

Effective Interviewing: Preparation, Presentation and Follow Up Plus Ideas for Interviewers and Headhunters

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Many applicants for work think their main goal in an interview is to sell themselves, to convince someone to hire them. But what happens if their match with the work, group, situation, or organization does not benefit anyone?

In other words, while being hired can be a practical or ego-satisfying outcome, it may not be the best one for the applicant or employer, especially in the longer run. In fact, the chances for an effective work experience, let alone satisfaction and success, could be weakened. For example, consider time you may lose when a detour is taken from what is closer to what you truly want.

Use everyone's time well and avoid detours. Before seeking or scheduling an interview, ask yourself: "Would I want to:

- do this work, as I understand it now, for the foreseeable future,
- in this situation,
- with these people,
- for such pay, opportunities for advancement, and benefits?"

If you have significant reservations, don't waste your own or the interviewer's time – unless there are advantages beyond just practicing. They may include mutually-useful networking, strong need for an immediate paycheck, or possibility to switch to work that's a better match within the organization at a later time.

Clarify your goals and prepare well. Assuming the work and situation match relatively well with your interests and needs, what should your goals be for an interview? One suggestion is to be *apparent*, to be seen accurately and positively. Integrate information and self-presentation aspects that let the interviewer(s) know:

- what you can specifically do for them, including how your background, interests, focus, and experience fit their needs
- how your strengths can support their efforts and goals
- how your longer-term professional goals would mesh and contribute
- your responses are nimble as well as trustworthy
- you have a sense of humor and confidence as well as personality that fit well with their larger culture and the area where you might work

To prepare for an interview, rehearse with others and get feedback or record yourself. Video is ideal because it helps you observe your body language as well. Consider working with a professional, colleague, or friend to practice answering challenging as well as prosaic questions. Or practice on your own. In any case, note what's effective and specify a few ways you can do better. Attend to the quality, quantity, and concreteness of the information you provide and how you organize it. Notice also your tone of voice, presence and clarity. Be alert for too many vocalized pauses such as *um* and *you know*. When needed, use silence as in "Your question is important; let me consider it for a few seconds."

Use these examples of questions for practice. Skim and adapt any related to your situation. Add your own ideas. Then choose about five to eight that you'd find challenging and stimulating, as well as relevant, to answer out loud and ideally record for review and insights into yourself.

1. Describe specifically what you have done to take an idea to fruition.
2. How do you respond when you're asked to do something for which you feel unprepared? Overqualified?
3. Tell me how you handled a situation in which you worked under a great deal of pressure.
4. What have you done when you had to work with a difficult boss, colleague, subordinate, or client?
5. Persuade me of something you believe in or something that's important to you.
6. How have you created new opportunities for yourself, either at work or in another setting?
7. How would you describe the way you work in a team? Your leadership style?
8. What do you find difficult to do and why?
9. During the last two years, how have you improved your significant skills or abilities and why?
10. As the new person in a work situation, how would you earn the respect of subordinates, colleagues, supervisors, and clients in the first month? After six months? After a year?
11. What is unique about yourself?
12. Revisiting a significant professional action that you regret, what would you do differently now?
13. Describe how you have influenced, inspired, or led others: the circumstances, people, and outcome.
14. Why do you think you would be a good match with this particular work? This situation? This organization?
15. How do you define success and failure, professionally.
16. In specific terms, what does "working too hard" mean to you?
17. If you could have (or do) anything, what would it be?
18. Do you have heroes? If not, how come? If so, name one or two and describe why you have chosen them.
19. What is your proudest accomplishment? What is a comparable aim for the future?
20. What specifically do you imagine your main colleagues and bosses at your last job think of you and why? Mention examples from other work as well.
21. How would you describe the best interview process you've had so far?
22. What fictional character, if any, would you choose to be? How come?
23. Give an example of how you would go about organizing a simple, typical, or complex project?
24. Tell me your story. (This is challenging because of what you choose and how you tell it.)
25. Would you be able to work the hours and days required for this situation? How would you accommodate to a period of several weeks (or months) of longer hours?
26. Walk me through a typical day in your current or recent work?
27. How would this work fit your longer-term professional goals?
28. Describe a day in your life you'd want about five years from now related to themes such as family, location, colleagues, education or training. What main tangible or intangible accomplishments would you have obtained?
29. How do you learn about other people and what motivates them?
30. What do you enjoy doing and why?
31. Add a few of your own questions related to your specific situation that you'd find challenging and worthwhile to explore.

Many of these questions are examples of behavioral interviewing. While long-known, this process is increasingly used for assessing potential employees, colleagues, managers and leaders. The applicant's descriptions of behaviors and experiences as well as organization of responses give a sense of his or her appropriateness for the work and culture as well as potential for success. So does the communication itself, nonverbal and verbal. Answers to hypothetical questions are analyzed for their fit with preferred skills and behaviors.

One way to organize your responses is to briefly describe the situation, action you would take, and outcomes sought if the question relates to something you would do. Or adapt these considerations for describing something you have done. For deeper understanding and another take on behavioral interviewing, explore it using Google and at http://www.udel.edu/CSC/pdf/behav_interview.pdf.

Before the interview. In addition to being clear about what you want to accomplish in the interview and rehearsing your responses, here are additional steps:

- Do research on the work situation and organization in advance with contacts and published materials as well as on the Internet.
- Find out what you can about the interviewer, interview process, time allotted, and other candidates, without being intrusive.
- Determine and prepare in advance what you want to wear. Find a balance among reflecting your authentic style, feeling comfortable, and looking appropriate for the situation.
- Confirm a few days earlier the timing and location of the interview, as well as directions, if you need them.

During the interview, as appropriate:

- Give specific examples of your skills, experience, goals and even passions.
- Be prepared to tell several short stories of no more than two to three minutes each to emphasize your core messages and provide examples from your past. Make them as powerful, relevant, and interesting as possible. Leave the interviewer(s) wanting more.
- Keep responses relatively short – in general, to about two to three minutes.
- Stop once and a while to make sure you understand what the interviewer seeks, either by paraphrasing what was said or asking if you've provided the information wanted.
- Be alert to and appropriately responsive to nonverbal cues from the interviewer such as engagement or boredom. Don't let the latter intimidate you.
- Connect and enhance what you say with your body language, eye contact, and tone of voice.
- Be as explicit as possible about what *you* seek in the work itself, your colleagues, and other aspects, as the situation warrants and permits.
- Finesse questions about required salary and benefits until later in the process, if possible.
- Ask toward the end, if an opportunity has not been already offered, a few questions related to what you need to know to make a decision about the work and organization. Perhaps say, "May I ask a few questions?" Typically they'd start with "what" and "how." The information you seek at this point probably won't be available through your own investigations. It should be substantive and professional. (See questions below.)
- When you mention your appreciation for the interview opportunity, including specific aspects, wait a few beats to see what the silence elicits from the interviewer about how the interview went. There may be information in the response or lack of it.
- Find out about the timing for feedback to applicants and/or time frame the employer has for filling the job.

Questions to choose, adapt to the situation, and **ask the interviewer** as appropriate:

- What two or three aspects of your work appeal to you most?
- What qualities in your close colleagues are the most important?
- How would you describe the leadership here?
- What opportunities have you had to strengthen your skills and abilities?
- How would you describe the culture here?
- How is success defined in the organization?
- What one aspect of the main work or process in this organization would you change, if you could?
- How are errors or mistakes handled?
- What are the most important benefits, tangible and intangible, you receive?

Note: Since you are interviewing them as well, also stay alert to:

- how they treat you
- their level of professionalism
- their expressed and implicit values and assumptions
- effectiveness of the hiring process
- clarity and timeliness of communication of the interviewer and others
- vibes they give off
- your comfort level, feelings, and intuitions in the situation
- the appeal of the people you meet
- match between your interests and the work as well as potential opportunities

After the interview, there is more to do in this process than possibly feeling relieved, neutral or upbeat.

- While your memory for details remains sharp, assess your performance and impressions of the process and people involved. Identify what gives you pride and a few things you'd do better in the future. Finally, imagine how you'd feel working there regularly in whatever rhythms seem to fit you and the situation. Jot down key ideas and impressions for future reference and comparison.
- Immediately afterwards, send a cogent, authentic thank you that specifies the positive aspects of the experience. Briefly add anything that's important to help the interviewer better interpret your responses, including something crucial that you may have omitted. As subtly as possible, integrate your main strengths related to the work. Emphasize why you're interested. When relevant, add a short, separate "think piece" with diplomatic, concrete suggestions about how the organization or area where you'd work could be strengthened. Accentuate the positive as much as possible.

If it fits the culture, send an e-mail. Or use a typed or handwritten letter or note (if your writing is legible) when you think it will help distinguish you and suit the recipient. Then use classy, simple paper. Let what you write reflect your own style while tailoring it to the situation. Of course, if you have serious reservations or concerns about the work, use your thank you to explain them briefly if you didn't already during the interview. Sometimes that information can affect what they offer and their interest in you, in fact.

- If you haven't heard anything a few weeks later than the feedback timing you've determined at the interview and remain interested, consider calling the lowest level person or headhunter involved to get a sense of what's unfolding. Inquiring at an appropriate level could avoid your pestering people you don't want to alienate. Continue to use your discretion and charm.

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