

Interviewing Tips

Dos and Don'ts of Interviewing

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Staffing Advisors arranges hundreds of interviews annually, but most job applicants interview infrequently. Consequently, people at every career level tend to overlook at least one of the three key points outlined below. If you take half an hour to review the following, you will make a much stronger impression, and you'll be far better positioned to land the job you want.

Answering Interview Questions

Have you noticed that most people don't get right to the point in conversation? They ramble on a bit, tell stories, go back and add in a few details, and occasionally wander off on a tangent. Eventually, they might get to the point, but not always. And, in normal conversation, that's fine, but in a job interview it's a disaster—a very common disaster.

A job interview is not a normal conversation, so normal conversational style is held against you when you interview. An interview follows four very different rules than normal conversation.

- First, in normal conversation, you are usually talking with people who share a certain context with you—a coworker, a friend, a neighbor. But, in an interview, you must provide context before you make your point. And, most people ramble on with irrelevant storytelling when they should be providing a brief bit of context on the way to quickly making their point.
- Second, in an interview, the interviewer picks all of the topics and the whole meeting is their agenda, not yours. They decide what to talk about, and for how long. Most candidate answers go on for about twice as long as the interviewer would prefer.
- Third, a normal conversation does not have a time limit like an interview does, so most candidates are not comfortable fitting all of their thoughts into the allotted time.
- Fourth, in normal conversation, you never try to make multiple points, but in an interview you simply must demonstrate how you meet all of the key competencies required for the job.

So, when you use your comfortably familiar conversation style to interview, you fail. Instead, go into an interview like you would go into a structured briefing with a very busy senior executive. The rules are simple: be prepared, be bright, be brief, and be gone.

Anticipate their questions, so when you are asked, you can give concise, structured answers. No matter what the question, you have about three minutes to provide all of the following information:

- **Context**—What situation were you in? What background information does the listener need to understand it?
- **Action**—What action did you take? (You might also want to outline what alternatives you considered.)
- **Result**—What impact did your actions have? (It does not have to be all puppies and rainbows—you can admit that you got it wrong on the first try and then had to go back and fix something.)

How do you prepare? Read the job description, decide what key competencies you need to demonstrate, and prepare direct, candid three-minute answers to the predictable questions.

Ask Good Questions

Here are some basic interview questions you should ask, but you need to go far beyond these. Don't rely on generic questions you get off the Internet. Instead, do your homework. Learn about the company, learn about the job, learn about what is expected of you in the job. Ask the kinds of questions you would ask if you were already working there.

- “How fast do you expect me to come up to speed on this job, and what kind of training do you have in mind?”
- “What kinds of results do you expect of me, and how quickly?”
- “With whom will I primarily work to get the results you anticipate? How are they to work with?”
- “How many competing priorities will I have at any one time?”
- “What are the biggest obstacles I will face on my way toward achieving the goals you set out?”
- “How have other people fared in meeting your expectations?”
- “How have other people failed in this job and how can I avoid that?”

Keep asking questions until you are absolutely sure that you understand what they expect from you, that you have the training and resources to be successful, and that you and your new supervisor can really work well together.

After the Interview

If an organization hires you, you will be spending about 2,000 hours a year with them. But, they'll only interview you for about four hours (if that). So, during the interview process, they are paying 500 times more attention to little things—things that won't matter nearly as much after you start work. You'll really be under the microscope in every interaction. Therefore, you simply must be more meticulous in keeping track of the little things—all of the little things—because you never know what their hot button issue is going to be.

Consider this simple list:

- Did your résumé or cover letter have any mistakes?
- Were you on time and prepared for the interview?
- Were you ready for the interview questions, and did you have relevant experiences you could confidently share?
- Did you ask smart questions during the interview?
- Did you send a thank-you note to everyone you met?
- Did you send references or other follow-up material in a timely manner?

Obvious and simple, right? Except—at least one-third of job applicants routinely fail to take these steps. That's because what it takes to keep a job is quite different than what it takes to land a new one.