

Preparing for an Interview

I. INTERVIEW PREPARATION

Overview:

An interview is a two way street. Both you and the interviewer are deciding if you are a good match. Your goal is to present and sell yourself, your skills, your capabilities and your ability to contribute during the interview. You must also see whether you like the company, the people you would be working for, as well as the job you would be doing. The interviewer's goal is to determine if you have the "right" stuff for the job. Your ideal situation is to make the very best impression in order to receive an invitation for a second interview or a job offer. This way YOU are in control of the situation; you can always decline another interview or an offer if the job does not meet your requirements, but you want that choice to be yours! By giving 100% in the interview process you will increase the odds that you will be asked back.

Research:

Always review the website of the firm/company where you will be interviewing. No matter the level of the position, this is a standard expectation for all interviews. In addition, consider researching current news articles to gather timely topics that are affecting the company.

Research the people you will be meeting with during the interview. The employer's website may have information. Use LinkedIn.com to do additional research regarding key background areas such as former employers, schools, additional credentials; knowing this kind of information about your interviewer(s) can help to create interesting dialog that will set you apart from other applicants. You should also discuss the interviewer's personality, background, pet peeves, and overall profile with your recruiter so that you are well-prepared.

Dress Code:

Regardless of the "business casual" dress code in firms, you should always dress in business attire that is conservative and professional for interviews. It shows that you are willing to go the extra step and that you understand traditional business customs. So what does this mean? It means that you should look like you are ready to present the best possible version of yourself in a work environment, not on your way to the beach or shopping. In today's work environment, there are no longer cut-and-dry examples of what is professional – so using your best judgment is the best you can do! However, there are a few things that can be land mines: variations on accessories are usually acceptable, but heavy perfume and excessive jewelry are strongly NOT advised – they are distracting and sometimes offensive to the interviewer. Length of dresses/skirts is also important – conservative is the best choice in this area. Are men expected to wear business suits? Again, it depends. Some industries like legal and finance are good places to wear business formal, however, a suit may be too conservative for other industries. Again – judgment is key.

Materials:

Going prepared to an interview with the proper materials sounds basic, but many people fail in this area. Having materials together in an organized, neat and professional manner will set you apart:

- Always bring at least three copies of your resume and have one ready for everyone you meet.
- Always bring an updated reference list.
- Bring a professional folder with you to take notes or a list of questions you want to ask the interviewer.

II. THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The Application:

You must fill an application out completely! The application is a legal document and must be accurate. You will be signing the application stating the information is true. If you do not accurately cite your employment and ALL previous employers, you are falsifying your employment history. If this information is verified by a potential employer and found to be inaccurate, employers can withdraw or not make offers. Applications also ask reasons for leaving a previous job. It is best to fill out as little information as possible; these questions are better left for discussion rather than detailing in writing.

The application is also used as a general screening tool. You are being evaluated on such simple things as (1) do you have an attitude about completing the application, (2) did you fill it out completely, (3) did you take an unreasonably long time to complete the application, and (4) was it neat and legible? You should be aware of this and do your best always to be pleasant and prepared.

Important Facts:

- Fill the applications out completely - most companies must have a completed application in your personnel file when they hire you.
- Be accurate, honest and do not exaggerate when completing questions that are asked.
- Do not put "see resume" under employment history.
- Know your employment history dates.
- Have a separate reference sheet with names and telephone numbers. If they ask for this information on the application, fill it out. Make sure you have contacted your references BEFORE you start interviewing and prepare them for the possibility of phone calls.
- Bring to all interviews a complete list of former employers, names of supervisors, and a completed reference list and resume so that the application is easier to complete.

Testing:

Testing can be one of the most stressful parts of an interview. Some firms rely heavily on test scores and do not interview a candidate if one or more tests are failed. Some firms use the test scores as part of the process and interview regardless of scores. It is important to understand that if an employer chooses to test, they are required by law to administer those tests in a fair and equitable way; they cannot pick and choose whom they will test. For example, if they decide they are going to test secretarial candidates, they must test every secretarial candidate that applies for a job at their firm. All applicants must be treated the same through the hiring process. You should try your best, and not get overly stressed about testing. Your ability to follow directions and your attitude about the testing are sometimes the most important factors being evaluated. You should be calm, polite and flexible; never complain about testing or make statement such as, "I have been a secretary for 15 years – my work history and references speak for themselves."

Important Facts:

- Testing has become commonplace with most corporations and law firms. Testing is not limited to support or administrative applicants - many companies test all applicants, even the management level.
- Testing is used to evaluate basic skills, i.e., spelling, grammar, mathematics, writing, etc. Once a firm has established testing requirements, it must test all applicants in that category to avoid discrimination practices.
- The most important rule of thumb regarding testing is to read the instructions and comprehend the contents. Example: If a test asks you to circle the answer - circle it. Following the directions

is as important as the right answer to many employers. Neatness also counts; don't scratch out and rewrite an answer in a messy, disorganized manner.

- Do not act flustered or agitated by the testing process; this only creates an atmosphere of insecurity or lack of cooperation. Be patient and get through it; employers will be appreciative.

III. KEY INTERVIEW TOPICS:

Reasons for Seeking a New Job:

You should have a solid explanation for seeking a new job and leaving your current employer. This is a key area of evaluation. Not clearly defining a reason for leaving may result in a failed interview.

Some reasons for leaving are simple such as; commute, firm is dissolving, supervisor is leaving, etc. Simply looking for money will end an interview on the spot. Bottom-line, if you are only seeking a higher salary, you should not be on an interview. If the reasons are delicate such as: abusive supervisor, hates the administration, involved with someone at the firm, these matters need to be discussed before hand with the recruiter and packaged in a way that is positive; "spin" is necessary to get through this kind of discussion.

Be sure to review what a recruiter has shared with the interviewer PRIOR to the interview to avoid conflicting information. It should match what a recruiter has told the employer!

Reason for Leaving Previous Employers:

The same principles listed above should be considered. You should be honest and brief, keeping your explanations simple. Don't get into an involved conversation and ramble on about your reasons for leaving, and don't make excuses. It is important to address directly sensitive issues such as being fired; employers will find out eventually in the interviewing process. You should keep things positive – do not speak negatively about your past employer. **You should always have a list of positive things to say about every former employer, focusing on what you learned and how you developed your skills while working for that firm or company.**

Strengths and Weaknesses:

You should have a list of your own strengths and weaknesses. When asked about weaknesses, we encourage you to take the negative and turn it into a positive (e.g., I put a lot of pressure on myself to do a good job). Try to stay away from the more popular ones. If you have to use one of the "clichés," you should word it like this: "I know you probably hear this a lot, but this is really me, I am a perfectionist."

Your Ideal Job and 5 Year Plan:

You should know what your ideal job is, but be sure it fits into what an employer is searching for. Most employers are looking for someone that will be happy doing the job they are looking to fill, not someone who will do it for six month and expects to be promoted.

Your response to your "ideal job" may transition into an explanation of your 5 year plan. This classic question, "what is your 5 year plan – or where do you see yourself in 5 years", can be translated as "are you going to be around for the long haul?" This is not the time for you to try to impress the person interviewing you with your grand plans. Keep it realistic. Try not to use the word "growth"; instead say, "I'd like to take on additional responsibilities and continue to develop my skills as a _____." Other example of safe answers: 1) "I know the value of a good job, good people to work with, and a good company. My goal is to find these things in my next position. Five years from now, I hope to be with the

same company”, or 2) “My goal is to find a firm that rewards its employees for hard work and commitment and I hope to be there in 5 years.”

Why Do You Want to Work for “This” Company?

You should have a clear idea of why you are interested in working for the company. Take the time when reviewing their website to find things that appeal to you. The interview should not be just about why you are looking, but why this job is appealing to you. The job description should have something in it that sparks your interest. Ideally, you should have three reasons “why” you want to work for the company. Also, beware of reasons that are related to benefits and hours – these should not be exclusive reasons!

What can “YOU” do for this Company?

Knowing what you can offer an employer regarding your skills and talents is very important. Make a list of your best attributes and the accomplishments these attributes have created. Focus on things that will add value to the company such as your ability to get results, save money, or increase sales/productions. Tell the interviewer what will set you apart from other co-workers and all the other applicants. You should have a minimum of three solid skills and talents that you can offer a company and how you can apply them to their system. This will create a reason the company should want to hire YOU over other applicants.

“Good Bad Good”:

When discussing a subject or issue that may create some level of negative judgment on the part of the interviewer, such as why you left a position, or what are your biggest weaknesses, the statement should begin with something positive, followed by the negative, and then summarized by something positive again!

IV. INTERVIEWER QUESTIONS:

The following is a list of standard questions interviewers ask candidates. It is important to remember that these questions may be asked by one, some, or ALL of the people you meet through the entire interview process from the first interview through the last. It is critical that you be consistent in your answers; interviewers compare notes, and inconsistent answers reflect poorly on you.

Traditional Interviewer Questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Tell me what you would like to know about this company?
- What knowledge do you have about this company?
- What is of interest to you in this industry?
- How would you contribute to this company or department?
- Give me a few examples of where your work has been praised or criticized.
- What do you find most interesting about the item we make or the service we provide?
- Why do you think I should consider hiring you?
- What do you consider an ideal working environment?
- What kind of personality would you say you have?
- Can you describe your greatest accomplishment?
- Are you more interested in money or title?
- How and what stimulates or motivates you in the job?

It is best to practice answering these questions ahead of time. If you are not asked these questions, you will be asked similar ones. If you need help with ideas on how to answer these questions, please contact your recruiter.

Questions You Can Ask The Interviewer:

In the typical interview, the interviewer will ask you to “tell me about yourself,” which starts an open dialog. The person doing the interviewing will ask all the initial questions. At the end of the interview, the interviewer always asks the question “do you have any questions?”

The purpose of an interview is for the candidate to find out the following information:

- a) Do I like the basic job description and duties?
- b) Do I like the people I would be reporting to, working with and interacting with on a daily basis?
- c) Do I like the firm and the environment?

Asking questions allows you to evaluate the company and get the information you need in order to determine if this is a company you want to work for. Good questions also demonstrate who you are and your personality. Employers are searching for candidates that match the personality and chemistry of the firm and other employees. By asking questions, you are “creating chemistry” with the person interviewing you. This can lead to an invitation back to meet others, or a job offer.

About the job:

- What is the ideal candidate for this position? This pulls the wish list of the company from the interviewer. You learn about the important points of the job and this gives you the opportunity to address how you match those points. It also is an opportunity to talk about where you may fall short but where you see this as a positive challenge to taking a new job. Enthusiasm and a positive attitude can make up for any shortcomings.
- Walk me through a typical day, typical week.
- How are assignments delegated?
- What are the principal responsibilities of the position?
- What are some of the main challenges of the position?
- Why is the position available? How long was the last person in the position? If it is a new position, what has taken place to warrant a new position?
- How many people have had this position in the last 5 years? 10 years?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the last person in this position? What did the last person in this position do exceptionally well?
- Tell me about the best _____ (use the title of the job you are interview for i.e., secretary, paralegals) you have ever worked with and why?
- What would you most like for new employees to bring to this job?

About the People:

- Tell me about the person or people I will be reporting to. What are they like?
- What is the ideal personality to work with these people? Tell me about the other people in the department.
- Who else would I be interacting with? And what are they all like? What personality do you feel best fits into the group? Are there any tricky personalities in the group?
- Paint me a picture of this/these attorney(s) at their best? At their worst?

About the Firm:

- What separates your firm from your competitors?
- How long have you been with this firm? How does it compare to other firms that you have worked at in the past?
- What is the average tenure of your employees?

- Where do you see your firm/company in the next 5, 10 years?
- What do you like about this industry? What don't you like? What qualifications are essential to success in this industry? How did you get into this industry?
- Can I provide you with any additional information to help evaluate me for this position?

V. "THANK YOU" LETTERS/EMAILS

It is always a good idea to send a thank you letter/email. There are several reasons:

- It keeps you in the employer's mind and repeats your name and qualifications.
- It gives you a second opportunity to emphasize anything you forgot during the interview.
- It helps you stand out among the other applicants.

Important Facts:

- Indicate you enjoyed the meeting on (date) and are still interested in the position.
- Repeat briefly why you qualify and add one or two accomplishments perhaps not mentioned in the interview.
- Thank the employer for their time and interest.
- The format should always be a business letter, not a handwritten note.
- Get a business card during the interview to confirm the spelling for the company and the interviewer(s). If you did not get a card, call the company and confirm this information. An incorrect thank you note has cost many applicants a job offer.
- Email vs Letter – it is difficult to answer which is the preferred method. Both are accepted in today's business environment. What is a good rule of thumb? The more conservative the firm/company, the more important it is to send a letter. When in doubt? Send a letter and email with the same text. If you do opt for an email, make sure you write it using standard English and avoid any abbreviations or "texting" shortcuts such as, BTW or LOL, etc.
- Have someone proofread your letter or email before you send it!

VI. GENERAL SUGGESTIONS THROUGHOUT THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS:

- Be confident, but not overconfident. Likewise, do not "sell" too hard. Your natural personality should be what an interviewer sees, not what you "think" they should see.
- Strike a balance between the amount of listening you do and the amount of talking you do.
- Rehearse interviewing with friends.
- Always maintain eye contact with the interviewer.
- Try to always find out what the next step should be and who should follow up with whom.
- Be patient – hiring managers within companies have many priorities throughout the day. Feedback and scheduling interview times can take longer than you might expect.

We hope this handout will give you ideas and prepare you for any job interview. There are many other resources online and in bookstores that pertain to career counseling, job searches and interviewing. Please do not hesitate to call us at 213-553-8451 if you have any questions or comments.

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