

THOUGHTS ON INTERVIEWING SKILLS

A successful interview is one in which both the interviewer and interviewee receive accurate information and can make an informed decision about the fit between the job and the applicant's personality and skills.

A. **The Basics**

- Be certain of the time, place and name(s) of the interviewer(s) -- a trial run to locate the building can be helpful
- Arrive early
- Bring a pen and notepad, copies of your resume and any other application material you might have submitted (in case something has been misplaced by the organization).
- Bring a reference list (in case they request references from you) with names, titles, addresses, phone, e-mail and fax numbers from 3 people (approved in advance by those people). Even better, have a reference sheet that describes how your references know you and highlights a few of your accomplishments they could speak to.
- Bring your interview portfolio or a few good samples of your work.
- Let the interviewer offer his/her hand first, shake hands firmly

IF THERE IS EVER A TIME TO THINK OF THE OTHER PERSON FIRST, THE INTERVIEW IS THAT TIME!

B. **The Care and Feeding of Interviewers**

- To communicate well, put yourself in the interviewer's place: is she/he nervous? In a hurry? Interviewers are often untrained to do job interviews, may have little experience hiring, and are frequently anxious about making a bad (and expensive) hiring mistake.
- Understand the interviewer's fears, gear the interview towards his/her concerns and show a genuine interest in those concerns. Offer yourself as part of the solution for the challenges the organization is facing (Bolles, 244-245).
- Try to get a good job description before the interview and/or a detailed discussion of job responsibilities early in the interview so you can pinpoint her/his major concerns and address them specifically.
- An interviewer controls the flow of the interview, but the interviewee controls the content (Medley).

C. Preparation, Preparation, Preparation

- Research the organization: look for written descriptions, check out their web page, find people who know something about it and its history. **IF YOU DON'T HAVE THE INTEREST TO FIND OUT WHAT THIS ORGANIZATION DOES, THAT LACK OF INTEREST MAY BE QUICKLY DISCOVERED BY THE INTERVIEWER. IT WILL AFFECT BOTH THE QUALITY OF YOUR ANSWERS AND HIS/HER IMPRESSION OF YOU.**
- On the other hand, don't flaunt your preparation and sound like a know-it-all. Let your knowledge be the background for some thoughtful answers.

D. Types of Interviews

- One on one: focus on the conversation, not on your own anxieties. The interaction should feel as natural as possible.
- Panel (or board) interviews: common for initial screening interviews and even for interviews with public agencies. 2 or more interviewers (usually 3). Can be challenging to make eye contact and really connect with each. Address the questioner on a specific question first, then look at the other members of the panel to include them in the discussion. Pay attention to what parts of the organization each panel member represents and if they have different stakes in this job for which you are being considered. This can tell you a lot about organizational dynamics.
- Phone interviews with individuals or a group of interviewers are especially challenging because you lack the signals of body language and facial expression. Write down the names and titles of your interviewer(s) so you know to whom you are talking. Have questions ready to cover any awkward silences.
- Videoconference interviews include the body language signals you are missing in phone interviews, but the technology can be unsettling and the interactions can feel unnatural. This is especially true if there is a time delay in the audio portion or if you can see yourself in a monitor as well as viewing the interviewers in a different monitor. Find out as much as you can in advance about the technology set-up so you know what to expect, then concentrate on the people and the conversation. If seeing yourself on a monitor would be distracting, ask if it can be turned off or moved so you can't see it.

E. Selling Yourself

- Enthusiasm: you must appear sincerely interested in the job. "There is an old saying that *people don't care what you know until they know that you care...* When you show a potential employer that you understand their needs and objectives, you demonstrate that you care about their organization." (Boldt, p. 465)
- Sincerity: don't fake interest and don't apply for jobs for which you would have to do this.
- Tact: handling disagreement or awkward questions gracefully.
- **TREAT THE INTERVIEW AS A VALUABLE EXPERIENCE IN ITSELF, WHETHER OR NOT YOU GET THE JOB.** Each interview, handled well, is a lesson and preparation for the next interview. It may produce a good referral, as well.
- A positive, confident attitude is absolutely crucial. **YOU RADIATE WHAT YOU FEEL.**

F. Questions and Answers

- The most important product of the interview is the interviewer's feeling about you: "Your relaxation, your confidence in yourself and your manner are far more important than the words you use in your answers." (Medley)
- Listen to the question: if it is specific, answer it directly. If it is general, turn it into what you want to say. If the question is ambiguous, ask for clarification.
- Take a few seconds to think out an answer if the question is important. You don't have to respond instantly every time; sometimes thoughtfulness is very effective.
- Tell appropriate (and brief) stories to illustrate your major points. This helps the interviewer see clearly how you would act in his/her organization and what you could contribute. Those stories can also be entertaining and memorable and help your interview stand out.
- Keep your answers brief, between 20 seconds and 2 minutes. Bolles quotes research that shows that successful candidates usually talk about half the time in the interview. Listening to the interviewer is important and engaging; monologues make you sound self-centered. (Bolles, p. 243)
- Eye contact: be as natural as possible. Don't look the interviewer(s) in the eye constantly (it will make her/him nervous), but don't stare at the table either. There is a natural rhythm to eye contact and conversation which will make both you and the interviewer feel more relaxed.
- Prepare answers to common questions in advance: tell me about yourself, why are you interested in this position, what are your major strengths/weaknesses, what are your future career goals... Bolles says that there are just 5 underlying questions in any interview, even if they are never asked overtly:
 1. Why are you here? *They mean by this, "Why are you knocking on my door, rather than on someone else's door?"*
 2. What can you do for us? *They mean by this, "If I were to hire you, would you be part of the problems I already have, or would you be part of the solution to those problems? What are your skills, and how much do you know about some subject or field that is of interest to us?"*
 3. What kind of person are you? *They mean by this, "Do you have the kind of personality that makes it easy for people to work with you, and do you share the values which we have at this place?"*
 4. What distinguishes you from nineteen other people who can do the same tasks that you can? *They mean by this, "Do you have better work habits than the nineteen others, do you show up earlier, stay later, work more thoroughly, work faster, maintain higher standards, go the extra mile, or....what?"*
 5. Can I afford you? *They mean by this, "If we decide we want you here, how much will it take to get you, and are we willing and able to pay that amount - governed as we are by our budget, and by our inability to pay you as much as the person who would be above you on the organizational chart?"*
(Bolles, p. 252) [See separate handout on salary negotiations]
- Decide in advance how you will handle illegitimate personal questions or awkward questions about past failures. Be honest and direct when you have to talk about a past failure. The most important element is to accept responsibility where appropriate, rather than blaming others, and to show that you have learned from this situation.
- Be careful about the use of jokes or other humor; humor must be used in an appropriate spot and in good taste or it can backfire.

G. **The Trap of False Assumptions**

- Do not make assumptions about the interviewer and what he/she wants. Listen carefully and pick up your clues from the interviewer.
- Do not make any assumptions about the interview results. All you know is whether you enjoyed the interview or not. You really don't know about the interviewer's reactions.
- "You waste your time by making such judgments. You are in the worst possible position to evaluate your performance. In the first place, you certainly are not able to make an objective appraisal. Second, you don't know what the specifications for the position are. Third, you can't possibly put yourself inside the head of the interviewer to determine the feeling he/she got from you." (Medley)
- Don't be intimidated by your competition. No matter how polished, good looking, etc. they are, you don't know anything about their performance in the interview or whether they match what that organization wants.
- "Be yourself. It's just as likely that the interviewer is looking for you as it is that he or she is looking for someone completely different. If he/she is looking for someone completely different, you wouldn't be happy in that job anyway." (Medley)
- Be honest. "Honesty consists of truth, consistency and candor." When asked for an opinion, you may present yourself in the best interpretation that is legitimate. When asked for a straight fact, either answer accurately or frankly refuse to answer (and you had better have a good reason for the latter). (Medley)

H. **Confidence**

- Have fun with the interview; you have absolutely nothing to lose. "Throw caution to the wind. Look at the down side. What is the absolute worst that can happen to you? You won't get an offer. Well, right now you don't have an offer, so the down side is simply maintenance of the status quo. That's nothing to worry about. Go into the interview forgetting about yourself. For fifteen minutes, exude self-confidence. Take a chance. If you recognize that not getting that for which you hope is no disaster, you will be much looser and will try things that may work. If they don't, you're no worse off." (and you will have learned something). (Medley)
- **JUDGMENTS CAUSE TENSION... "it is the judgments we make on ourselves that keep us from relaxing."** (Medley)
- **YOU ARE INTERVIEWING THEM.** You need to test the interviewer and the organization, just as they need to test you. The key is always finding the right fit. A good interview is a partnership, a joint exploration by the person and the organization. A poor fit is not necessarily any reflection on you and your abilities, it means you should look for a different organization or a different type of job. There are a variety of abilities and personalities needed in the public arena; yours are just as valuable as any other person's.

References

Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed. Medley, Anthony H. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1992.

What Color is Your Parachute? Bolles, Richard N. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2002 edition.

Zen and the Art of Making a Living. Boldt, Laurence G. Arkana: the Penguin Group, 1999.