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The Successful Interview

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Interviews can be very nerve-racking, but when you start viewing an interview as a conversation between two parties who want the same thing and not an examination, half the battle is already won. The person interviewing you would like you to be the person who fills the empty position on their team just as much as you would like to get the job.

Remember, you would not have been offered an interview if the company did not like your CV and covering letter. They already think you would be a suitable. Now it is not only about whether the company wants you, but also about whether you want to work there. The interviewer needs to find out whether you can do the job, whether you will fit in with the team, and whether you will be a good long term investment. You, on the other hand, will have to decide whether you want the job and whether you like the organisation and the package they are offering.



Before the interview:

- Research the company as part of your preparation. Google them or look at their website.
- Read up on their background, recent news and history. Check whether they have a mission statement. See who their competitors are. Find out how many employees they have.
- Who are the managers and who will be interviewing you?
- Look at the job advertisement again and match your skill-set to their requirements.
- Look at your CV and make sure you can answer any questions about your experience or lack of experience. Be ready to explain CV or experience gaps.
- Read through the covering letter you sent again, to make sure that you know why you said you would be a suitable candidate for the job. The interviewer is bound to ask you a question about what you said in your cover letter.
- Practice for your interview. Have a family member or friend ask you possible questions.
- Do not memorize your answers word for word, since you do not want to panic and forget what you wanted to say, but have some key points in mind.
Let your references know when you have a job interview, so that they are prepared.
- Prepare your documentation. Take a few extra copies of your CV. Take a pen and paper to your interview. Take a neatly printed list of referees. It looks great if you can immediately produce them on request. Also take project summaries, a portfolio of work, or any other documentation you commonly need in your field, and your identification document. Rather be over-prepared than under-prepared.
- Make sure you have directions to the interview. It is a good idea to visit the interview location beforehand, to make sure you know where it is so that you won't be late on the day.



On the day of the interview:

- Be punctual. In fact, be early, at least 15 minutes early. This gives you enough time to find the correct place and quickly visit the restroom to check your appearance. Remember that you start creating an impression from the moment you walk through the door.
- When you arrive, be friendly and greet people in the office.
- While you wait, calmly look around the office and see what you can learn. Do not slouch or look bored. If the opportunity presents itself speak to the receptionist or others in the office. It is a good way to find out more about the company and to make a good impression on potential future co-workers.
- Resist the temptation to play with your cell phone while you wait for your interviewer to arrive. It is a good idea to turn your phone off before you ever set foot in the building. You never know whether the interviewers will be able to see you immediately, which means there may be no time for you to do so once you reach your destination.
- Dress appropriately. According to howstuffworks.com hiring managers found that the mistake job candidates make most often is dressing inappropriately for interviews. Men should wear a business suit and women a pantsuit or conservative skirt or dress, when applying for an office job. If you are applying for a more casual position then it is not necessary to be as formal. Dress neatly, while still feeling comfortable and maintaining your brand or style. It is wise to wear calming, but smart colours such as blue and grey. Sloppy sandals, pants that drag in the dust and crumpled or dirty clothing never make a good first impression. Avoid wearing perfume as it can cause allergies.
- It is often said that an interviewer makes up their mind within the first 30 seconds of an interview. While this is not necessarily true, your aim should be to make a positive impression on the interviewer from the start. Smile and introduce yourself clearly when you greet your interviewer. Use your interviewer's last name with a title once they introduce themselves. Shake hands with a confident grip. Be respectful and do not sit down until you are invited to do so. Body language is very important. Do not slouch or look too relaxed, instead sit up straight and look interested and observant. Do not fold your arms, it makes you look defensive, cover your mouth, your interviewer may not hear what you have to say, or look away often.



- Don't make fun of the situation. While humour can make you feel relaxed it may be seen as a defensive tactic or it may make you seem unprofessional. Speak confidently and clearly – don't talk too fast or too much. If you are a nervous chatterer, practise speaking more slowly and only conveying important information. You can do this by pausing before you speak, to gather your thoughts, and by asking the interviewer a few questions too and listening closely to their answers.

- There is nothing as disheartening as a negative person. Complainers are rarely liked. This also counts for interviews. Never complain about your previous boss or company. While your complaints about the company, your boss or other co-workers may be valid, it is best to keep them to yourself, since you do not want to make label yourself as the sort of person who complains at work or points fingers at others. Never discuss personal problems. Never burn bridges, the person interviewing you may just be best friends with your previous boss.

- Be enthusiastic and do not play your talents down. Nobody likes arrogance, but self-depreciation will also not get you very far. It is good to be humble, but never hide your talents or put yourself down, not even in a humorous way. Do not just talk big though, show people what you are really good at, so that your brand and product can excel. Who would you give a chance to? The person that says, “I can probably manage that” or the one that confidently proclaims, “I can definitely have that done for you tomorrow” and then follows through?



Know the classic interview questions

You should be able to ace the obvious questions. There are good reasons that the same questions appear in most interviews, they best judge whether you are the right person for the position. It is relatively easy to prepare for these obvious questions, but keep in mind that your answers should not sound practised or rehearsed. Also, don't just give the standard answers or what you think they want to hear, be genuine in your answers.

o Tell me about yourself or where are you in your life now?

Give a quick recap of your last few years to this question, but keep it short and relevant.

Talk about the experiences that make you ideal for the job.

o What are your strengths and weaknesses?

Once again focus on skills that are relevant to the position. Be ready to talk about at least three strengths. Good examples are to explain how you work well with others, how you are good at multi-tasking, or how you always pay attention to detail. You also need to have at least one weakness to discuss. Remember to pick something that is an actual weakness, so that it shows that you are humble and self-aware, but not something that will harm your chances at getting the job. If you try and turn a positive trait into a weakness the interviewer will think you are arrogant or hiding something. Mention a minor flaw and always explain how you are working to correct it. For example, "My presentation skills are not my greatest strength, but I am taking a short course in the evening and am working on improving them."

o Why do you want to work here?

Here you can show off that you know something about the company and the industry, as well as the characteristics that make you ideal for the job. You can, for example, focus on the company's system of values and why you admire it. Never mention money when asked why you have applied for a job.



o Where do you see yourself in five years from now?

This question is designed to measure your level of maturity, and your ambition and drive. Do you have a long term plan and does it fit into the plans the company has for you. Here it is best to focus on where you might want to be in five years working in a similar environment. Do not tell your employer about an ideal job that is completely unrelated or make the position you are interviewing for sound like a stepping stone.

o How do you handle change?

Do not just say that you handle it well. Think of a specific situation where you needed to deal with change and how you were able to adapt and grow / become stronger as a result.

o What motivates you or makes you work hard?

You can talk about what motivates you as a person, but your focus should be on what motivates you at work and about the position you are applying for. Speak about the satisfaction you derive from reaching goals, from being part of a successful team and from adding value to an organisation. Once again do not mention money as a motivator.

o Explain a difficult / stressful situation you faced in your last job and how you dealt with it.

Stay positive and focus on a solution that you provided to a tricky situation, without putting the company or your boss in a bad light. If there were very few difficult situations focus on that. Make it obvious that you do your work well and get along with others. If you are asked specifically about conflict between co-workers once again focus on solutions or on the fact that there was very little conflict. When answering questions about your previous experiences you can use the CAR system. First mention the circumstances or situation, then explain the action you took, and finally focus on the positive result.

Tip: Always be ready to explain employment gaps, because the interviewer is sure to ask about them. Explain that you were pursuing volunteer work, taking time off to work on a personal project or attending to family obligations.



Ask questions of your own

Asking the right questions is as important as giving excellent answers. Questions show that you are dynamic and interested in the position. It also demonstrates that you have invested some time in learning more about the job and the company, and that you understand what is important to them.

Ask questions like:

- o What are the challenges of the job?
- o Which projects will I work on?
- o Who are the other members of my department and what is the department's goal?
- o Is it possible to advance and what skills do I need to do so?
- o Do you provide and training or professional development opportunities?
- o In which ways do you measure performance and how often is it reviewed?

The interviewer wants to see that you will be committed to their company. If you want to work and evolve with the company then you are a valuable investment in terms of time and training. If you are asked how long you see yourself staying with the company, say that you are looking for stability, and to work for a company that you can grow with and advance in.

Avoid questions about salary, holiday, tea breaks, lunch breaks and benefits or so-called duvet or personal days. Avoid asking about internet and Facebook policies. Do not give the wrong impression by making it seem that you are more interested in time off than in doing your job. All the answers to the important questions about salary and benefits will be discussed in the second interview or when you are offered the job.

Interviewers may often mention money though, so be prepared to deal with those sorts of questions. If the interviewer asks what salary you expect should you be offered the position, mention that you are looking for work that suits you and a position where you will have the chance to advance.

- o Naming a figure that is too high could mean that the company thinks it could not afford you.
- o Naming a price that is too low limits your options when negotiating a salary after the job is offered.



Do some research about what a competitive salary should be, so that if the interviewer insists you give a figure you can mention a salary in the higher range of what you expect the job will pay. Explain that you are willing to negotiate a figure when you know more about the duties and benefits.

Also, don't aim too low. Work out what the minimum salary is that you need to pay your bills and maintain your standard of living. Add a little bit to that and compare it to what the higher scale of a competitive salary is. A figure in between your lowest figure and the higher scale should give you a good indication of where the middle ground is.

After the interview

Take the interviewer's business card or name and contact information before you leave. Ask what the next step in the hiring process will be. When will you hear from them? Is there any other important information or documentation that they may need from you?

Send the interviewer an email thanking them for the interview and simply state that you look forward to hearing from them again. If you do not hear back within the time that you expect to, remember that the process can take longer than expected for many reasons. Be careful not to pester the company.

Be truthful if you do not know the answer to a question. Do not claim to have experience that you do not have. If the interviewer asks follow-up questions you may be found out and dishonesty in an interview is sure to blow your chances. If you lack certain skills, be honest, but mention that you are willing to learn and that you are a quick study.



The second interview

Candidates often forget that there may be a second or follow up interview. If the company invites you back for a second interview this is definitely a good sign. However, don't be overly confident and assume that you are going to get the job offer. The market is competitive and many employers conduct second interviews. Always prepare carefully for every interview to make sure you have the best chances of turning your interview into a job.

At the second interview you will usually meet people that are higher up in the company, such as managers, or staff in departments that are related to the advertised position. These people will likely ask you new questions to establish whether they think you are the perfect candidate for the position. You will often be asked more specific questions about the job and how your skills and abilities will be suited to the job and to the company. When answering similar questions as to the first interview, be consistent. It is important that what you say at the second interview matches what you said at the first – even if you are speaking to completely different people.

Since you do not want to repeat what you asked in the first interview, be prepared and have different interview questions ready to ask during your second interview. Here are examples of questions you can ask at a second interview:

- o What are the top three qualities you are looking for in the person you want to hire?
- o What challenges may someone face in this job in the first year?
- o What do you like most about working for the company?
- o Can I provide you with any additional references?
- o What is the next step in the hiring process?
- o If I were to be offered the job, when would you like me to start?

Salary and benefits can also be discussed at the second interview. Use the second interview to negotiate or address any concerns you may have about the salary and hours. Before you go to the second interview, have a clear idea in your mind of what you expect and what you are not able to compromise on and what you are able to compromise on. For example, you might have a very clear idea of the hours you are willing to work, but you are willing to compromise on that if the salary and benefits are great. On the opposite end, you might be willing to work for less money because the opportunity for growth and development is great in the company.



Learn to trust your instincts and keep an eye on the reactions of the people interviewing you. This will help you know when it is safe to bring up more sensitive topics. What did the job ad say? Is salary open to negotiation depending on experience? Is the role you are applying for flexible?

At the second interview remember that just as the people who are interviewing you are making up their minds about whether they want to work with you and have you in their company, so you must also decide if you want to work with them and in that company. If the people interviewing you are being vague and contradicting themselves, ask for clarification.

When you don't get the job offer

These days the majority of companies no longer send rejection letters. There are various reasons for this, such as the sheer volume of applications that they receive and also because they may want to keep their options open. If another candidate does not work out then the company can go to the next candidate on the list. Companies also fear legal action and some claim it's safer not to reject applicants in writing.

Rejection letters are, however, still being sent by some companies. If you do get a rejection letter it will look something like this:

The ABC Company interview team wants to thank you for taking the time to participate in our hiring process. This letter is to let you know that we have selected another candidate.

Again, thank you for taking the time to come to The ABC Company to meet our interview team. We enjoyed meeting you and our discussions indicated that you have much to offer your next employer.

We wish you both personal and professional success in your job search and in the future. We appreciate your interest in our organization.



If you do get a letter of rejection it is very good form to reply with a thank you note. It is always good to be gracious and Julie Bauke, president of Congruity Career Consulting, admits that she instantly wonders whether she made the right decision when she receives a thank you note on a rejection letter. Never reply with an angry or pleading message. It is always best to end the relationship in a friendly, professional way as you never know what might happen in the future.

When you get the job offer

It can happen that you get offered a job on the spot at a second interview. Whether it happens at the interview or later, you do not have to answer immediately. It makes sense to think about it first, unless you are completely sure that you want the job. Everything may seem perfect while you are there, but, if you think about the offer for a while you may realise the job is not for you. It is very bad form to accept a job and then change your mind soon after, so ask for some time to think it over and ask when they need a decision by.

Be enthusiastic about the offer. If the employer thinks you do not care about the job or that you are waiting for a better offer, they may be less likely to want you. Before you think about it, make sure you know all the details about the job such as job description, travel, location, salary and the hours, and when they would like you to start.

This is your final opportunity to negotiate, if you feel you need to. But, be careful, you don't want to seem greedy or ungrateful. If you are really concerned about the salary use words that you feel comfortable with. A good way would be to say, "This is a wonderful opportunity and I'm interested in the position. I was, however, expecting the salary to be higher given the responsibilities." After asking your question wait for them to answer. You should have good reasons to ask for an increase in salary, or to discuss flexibility.

If you don't get what you want be prepared to either accept the offer or to walk away. If you know your value and you know what you realistically have to offer, and the deal doesn't meet your expectations, you should know when to turn the offer down.

If you decide to accept the position and you are employed elsewhere at the time, never hand in your notice on a verbal offer. Always wait until after negotiations when you have the final offer in writing.



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