

Career Advice

Interview Tips, Advice and Help

Interview performance is often the deciding factor when deciding between candidates for a job. This makes the face-to-face meeting a critical part of the recruitment process and you will need to impress from the start.

Interviewing for a job is a nerve-racking ordeal for many people. You may feel uncomfortable “selling” yourself or fielding unexpected questions. Or maybe the prospect of having to meet and impress new people is enough to trigger your anxiety. The good news is that interviewing is a skill you can learn. With the right tips and techniques—and plenty of practice—you can become a master of sharing your value with potential employers and presenting yourself effectively. Following the interview preparation guidelines below will help overcome any interview nerves and instill confidence for a productive meeting with your potential employer.

Research

Find out as much information as possible about your prospective employer in advance. Most now have websites which are packed with information. Familiarise yourself with mission statements, past performance, future goals and current analyst ratings. Be aware that if your prospective employer does have a comprehensive website, you may seriously compromise your chances if it becomes apparent you have not taken time to research it.

If there is no company website, it is still easy to research your employer. All national newspapers and professional magazines have online sites with archive articles. You can also utilise web search engines just by entering the company name. Talk to anyone you know who has worked at the organisation. If all else fails do try phoning the company and requesting general information.

Our Seven Point Interview Preparation Guideline

1: Interview for as many jobs as you can

Let's assume you have focused your search on certain types of jobs and types of employers. You have developed a preferred list of both. You have scanned the horizon, conducted research, compiled your questions, and engaged your network for assistance. Your resume is in order.

Then job openings start to pop up through your web searches and referrals. Some seem close but others don't quite fit. You quickly skip over those jobs that are "beneath" you, have titles that appear to be foreign, or are in fields or industries you're unfamiliar with. You have decided to be focused and only apply for positions that exactly match your search criteria.

But limiting your job search limits the possibilities. Once you create too many filters and requirements, you can easily overlook opportunities. In this type of market you have to get out there and actively uncover opportunities. Don't dismiss opportunities to interview based upon superficial and narrow criteria. You never know when an interview for a “not-quite-right” job will result in a surprising match, a referral to another opening, or an entirely new position tailored to fit your unique experience and abilities.

Why you should interview as much as possible

- **You need the practice.** Some of you have not interviewed for a while. You need to refine your story and you can only do that through practice. That means interviewing as much as you can.
- **Interviewing will refine your job search.** By getting out there and interviewing, you'll learn about new trends, positions, and opportunities, your perspective will shift, and you'll see new paths that you were previously unaware of.

- **Interviewing will make your network stronger.** As you engage your network for interview referrals and recommendations, you will not only strengthen existing connections, but you'll meet new people who are connected to your network.
- **Interviewing may lead to unexpected opportunities.** If you have the skills and impress in the interview, that carries weight in the organization. Employers want to place good people and may even refer you to opportunities outside of the firm.

2: Develop a compelling story

We tend to conclude that our lives are pretty much the same as other people's, that they're average and boring. As a result, many people don't tell their own story well. But your story is so much better than you think. The way your life has evolved; the things you've learned; your achievements, failings, and dreams—these things are unique to you and much more interesting than you realize. Sharing your well thought out story is a powerful interviewing technique.

Your story is what helps people understand who you are and where you are going. So learn to tell your story and tell it well, especially for interviewing and networking purposes. Putting together your story takes a lot of work and practice. However, the benefits to you and to your career are enormous. Your stories:

- Give you confidence
- Increase your self-awareness
- Bring humanity to your resume
- Make you memorable and set you apart

Developing your story for job interviews

- **Take a comprehensive inventory of the chapters of your life.** Think about major events, memories, and turning points that shaped who you are. Make notes about your feelings, expectations, and frustrations, or what you learned, accomplished, and experienced. Organize your chapters by time periods or jobs.
- **Focus on memorable “aha” moments.** These stories need to have vivid dimensions so people will experience that moment with you. It may have been a moment with your mom on the porch, or a trip you took to a far away place, or what a boss or mentor told you. The stories don't have to be dramatic, just meaningful to you.
- **Uncover the themes in your story.** What emerges as your passion? Mentoring others, doing research, helping a specific type of client, advancing knowledge in your field? What gives you joy? Are you a teacher, a leader, an entrepreneur, a risk taker?
- **Reflect on your career path.** How have you arrived where you are today? Why did you make certain choices? Who helped you along the way? What motivated you then and now? Have your career goals remained the same or have they changed? Are you someone who likes new projects? Or executes the details of someone else's vision?

Practice makes perfect

Once you've developed your story, the next step is to practice telling it—saying it out loud, ideally to others. Don't wait until the interview to tell it for the first time. Try reciting it into a tape recorder or sharing it with a confidante for feedback. Get over your feelings of story inadequacy or thinking that a job well done speaks for itself.

As you become more comfortable in how to tell your story, you will see that your life has not just been a string of random events. Your story has a past and it has a future and the road ahead becomes clearer when you understand where you have been. The ultimate test will be the next time someone says, "Tell me about yourself."

3: Tailor your story to the job

Applying your story to a specific employer or job is the next step. Lining up the stories that apply to the opportunity at hand is critical. Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes and pose the questions you would ask. Which stories are relevant to this job interview? Think about personal stories that show how you handled change, made choices under pressure, or learned lessons from mistakes and failures. You should also think about stories you can tell in the interview that reveal your skill set.

Learning and appreciating your story is a prerequisite to any interview process. Don't rely on your ability to think on your feet. Anticipate the questions and have answers at the ready. In the end, this is about making a great and memorable impression that demonstrates competency and ability.

You may want to start by developing your stories around these areas

- State times where you either made money or saved money for your current or previous company.
- Focus on a crisis or two in your life or job and how you responded or recovered from it.
- A time where you functioned as a part of a team and what that contribution was.
- A time in your career or job where you had to deal with stress.
- A time in your job where you provided successful leadership or a sense of direction.
- The failures you faced in your job and how you overcame them.
- The seminal events that happened during your career that caused you to change direction and how that worked out for you.

If you're having trouble developing a good interviewing story, ask your friends or family members for their own success stories. Notice the elements that make them work, such as specific details and a smooth flow. Notice elements that don't work, such as vagueness or rambling. Then think about your own experience and try to uncover the moments when you really excelled or when you rose to meet a challenge. After you identify several, practice them until they flow easy and work on adapting them to different types of questions.

4: Be prepared

Interviews range from conversations lasting a few minutes to several formal meetings, sometimes with more than one



interviewer. Interviews allow you to demonstrate that you are the right candidate for the job, but you are not alone if interviews make you nervous. The better prepared you are, the more comfortable you will be when the questions start coming your way.

Job interview preparation tips:

- **Do your research.** Gather information about the company and the position available. Try to specifically relate your experience to the duties the job opportunity entails.
- **Practice interviewing.** Enlist a friend (better yet, a group of friends and colleagues) to ask you sample questions. Practice making eye contact.
- **Record your practice sessions.** Pay attention to body language and verbal presentation. Eliminate extra movements and verbal fillers, like “uh,” and “um.”
- **Handle logistics early.** Have your clothes, resume, and directions to the interview site ready ahead of time, to avoid any extra stress.

Don't forget about your references

Don't let your references be the last to know about your job search, or even worse, get an unexpected call from a potential employer. Many offers are withdrawn over bad references. Why take that chance? Get in touch with your references right away to seek help and to avoid surprises on either side.

- Are your references relevant to your current job search? Who should you add or subtract?
- Are there any reference gaps? Gaps that an employer will question? What is your story about those gaps?
- Can a colleague, vendor, customer, or board member be added to replace or enhance the list?
- What is the current status of your relationship with your references?

5: Anticipate likely questions

To get to the motivations and working style of a potential employee, employers often turn to behavioral interviewing, an interviewing style which consists of a series of probing, incisive questions.

Sample behavioral interview questions include

- Describe a situation in which you didn't meet your stated goal, how did you handle it?
- Tell us about a situation in which you encountered resistance from key people, how did you convince the person or people to do what you wanted?
- Describe a situation in which you took the initiative to change a process or system and make it better, how did you

identify the problem? How did you go about instituting change?

Preparing good interview answers

Interviewers will follow up your preliminary answers with further questions about your actions. To prepare for these types of interview questions, the following tips might help:

- **Review your research** about the company and the position.
- **Make a list of key attributes** for your desired job.
- **Write sample interview questions** that are likely to uncover the attributes you identified as important.
- **Create answers** to the sample interview questions based on a template such as “Situation – Action – Result” with specific details from your work experience.
- **Practice answering the interview questions** and follow-up questions so that you are very familiar with several detailed examples/stories. Rehearse key points.

6: Ask questions during the interview

Being prepared and asking great questions about the position and the employer shows your interest during the interview. You can't just be an effective responder. You need to assert yourself, too. By the time you reach the interviewing stage, you should be clear about what you want and what you offer to the company.

Try to be thoughtful and self-reflective in both your interview questions and your answers. Show the interviewee you know yourself—your strengths and your weaknesses. Be prepared to talk about which areas would present challenges and how you would address them. Admitting true areas of weakness is much more convincing than claiming: "I have what you need and I can do anything I put my mind to."

Questions to ask potential employers in job interviews

- The people who do well at your company: what skills and attributes do they usually have?
- What do you like best about working at _____?
- What results are expected?
- What specific problems are you hoping to solve during the first six months?
- Who are the key internal customers? Any special issues with them?
- What happened to the person who had this job before?
- What communication style do you prefer?
- What is your philosophy regarding on-the-job growth and development?
- What are your goals for the department?

7: Focus on commonalities

A conscious goal you should have in every interview is finding common human connections. If you set out with the intention to discover how you and the person interviewing you are connected and what you share, you will discover commonalities much faster. And the interviewing process will be much less intimidating because of it.

Tips for discovering commonalities with your interviewer

- **Do your research.** Google every person you know you are going to meet or think you might meet in the interview, especially senior executives. Learn what might be common areas of interest in advance.
- **Listen and pay attention.** If you listen during the interview and look for commonalities, they will seem omnipresent. When your interviewer mentions his or her alma mater, weekend plans, kids, or favorite restaurant, you have the chance to ask questions and find common ground. You can also take a look around the office. Do you see a book you've read, a product you want or just bought, or a photo you like? If so, you have a means to discuss commonalities.
- **Lead with your interests and passions.** How you introduce yourself and talk about yourself in the interview matters. If you integrate facts and interests into your spiel about yourself, then you create opportunities to connect. After the "What do you do?" or "Tell me about yourself" query, tell your story.
- **Find common ground in the context.** Where you are meeting, your surroundings, and the purpose of your connection are all reference points. There is a reason why both of you find yourself at this unique place and time. Why are you both in this business? Do you know the any of the same people?

While searching for commonalities, avoid pummeling your interviewer with a series of set questions. Let the interview happen naturally, but keep an eye out for hints of commonalities. Once you do, the world will feel like a smaller, friendlier place and your anxiety over interviewing will shrink.

In Review

- Greet your interviewer standing, with a strong, firm handshake and a smile! Good body language is vital. Sit up straight with both feet on the floor. Speak clearly and confidently. Try and maintain a comfortable level of eye contact throughout.
- A standard interview will generally start with an introductory chat, moving on to questions specific to your application and experience. General information about the company and role may follow, finishing with an opportunity for you to ask your own questions.
- Be familiar with your CV and prepared to answer questions from it. Similarly, ensure you have read any job description thoroughly and think of ways in which your experience will benefit your potential employer.
- Listen to what is being asked of you. Think about your answers to more difficult questions and do not give irrelevant detail. Give positive examples from your experience to date but be concise. Avoid one word answers however. Prepare yourself in advance for common interview questions.
- Be ready to ask questions that you have prepared beforehand. This can demonstrate you have thought about the role and done some research on the organisation. Ensure they are open, thus encouraging the interviewer to provide you with additional information.
- Show your enthusiasm for the role, even if you have some reservations.

We hope these simple tips will assist you in coming out ahead in your next interview. Best of luck!