

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING STRATEGIES

You've got your resume, a company has picked up on your background, and now they'd like to interview you. Needless to say, this is the moment you've been waiting for, but you won't get a second chance, so make sure you prepare yourself. Here are some suggestions to help you make the best impression.

Types of Interviews:

Behavioral interviewing is becoming more prevalent lately, based on the idea that your past performance is the best predictor of future performance. Instead of questions focusing on your background and experience, you will need to provide examples where you have successfully used the skills you have acquired. The questions get at your skills, strengths and weaknesses, as well as helping the interviewer understand your values and interests. Always emphasize what you can do to for the company instead of just focusing on your interests.

In responding to a behavioral interview question, first identify the situation or task that you faced, then explain the actions that you took, and finally state the results or changes caused by your action.

Some examples of **traditional interview** questions are:

- Where do you see yourself in ten years?
- Describe three strengths and weaknesses.
- Why should we hire you for this job?
- What do you think is important in being a good team member or manager?

Here are some examples of **behavioral interview** questions:

- Tell me about the last time you handled a customer complaint.
- Describe an example of when you became frustrated with a peer or team member.
- How did you handle the last time you gave feedback to an employee who was not performing up to standards?
- Tell me about the most recent creative idea that you implemented in your group.

Preparing for the Interview:

- **Research in advance:** Do careful research before the interview, so you know what to expect and so you have some questions ready. Study the company's website, a current Annual Report (if available), and any current news items.
- **Think about your answers to likely questions:** Almost all interviewers ask what seems to be a trick question – What is your greatest weakness? Think about this in advance, and prepare a thoughtful response. Avoid fake weaknesses that are really strengths ("I'm a perfectionist"). Think of a work-related area in which you've really struggled to overcome some professional limitation, and think about what progress you've made and still need to make to do so. This shows the interviewer that you are self-aware, and committed to self-improvement.
- **Study the position description:** Get a copy of the job description and write out what makes you an excellent candidate, making sure you address the specific job requirements.

- **Investigate your interviewer:** If possible, study the bio of the person/people with whom you will be speaking.
- **Review logistics:** For a phone interview, double-check who is calling whom, on what phone number, at what time and on what day. For an in-person interview, double-check the time and date, then make sure you know how you're getting there, where you're going, and for whom you should ask when you get there.
- **Prepare questions about the job, the company and the interviewer:** You should ask at least a couple of questions each about the company, the position, and the person with whom you are meeting. There are two reasons for this. First, it shows the interviewer that you've done your homework and are interested and motivated. Second, it provides you with an opportunity to learn more about the company as your prospective employer. (See "Sample Interview Questions: Interviewing the Interviewer" under "Resources" at www.ehnagel.com).
- **References:** Contact your references in advance, and let them know that you'd like to use them as a reference. Some employers will want to speak with your immediate supervisor. It is reasonable to ask them to wait until at least a verbal offer has been extended and accepted before providing this.
- **Prepare a Fact Sheet:** Put together an information sheet with names, telephone numbers and addresses of your references and former employers (and employment start-end dates). This will help you if you are asked to complete an application, and if your interviewer asks you to tell them about your employment history or for references.
- **Practice interviewing:** Have a friend practice interviewing with you, and have them rate you based on the interview tips below ("At the Interview"). Prepare and practice answers to some sample questions (see "Sample Interview Questions" at www.ehnagel.com). Ideally, videotape yourself and replay the interview so you can rate and improve your performance.

The Day of the Interview:

- **Dress appropriately:** Even if the office has a "business casual" code, dress formally. Employers figure this is the best you will ever look, so make sure you make a good first impression. For men, wear a dark suit with a white shirt, an understated tie, a belt the same color as your shoes, well-polished shoes (yes, some employers look at shoes) and a briefcase for notes. For women, wear a suit or a nice dress with a jacket, pantyhose, pumps and a small handbag and/or briefcase. If you wear make-up, keep it simple and understated.
- **Be punctual:** Arrive about 15 minutes before your scheduled appointment time, so you have time to relax, get into the right mind-frame, and if necessary, fill out any paperwork.

At the Interview:

- **Greet** the person with a firm but not over-firm handshake.
- **Relax** and breathe slowly. If possible, try to see this as an adventure, not a torture.
- **Smile** genuinely. This will actually help relax you, and relax and reassure your interviewer.
- **Make eye contact** often.
- **Make positive statements** and act politely enthusiastic. People shy away from negativity.
- **Listen carefully** to the questions your interviewer asks, and **ask them to clarify** a question if you are not sure what they mean.

- **Paraphrase the question** to show that you know how to listen, then **answer the question specifically**. Don't wander or go off on tangents unless you feel it is important (if so, explain why).
- **Take your time answering**. A slow, well-thought-out answer is better than a fast, sloppy one.
- **Don't talk too much**. Once you've finished answering a question, stop. This can be hard, because it is natural when you are nervous to want to fill long pauses and babble. If the silence stretches on, smile in a friendly way and ask if you have answered the question.
- **Never say anything negative** about former employers or colleagues. This shows poor judgment and reflects very badly on you. It can also make the interviewer think you'd say bad things about them in the future. Sometimes interviewers will try to get you to do this – if so, resist politely and reiterate positive things.
- **Never ask about compensation**. If they ask you, say you are confident they can provide compensation in line with your experience and abilities. If they press, reiterate the same. If they continue to press, tell them your understanding of the salary range for the position, and that you are comfortable with that range. If they ask you what your current compensation is, tell them your base salary and any incentive compensation separately (this information will be verified, so never misrepresent it).
- Depending on how the interview has gone, it may be reasonable at this point to **ask about next steps**.
- **At the end of the interview**, smile, thank the interviewer for their time and shake their hand again firmly. Ask for a business card.

Thank You Note:

- **Two or three days** after an in-person interview, write a thank you note to the lead interviewer. This gives you the opportunity to summarize what makes you an excellent candidate for the position, and to show that you are polite, professional and paid attention during the interview.
- **Neatly type** the note, and don't go over **one page**.
- In the opening paragraph, **thank the interviewer** for their time and the time of the other interviewers if there were others. Express your **interest in and enthusiasm for the position**.
- In the next paragraph, without repeating your resume, briefly **highlight your skills**, always linking them firmly to the requirements of the position, and tying into what you discussed at the interview.
- In the last paragraph, provide **contact information** and sign the note with your first and last name.
- **Proofread** the note carefully.

Reasons You Might Not Get an Offer:

- One reason you might not be extended an offer is that your background and skills aren't the right fit for the particular position. This is not a reflection on you, but rather, a function of the job requirements, the composition of the team, the structure of the organization, and so on. There's nothing you can do about this, so don't take it personally.
- Other reasons you might not be hired are more dependant upon your performance during the interview. Once a bad impression is made, it can rarely be corrected, so just try to learn from your mistakes and move on. Critique your performance during the interview rigorously to see if any of the following apply:
 - A sloppy or incomplete application

- Arriving late for the interview
- An untidy appearance
- Negativity or lack of eye contact
- Being unable to express information clearly
- Not showing enthusiasm or genuine interest in the position
- Seeming unwilling to “roll up your sleeves”

Need Help?

Feel free to contact us at (847) 859-5069 or emerson@ehnagel.com if you would like to discuss interviewing strategies. If you are interested in learning about any of our risk management positions, contact us or check our website at www.ehnagel.com. Good luck with your search!