

## The key to successful interviews

We all know the main aim of the job interview. Your potential employer has worked through the entire laborious process and if you're still in the game, you'd have to assume that you now have a reasonable chance of landing the job. The interview is without doubt the most stressful point of the job search process for the job seeker and also the one that counts most.

Your potential employer has received a pile of applications and resumes. These have been weeded through. Now it's time to put faces to the paperwork and ask probing, insightful questions to determine the perfect candidate for the prized position.

But, as we also all know, what we aim for isn't what always happens. It's the person who gives the best interview who wins — whether they're the best one for the job or not.

One important point to remember is that we are only human. And so too are our interviewers. Some of us perform badly in interviews. And sometimes our interviewers perform badly, too. There are times we go in poorly prepared. And occasionally, they do too. Sometimes we ask foolish questions. And sometimes they ask questions they have no right to ask.

Whatever happens, don't be disheartened. See every interview as a learning experience. If you are not successful, ring and ask for feedback. Determine what you did well and where you need to improve.

### Preparation

See the interview as a competition — one in which there is rarely a prize for coming second. So you have to win. And before you can win any competition, you need to prepare for it.

Identify four or five of your most valuable strengths, thinking along the lines of personal qualities. These could include the ability to stay calm while other around you are panicking; commitment; willingness to work long hours; lateral thinking; team leader, team player, sense of humour. Prepare an example of how you have demonstrated each of these strengths and make sure you get an opportunity to mention them somewhere during the interview.

At the same time confront some of your weaknesses. While you don't need to share these with your interviewer/s, you don't necessarily want to land yourself a job you will hate.

## **Demonstrate a "good fit"**

List the requirements of the job point by point, and then match your experience to the appropriate requirements. Learn them. But make sure that, when the opportunity arises, they come out naturally and spontaneously — don't regurgitate them in an obviously rehearsed way.

If you're truly lucky, a less than total match will be overlooked. But if a gap is mentioned, try to stress your enthusiasm to learn. If they're right onto you and probe deeply, accept that you need experience in that area. Counter any negative impact by pointing out a previous situation where you were 'thrown in at the deep end' and you demonstrated a rapid learning curve.

## **Know the organisation**

If you can't demonstrate some interest in how the company makes their money, they're unlikely to offer you any of it. The more you can find out about the following, the better:

- Company size, form, locations and divisions
- Products and services, target market
- Culture and reputation
- Financial performance and history, including turnover, profitability and exports
- Major competitors.

If it is a small company that is unlisted on the stock exchange, you could be limited to word-of-mouth. But if it is a listed company you can research in libraries, trade references and newspapers.

## **Review your resume**

Read your resume carefully to remind yourself of your past achievements and identify areas to highlight at the interview. You got to the interview stage because the interviewer saw something in the CV that appealed. Identify what it is.

Practise answering likely questions on your past history that show the following.

- A logical progression from one position to the next.
- Positive reasons for moving rather than negative ones or fickle rationales.
- How your experience has been built by each successive employer and is now available to the new company.

## **Plan the journey**

- Plan your route carefully.
- Allow for delays and traffic jams.
- Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes before the interview so that you're relaxed.
- Arrive at the interview venue no more than five minutes early. Use the time to soak up the atmosphere of the company and mentally go over what you want to say.

## **Dress appropriately**

- Dress comfortably but presentably. If in doubt, err on the side of conservatism, avoiding loud ties, bright socks or esoteric clothing.
- Make sure your shoes are clean and avoid overpowering aftershave/perfume.
- Dress in dark blue, black. Darker outfits give an image of control, while lighter ones tend to show a need for attention.
- Make sure that you are still well presented if you take off your jacket.

*Adapted from Successful Interview Practice, a Newtex publication.*

## **At the interview**

You're prepared, on time, perfectly groomed for the role and ready to convince them that you're the person they need. Along with the other applicants, you will have been allocated a certain amount of time in which to convince the interviewer or panel of interviewers.

It's also worthwhile pointing out that the interviewers too are in the spotlight to an extent. Even the most thorough pre-application research cannot tell you certain things about the company or the job. So the recruiter/employer is selling the company and position to you as well.

## **Make a good first impression**

The first impression is always the strongest and most lasting. Be friendly, but not over-friendly. Leave the smart, witty rejoinders for another time. Create a positive first impression by offering a firm, non-bone crunching, hand shake and make direct eye contact.

## Deal with nerves

Being nervous is normal and most experienced interviewers understand this. And it rarely harms your chances if you acknowledge your nervousness.

However, excessive nervousness can work against you — especially if you continually apologise for it. It makes other applicants, who are more relaxed and confident, seem more attractive.

Also many people tend to be overly talkative when nervous. If you fall into this category, try not to go off on tangents. Stick to the question being asked and answer it concisely. You will control your nervousness more effectively if you have taken the time to practise answering questions before the interview.

## Ask questions

Interviews aren't supposed to be grilling sessions. The intention behind a good interview is to find out more about you, while you find out more about them. In other words, to get a good match between the person and the job.

Interviews should be a two-way street. Probing, intelligent questions can help the employer to evaluate your professional and personal needs. Your chance of being successful increases when the employer believes that the position will be mutually beneficial.

Consider bringing a notepad and pen to take notes of answers to your questions and pertinent facts and figures. It shows you have come prepared and are taking the opportunity seriously.

## Answer honestly and completely

Answer questions honestly. Avoid the temptation to overly embellish your experience, qualifications and abilities. If you're questioned deeply about a fact that you've creatively enhanced, your credibility could disappear.

On the other hand, try to avoid giving blunt "yes" or "no" answers. They reveal nothing. Certainly, a "closed" question ("Do you perform well under pressure?"), generally indicates an unskilled interviewer. You could simply answer "yes" but this doesn't help you. If you get a closed question, give a brief but comprehensive response. Use it as an opportunity to sell yourself.

"Yes, it gets the adrenalin going and I get a real sense of achievement. But I also like to plan and manage my time so as to avoid crises when possible."

As a general rule of thumb, try not to speak longer than two minutes at a time and never dominate the conversation. The recruiter must feel in control. Furthermore, in *What Colour is your Parachute*, Richard Bolles points out that studies have shown that people who mix listening and speaking activities roughly 50/50 have a greater chance of getting hired.

## **Don't complain**

Avoid making negative judgements and criticisms of past employers and companies — even if encouraged — unless you want interviewers to make the following judgements:

- You're a "know-all";
- You're a "buck-passer" who refuses to accept responsibility for your own performance;
- You'd criticise this organisation and its members when applying for a future job.

## **Ask for the job**

Don't be afraid to strongly communicate your desire for the job. Acting cool won't get you anywhere. An interested candidate always gets the offer over the non-interested candidate. Here is an example of how you might phrase it.

"I'm very interested in what you're doing here and the products you're developing. The working environment appears pleasant and the people I've met seem knowledgeable. It's a very interesting opportunity and I believe with my background I could make a significant contribution."

## **Dealing with trick questions**

Here are the answers that just might help get you through the questions you hoped they'd forget to ask — the question where the honest answer is completely out of the question.

### **"Why were you out of work for so long?"**

You must have a sound and feasible explanation for this one. Don't attempt to gloss over this question, as it's an issue that most prospective employers take seriously.

Martin Yate, author of *Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook*, suggests you emphasise that you were seriously considering your next move, rather than just looking for another pay cheque. You enjoy your work and are determined that the next job you take will be one where you can settle down and make a solid long-term contribution.

## "Reasons for leaving?"

Hopefully you'll have an acceptable reason for leaving every job you've held. If not, Martin Yate suggests you choose one of the reasons from the following acronym, CLAMPS.

Challenge: You weren't able to grow professionally in that position.

Location: The commute was unreasonably long.

Advancement: There was nowhere for you to go. You had the talent, but there were too many people ahead of you.

Money: You were underpaid for your skills and contribution.

Pride or prestige: You wanted to be with a better company.

Security: The Company was not stable.

Yate gives this example: "My last company was a family-owned affair. I had gone as far as I was able. It just seemed time for me to join a more prestigious company and accept greater challenges."

### **"Your application shows you have been with one company a long time without any appreciable increase in rank. Tell me about this."**

This is one case where saying the wrong thing can get you in just as much trouble as failing to say the right thing.

The more time either of you spends on this query, the more time the interviewer has to concentrate on negative aspects of your application. Make your answer short and sweet. Then move on.

Martin Yate in his book, *Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook*, 1996 (Adams Media Corporation) suggests this response:

"My current employer is a stable company with a good working environment, but there's minimal growth in my area. In fact, there hasn't been any promotion in my area since (whenever). Your question is the reason I am meeting here with you. I have the skills and ability to take on more responsibility and I'm looking for a place to do that."

Prepare your response and practise it, out loud, several times before the interview. It may take a few tries to convince yourself that you're being honest and spontaneous.

## "Why do you want to work here?"

You can't answer this one unless you've done your homework. **Research the company**. Reply with the company's attributes as you see them. Cap your answer with reference to its reputation for providing a stable and happy work environment — an atmosphere that will encourage your best work. Martin Yate again:

"I'm not looking for just another pay cheque. I enjoy my work and am proud of my profession. Your company produces a superior product/provides a superior service. I share the values that make this possible, which should enable me to fit in and complement the team."

### **"What did you like/dislike about your last job?"**

Should you get hit with this one, the interviewer is trying to find out the incompatibilities between you and the prospective job. Now, most interviews start with a preamble about the company. Pay attention. They are giving you the information that will help you answer this particular question. Use statements the interviewer makes about the job or the organisation to your advantage.

The solution is to focus on what you like and gloss over what you dislike. It won't hurt to say that you liked everything about your last job; it taught you the importance of certain key aspects about business, achievement, or professional profile. Never criticise. Criticising a prior employer is a warning flag that you could be a problem - and no-one intentionally hires trouble.

### **"What would you like to be doing five years from now?"**

The best answer to this question will include your desire to be regarded as a professional and a team player. As far as promotion, that depends on finding a manager with whom you can grow. Of course, you will ask what opportunities exist within the company. Martin Yate suggests you can pick up on these and become specific:

"From my research and what you have told me about the growth here, it seems operations are where the heavy emphasis is going to be. It seems that's where you need the effort and where I could contribute toward the company's goals."

Or

"I have always felt that first-hand knowledge and experience open up opportunities that one might never have considered. So while, at this point in time, I plan to be a part of (e.g. operations), it is reasonable to expect that other exciting opportunities will crop up in the meantime."

### **"What are your biggest accomplishments?"**

Yate suggests you might begin your reply with:

"Although I feel my biggest achievements are still ahead of me, I am proud of my involvement with {whatever}. I made my contribution as part of that team and learned a lot in the process. We did it with hard work, concentration, and an eye for the bottom line."

### **"Why should I hire you?"**

Make the answer short and to the point. Highlight areas from your background that relate to current needs and problems. Recap the interviewer's description of the job and match it point-by-point with your skills. Finish your answer with:

"I have the qualifications you need [itemise them].

I'm a team player. I take direction and I have the desire to be a thorough success."

## **"Tell me about yourself."**

This is not an invitation to ramble. If the context isn't clear, you need to know more about the question before giving an answer. In such a situation, you could ask, "Is there a particular aspect of my background that would be most relevant to you?" This will enable the interviewer to help you find the appropriate focus and avoid irrelevancies.

Whichever direction your answer may take, be sure that it has some relevance to your professional endeavours. You should demonstrate, or refer to, one or more of your key behavioural profiles in action — perhaps honesty, integrity, determination or being a team player. If you choose "team player" (maybe you're the star player at first base on a community team), you can tell a story about yourself outside of work that also speaks volumes about you at work. Your answer must make the connection between the two, such as:

"I put my heart into everything I do, whether it be sports or work. I find that getting along with team-mates, or professional peers, makes life more enjoyable and productive."

This is rarely a question that you can answer instantly. Think about how you would answer it in advance, together with those aspects of your personality and/or background that you'd like to promote or feature in your interview.

## **"What is the most difficult situation you have faced?"**

This question looks for information on two fronts:

- How do you define difficult?
- What was your handling of the situation?

You should have a story ready for this one in which the situation was both tough and allowed you to show yourself in a good light.

## **"Why did you choose this particular career path?"**

This sort of question could lead to a vague and lengthy explanation. Avoid the trap. Form your answer so that it connects you with the position and the company. Keep it succinct and offer a specific example.

You need to convince the interviewer that their industry and your career goals are in sync. Do you have a realistic view of what it is like to work in their industry? What aspects of their industry are particularly attractive to you? Give specific examples that the interviewer can relate to and convince the person that this career path makes perfect sense for you.

"I chose advertising because I have always been a strong communicator with a good eye for design. I have a particular interest in creating dynamic eye-catching pieces that support a new product being introduced to the market. I also like the fast-paced high-energy environment that seems to be commonplace in the advertising industry."

## **"What are your salary expectations?"**

You could be asked how much money you're after. We all want to earn as much as we can. But be realistic. Saying that you will work for peanuts won't get you the job either. Both you and the interviewer know that you will soon become dissatisfied.

If the advertised position didn't indicate the likely remuneration, ask to discuss the approximate pay range for the position. Then answer in general terms, taking into account your qualifications in relation to the job requirements. Mention the market value for yourself, in general terms.

"Most people with my qualifications, at my age, can expect around \$30,000 to \$40,000 per year. I presume your salaries are within that range. However, because of my extensive experience with (whatever) my feeling is that I'm worth a figure towards the top of the range."

*Adapted from Peter Veruki, Adams Job Interview Pro*

## **After the interview**

After the interview, take the time to write down the names and titles of all interviewers, your impressions, type of questions asked and information learned. If you are undergoing regular interviews, this will help you keep employers and circumstances clearly defined.

If you are unsuccessful, ring and ask if you can have feedback about why you didn't get the job. While most people will be diplomatic rather than brutally honest, you should still be able to work out whether you could have improved your presentation — or whether you lost out simply because the job was not for you.

In the meantime, be brutally honest with yourself. Review your performance. What went well? What went badly? Did you sufficient prepare yourself? In which areas do you need to improve?

Remember, the only way to appear confident in an interview is to actually believe you are the person for the job. While the more you get your hopes up, the more they crash if you don't succeed, remember to pick yourself up again and launch into a new opportunity with the same energy and optimism. From every loss you learn something extra, and move one step closer to your next success.

Make your interest in the job formal with a thank you letter. If they have yet to decide who will get the job, use the letter as an opportunity to reinforce your strengths. If you have found out that you were unsuccessful, still write and thank them for giving you the opportunity to try out for the job. You never know when you are again going to be face-to-face with someone from the interviewing panel.

by **Dan Sullivan**