

How to Interview Successfully for a Job

By

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Contents

- Overview
- Getting the Interview
- The Human Connection
- Remember Common Courtesy
- Cleaning Up Your Social Media
- Employer's Needs, Not Yours
- Thirteen Tips on Job Interviews
- Advice for the First-Time Job Interviewee
- Interviews Are a Two-Way Street
- Conclusion

Overview

There's already an abundance of excellent literature and advice out there about how to interview for a job, so why another article on the topic? Well, experience is the best teacher, and we want to share with you what we have learned over the years from our many interviews. We have been both the interviewer and the interviewee, and, based on these experiences, we want to give you some insider tips to help you to prepare for a successful job interview. By success, we mean one that will result in a job offer. Whether you are a veteran of many interviews or a neophyte, this article is for you.

Getting the Interview

Most likely your resume is one of a multitude that has landed in front of someone tasked with sorting through them to find the best possible fit for the job opening. It's vital that you read the job description carefully and revise your resume to best fit the position. We aren't recommending that you make up experience that you don't have, but if you have a particular talent that the company is looking for, you don't want that buried at the bottom of your resume. Move it to the top so it can get noticed.

It's no secret that the old adage, "it's not what you know, it's who you know," is true when it comes to landing an interview. When there is a job opening that's of interest to you, a great way to stand out from the crowd is to tap into your LinkedIn® network and find a connection of yours who can put in a good word for you with someone at the company. The recommendation of a friend of a friend can go a long way to getting you in the door.

The Human Connection

Once you have secured an interview, you now have passed muster; namely, your resume has been screened and you have the experience, education, and qualifications on paper. Now the employer is asking this question, “Do we like this candidate as a person?” Ask yourself, “Do I come across as authentic?”

The job interview is about making a connection as a human being with those who interview you. Your communications skills are at a premium; namely are you articulate, can you think on your feet, are you a good listener, do you pay attention, and so on. It will be obvious to the interviewer if you’ve memorized some canned “best interview answers” that you found online. It will also be obvious if you aren’t being sincere.

In many ways, a job interview is like a first date. Each party is sizing up the other, thinking, “Do I like this person? Is this someone I can see spending time with?” If you aren’t authentic during your interview, even if you do get the job, it might be short-lived. You don’t want to waste your time or the company’s time if you know it isn’t going to be a good fit for you. If you realize this during the interview, you can graciously thank them for their time but tell them that you are going to look elsewhere, as you don’t feel like this is the right job for you.

Conversely, we have seen situations in which there wasn’t necessarily a job opening, but a candidate came along who was such a great fit for the company that she was hired. The bottom line is this: It pays to be yourself.

Remember Common Courtesy

You are a guest in the employer’s office. Stand up when someone comes into the room. Wait for an invitation to be seated. Never touch anything on the interviewer’s desk or attempt to read anything on their desk. If you are offered a beverage, politely decline. Why? Because a beverage is a distraction and you need 100 percent of your concentration on the interview. You also don’t want to risk spilling the beverage on you or the interviewer.

Immediately after any interview, whether it’s in person or on the phone, send a thank you note. Many job candidates do this via email, which is fine, but to really stand out you will also want to send an old-fashioned thank you note via snail mail. If you have multiple interviews with the same company, send a thank you note after each interview. Reference in your note something about the company or the job that you liked from the conversation. Be sure to invest in a variety of quality thank you note cards that look professional.

Cleaning Up Your Social Media

Prior to getting the call for an interview, there’s a very real chance that someone at the company will visit your social media pages. What’s on these pages may determine whether you are asked to come in.

If you are serious about landing a job, one of the first steps you should take is to scrub your social media feed of any content that may be an issue. Use this as a guideline: Would you be proud to see it on the front page of a newspaper? Although that kegger you went to during spring break your junior year may be one of your best memories, you wouldn’t want a future employer to see those compromising photos of you.

The same goes for political statements. We're a country divided, so anything you post will have an approximately equal number of people who agree with you as disagree. You don't want to take the chance that the hiring manager has the same views as you.

Another tricky issue is publicly talking about serious health problems, whether they are your own or those of a family member. Legally you can't be discriminated against during the hiring process based on this information. However, if you are one of a handful of finalists for a position and you post about your spouse's rare disease, the hiring manager may wonder how focused you'll be on the job if you are hired.

Once you clean up your social media feeds, be sure to Google yourself to see what else is out there about you. If there's something unsavory, try to get it removed (for example, if a friend has tagged you, untag the photo and ask your friend to remove it). If you can't get it removed for some reason (say, it's part of public record), know that you will be asked about it so develop a concise, non-defensive answer that both explains the situation and assures them that this is not a reason for ongoing concern.

Finally, use a professional (or as near professional as possible) headshot in your social media profiles. Your LinkedIn profile photo shouldn't be something that you cropped from a group photo. It shouldn't have other people in it. Look at the most successful people on LinkedIn, such as the social media experts, and emulate what they are doing. Your other social media profile photos can be more casual than LinkedIn, but still make sure you choose a photo that wouldn't make your mother cringe.

Employer's Needs, Not Yours

The employer's needs are paramount, not yours. You might need a better paying job or to move on from an undesirable job situation, but that's not your interviewer's problem, so don't mention them during an interview. Never come across as needy or desperate. You should be able to identify the company's needs via the job description, so tailor your answers and any supporting (short) anecdotes about how you can fulfill those needs.

A common interview question is, "Why are you looking for another job at this time?" You may be motivated by a number of personal issues, such as: the commute is too long, the pay is too low, you don't like your boss, etc. Don't include any of that in your answer. Find something about the job opening or company that appeals to you, that you can truly get excited about, and share that with the interviewer instead. Never lie in your responses, but leave out the personal stuff and focus on how you can solve the employer's problems.

Thirteen Tips on Job Interviews

Tip: Dress appropriately for your interview. Always err on the side of more conservative clothing if you aren't absolutely sure about the company dress code. Be sure your clothing is comfortable enough that you won't spend the interview fidgeting or otherwise making adjustments. Wear nice looking shoes and carry a nice briefcase, portfolio, or purse. If you wear something you love that makes you feel good, your confidence will show.

Tip: Bring extra copies of your resume. You may be meeting with more people than you expect to, so having extra copies of the resume enables you to give one to each person.

Tip: Bring a portfolio with samples of your work, if appropriate for the job. For example, graphic designers should bring a variety of work that shows their range, anyone going for a communications job should bring writing samples, etc.

Tip: Prior to the interview, spend some time researching your prospective employer. Study their website. Search for news articles. Read their annual report. If it's a nonprofit, study their IRS 990 (tax return). Prepare two or three thoughtful questions based on your research.

Tip: Use small talk to get the interview rolling and to ensure that you and the interviewer are comfortable. Small talk is innocuous; we consider it a "social lubricant." For example, the interviewer might ask, "How was your trip here." Answer with more than one word, such as, "Great, security lines moved along, flight was not crowded, and on time." If you have to kick off the small talk, here are a few suggestions. "You have beautiful offices, when was this building built?" "My hotel was quiet and comfortable. Thanks for making the reservations." "You have a great website, lots of information, and easy to navigate." After a few minutes of small talk, let the interviewer take charge of the interview.

Tip: How to handle a phone interview. Ensure your privacy during the call so there is no extraneous noise. Make sure your dog is not barking and young children are not around. If possible, schedule the interview when the kids are at school or in day care or take them to their grandparents. Do not multitask in any way, such as typing or checking your phone. Give the interview your complete attention. Do the interview while standing up, because it will make you more alert. Be sure to smile; when you smile you will come across as a friendlier person on the phone.

Tip: How to handle the "tell me about yourself" question. Mention relevant basics like where you were born, your education, job experience, and accomplishments — nothing about marital status, life style, kids or no kids. Write out and practice your answer. Keep it concise and relevant.

Tip: Answer all questions succinctly. If you don't know the answer, say so. Don't wax eloquently with a lot of empty chatter as the interviewer will see through it. For example, a former teacher told a story about being asked about euthanasia in an interview. He gave a long response about youth in Asia before realizing that something had gone terribly wrong with the interview.

Tip: Never demean your current or past bosses, colleagues, or employers. Deflect any questions that would cause you to reveal any proprietary or competitive information about your current employer. If you're pressed to reveal any information that you aren't comfortable providing, politely end the interview and don't look back. If you get the sense that your values will be compromised by an interview, just imagine what you'll be asked to do on the job. That's a huge red flag and you want to run, not walk, away. There will be other opportunities that don't threaten your moral code.

Tip: Stay away from political or religious topics. If the interviewer expresses an opinion contrary to your beliefs, or that you consider bizarre, respond with an innocuous comment such as, "That's an interesting perspective" or "I haven't really thought about that." Ask an unrelated question to change the subject. You are not there to argue or pontificate about your beliefs; you are there to sell yourself as the best candidate for the job.

Tip: If you are asked a question that is improper or even illegal, ask, "How does that question relate to this position?" You do not have to answer any questions about age, marital status,

whether you have children, and life style. This is another red flag, so you might want to give more thought to whether you want to work for this company.

Tip: What if the interview is over lunch? First, think of the lunch invitation as a positive sign. If your interviewer takes you to lunch, you may be a finalist candidate for the job. Most likely you have been through several interviews and have “made the cut.” At lunch, remember to relax but not too much, so think before you speak. Most likely this lunch is part two of the determination, “Do we like this candidate as a person and will this candidate be comfortable interacting with work colleagues?”

We also suggest keeping the fare simple; avoid anything creamy, like a salad dressing, or messy, like spaghetti, which can get on your clothes. If your interviewer offers you an alcoholic beverage — more likely at dinner — we suggest you pass. You need to be alert to maximize the effectiveness of the interview. Meal interviews need your full attention and focus because of the wait staff taking and serving orders, which can disrupt the conversation. This should go without saying, but be polite to the wait staff. Finally, be sure to thank the interviewer.

Tip: How about handling a group job interview? This sort of interview can be intimidating. First, don’t panic, get through the introductions, and if, possible, try to remember each of the interviewers’ names. Chances are they will hand you their business cards when they introduce themselves. A good trick is to leave the cards out in front of you, in the order in which they are seated in front of you. If you get confused during the interview, you can take a quick glance at the cards to refresh your memory. Use people’s names when you respond to them. People like hearing their names and it will also help you remember them.

Second, listen carefully to the questions. If you need time to think, use the politician’s ploy for time by saying, “Great question” or “Let me think about that.” Only don’t use this ploy too often. Usually, in a group interview you will have one “champion”; namely, the person who wants to see you hired. If you run into any problems during the interview, look at your champion and perhaps they will help you out with a friendly question. Be sure to smile and act like you are happy to be there.

Advice for the First Time Job Interviewee

You will most likely be nervous on your first job interview, but you can mitigate those nerves with a little preparation. Ask people within your network to do some interviews with you so you can practice. Your friends might not give you the most honest feedback – and, if they are new to the workforce, they might not have the experience to properly prepare you – so see if their parents can do a mock interview. If you’re fortunate, you’ll be able to find someone in your network who is human resources professional or who has done a lot of interviewing in their career. Be honest during these practice interviews and ask for the most candid feedback possible so you can learn and improve.

When you go to your interview, follow the tips provided here. Think of the interview as a friendly-but-professional conversation with another person and exchange of information. Pay attention and learn. Make notes after you have completed the interview. Write and send the thank you card. And remember: The more you interview, the better you will be at it.

Interviews Are a Two-Way Street

We’ve already alluded to this, but it is worth repeating here: Interviews are as much for you to figure out if the company is a good fit for you as it is for the employer to figure out if you’re the

right candidate for the job. Once you've covered the standard interview questions, have discussed the job opening and your qualifications for it, and have answered the interviewer's questions, you will be given an opportunity to ask questions of the interviewer. This is a great time to ask questions about the company culture. Try to engage the interviewer in discussing what they like most about working there; ask follow up questions that will tease out details about the culture.

Think to yourself: If I'm offered this job, will I be happy here? Is this a good fit for me? Will this company support me in my professional development and help me reach my goals? If you have any doubts, ask the interviewer for more information.

Many full-time employees spend more time with their coworkers than they do with their families, so you want to make absolutely sure that the fit is right for you.

Conclusion

Job interviews are harrowing at any point in your career. When you're first starting out, chances are you had validation in one form or another by your friends and family and, perhaps, your good grades in school. It's a different experience to sit in front of a complete stranger who holds your future in their hands. They aren't predisposed to like you, so it's up to you to win them over. Be genuine, be prepared, and be engaging, and you will do just that.

If you're changing jobs mid-career, the job interview can be fraught with questions you'd rather not answer. Use the tips in this article to focus on the open position and how well your experience can help the employer.

We can't stress this one point enough: Always be yourself. It's clear to an interviewer when a candidate isn't being genuine and that comes off as a form of lying. Even if you somehow were able to land the job, it probably won't last long because, sooner or later, your true self will emerge. You will be happier in your job and it will be a much more rewarding experience if you are able to connect with your interviewers, let them see your true self, and then both parties can decide if this job is a good fit for you, and vice versa.

We invite you to read our second paper on working and jobs, "What You Don't Learn in School about Job Hunting" (CM-10). This paper covers these topics:

- Beyond the Interview
- Is It Always About the Money?
- Negotiating the Job Offer
- What Are the Risks in Switching Jobs?
- Fear of Rejection
- Networking Is Indispensable
- LinkedIn® as a Job Search Platform
- How About Internships?
- The Best Career Advice We've Ever Received
- What Is Important in Work?

McHugh Career Management Advice For information call Jack McHugh. See contact information below.

Also of Interest at http://johnbmchugh.com/free_pub_guides.htm

- A-23, *Earning a CAE: One Candidate's Experience, An Interview with Liz Novak, MBA, CAE*, 2018, 3 pages
- PM-12, *Job Searching in Association Publishing vs. Commercial Publishing: Key Differences and Interviewing Tips*, 2015, 4 pages
- PM-54, *For Job Seekers: Eight Interview Tips and Four Questions to Ask*, 2014, 1 page
- PM-72, *Get Set for Success: Twelve Thoughts When Starting a New Job*, 2018, 3 pages
- PM-74, *The Many Benefits of Mentorship*, Co-author Liz Novak, 2020, 4 pages
- PM-75, *Beyond the Basics: Many Facets of Mentorship*, Co-author Liz Novak, 2020, 4 pages
- PM-78, *How to Deal with a Toxic Boss*, 2020, 5 pages

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