the employer that your primary motivation for changing jobs is the new company's compensation or benefit package, you'll be out the door quicker than a bolt of lightning. Employers get chills of fear and loathing when they think you're only on the job market to feather your nest at their expense. They visualize your employment with them as a short term, non-committal, career leveraging maneuver, and understandably, want to avoid being victimized.

Early in my career as a recruiter, I arranged an interview for a qualified candidate with a client company. After the interview, I called Shelly, the employer, to debrief her.

"Well, your candidate didn't do so well," Shelly said.

"Really? I thought he had the perfect background."

"That wasn't the problem. I just didn't like the way he handled the interview."

“What happened?”

“I spent over an hour with him, telling him everything about the company, and introducing him to all the key people,” Shelly said. “I even gave him an extensive tour of the manufacturing area.”

“And then?”

“And then, I brought him back to my office, and we sat down to talk about what he’d seen. I asked him if he had any questions.”

“And did he?”

“Yes. That’s when the interview ended. He looked me straight in the eye and asked, ‘What are your benefits?’”

“And?”

“And I got up,” Shelly said, “and walked him right out the door.”

Don’t misunderstand me. The candidate’s actions in no way reflected on his abilities or his character; his intentions were perfectly honorable. But after that incident (which cost the candidate a job and me a placement fee), I learned to caution interviewees not to initiate the subject of salary or benefits.

My suggestion is to take the John F. Kennedy approach to interviewing: “Ask not what your company can do for you, ask what you can do for your company.”

This way, you can present yourself as a loyal, hard-working, virtuous, and dedicated candidate, rather than as an opportunistic job-hopper who’d prefer to live off the fat of the land.

While it’s unthinkable to accept or even consider a job without first knowing the financial rewards (or the details of the benefit package), there are better and more timely ways to broach the subject, without endangering your candidacy.

Interview preparation is perhaps the single most overlooked aspect of the job changing process. A candidate who’s fired up and ready to go at the time of the interview has a tremendous advantage over a candidate who’s not.

The more carefully you prepare for your interview, the better your chances of getting hired.