The Art and Science of Interviewing

Despite the increasing use of 'virtual recruiting' and online applications, most companies still use one-to-one personal interviews as a critical part of the hiring process. So it's still essential to learn what interviewing's all about and what you need to do to maximize your chances for success.

What Interviews Are NOT:

The first thing that you need to understand is your role in the interview. Let's start with a few 'Don'ts.

Interviews are **NOT**:

1. **An Opportunity for You to Recite What's On Your Resume.** Employers are not interested in hearing you tell them information that they can read on paper.

2. **A Friendly Chat.** Recruiters may 'break the ice' for the first few minutes of the interview, but their primary purpose is to identify strong candidates.

3. **A Lecture.** In the classroom, students are often expected to listen and learn. An interview is much more of a 'two-way' process, in which both the recruiter and candidate take active roles.

4. **A 'Test'.** With the possible exception of technical interviews, there are no 'right' answers to interview questions.

So What <u>Am</u> I Supposed To Do In An Interview?

A lot. Keep in mind that an interview is a marketing presentation—you are both the presenter and the product being presented. On top of that, you normally have about 30 minutes or so to do your presentation. 30 minutes may seem like 30 years when you're sitting across from a recruiter, but it's really a very short time. So you have to make every second count.

How to do that? Here's four tips that will make the interviewing process a little bit easier:

Tip #1 --Know The Employer and Know Yourself. You may think that you're all ready to tell someone all about you (after all, who knows you better than you do?). But you may not be ready to talk about you as a candidate—what are your top strengths or skills? What makes you stand out from other candidates? Before each interview (and not 20 minutes before—give yourself enough time to do a thorough job) take a look at your resume, transcript, and other documents to help and identify your top three or four selling points (talking to friends helps a lot as well). Make sure that you can provide at least one example that illustrates or 'proves' that you have each of the strengths that you've

identified. We'll discuss how you communicate these strengths to recruiters in the next tip. When researching companies, know the answers to at least three questions:

What product or service does this company provide?

How big (or small) is the company relative to other companies in the same industry?

What values or 'points of pride' does the company emphasize in its online or printed information pieces?

Your goal in an interview is to attempt to tie all of this information together—what do I know and like about your company and/or the position, and how do I see myself contributing to your company's success? You accomplish this goal through your answers to the recruiter's questions.

Tip #2 --Tell Your Story to the Recruiter. Once you get into the interview room, it's time to start marketing yourself. And you accomplish this through your answers to the interview questions.

While there are practically an infinite number of possible interview questions, nearly all of them fall into three categories. *Specific Questions* are aimed at uncovering factual information about your educational background, experience, etc. For example, you may be asked about your coursework, or about your responsibilities at your internship last summer. *Open Questions* are much more vague and undefined ('Tell me about yourself' or 'What makes you a strong candidate for this position'?). *Situational Questions* are normally asked in the context of a Behavioral-Based Interview, and usually begin with 'Tell me about a time when…' or 'Can you give me an example of an incident when…'. No matter which type of question you are asked, your task is the same—to highlight your top strengths as a candidate in your answers. For example, if a candidate were asked to talk about her responsibilities as an intern last summer, she may respond in part as follows:

What I really liked about my experience last summer was the fact that I was able to develop skills in three different areas. As a Software Engineer, I got involved in some projects that really enhanced my programming expertise. The project work also required me to work with other interns and to use teamwork to get results. At the end of the summer, our project team was required to present the results of our work to a group of managers. So the internship really gave me a chance to use both my technical and non-technical skills.

Notice that in this example interview answer, the candidate included her strengths (programming, teamwork, and communication skills) when describing her internship (rather than just summarizing her responsibilities). This type of answer gives a recruiter a much more complete picture of the candidate.

It's also important to use examples to further illustrate your top skills. Whenever you mention a strength for the first time, tell the recruiter a story from your background that highlights that strength. For example, a candidate who is asked 'What makes you a strong candidate for this position'? may respond like this:

One of the areas in my background that I feel makes me good fit for this position is my ability to learn new things and to adapt to change quickly. As my resume indicates, I worked at the same company for two summers in a row. At the start of my second tour, I found out that the company had been acquired by another firm that had instituted a lot of changes in the technology and corporate culture. So the challenge that I was faced with was to move a lot of the database work that I'd been doing to a new software, and to establish a working relationship with a new boss who didn't know anything about me or what I could do. So I arranged to have a long meeting with my new manager at the start of my first week.. I basically treated the meeting as an interview—I presented my resume, outlined my work from the previous summer, and summarized my goals for the next few months. I also was able to persuade her to have another intern who was familiar with the new software package work with me to help transfer my database over. By the end of the second week, I had mastered the basics of the new software and was able to pretty much work on it myself for the rest of the summer. I also found out that the new software was much more powerful than the old, so I incorporated a lot more data and search features into the database than I had originally intended. As a result, by summer's end I had both learned to use another type of software and had created a records database that will help to make it easier for the company to track orders.

The above example contains all three elements of a good story; a <u>Background</u> (challenges posed by a change in software and culture), an <u>Action</u> (meeting with the new manager, learning new software), and a <u>Result</u> (creation of a database). The stories that you use to illustrate your skill areas don't need to be overly long—maybe a couple of minutes—but they can do a lot to 'three-dimensionalize' your resume.

Tip #3 --Ask The Right Questions. As mentioned earlier, it's not a good idea to adopt a 'passive' approach to interviews. You need to be actively involved in gathering the information necessary to make the right decision, should you be offered a job. It would also help to get an idea of how the recruiter is responding to your presentation of skills. You can achieve both of these through the questions that you ask the recruiter. Generally, recruiters reserve time in the last third or last half of the interview for candidate's questions. Always have questions to ask—no questions might signal either a lack of preparedness or a lack of interest.

Your questions should fall into two categories. Informational questions are used to uncover facts about the job's day to day responsibilities and organizational structure. Questions in this category include 'What's a typical day like on the job'? and 'How is my performance evaluated'? 'Check Back' questions, as the name implies, are used to check on how closely your skills match the position's requirements. A candidate may ask 'What skills or background are crucial for success in this job'? or 'What type of skills did former incumbents in this job have that made them successful'? Essentially, you're

asking the recruiter what they're looking for in a candidate. Since you've already spent the first half of the interview presenting your own skills, there's nothing wrong with asking this type of question.

Listen to recruiter's responses to your questions, and follow up where appropriate. For example, if a recruiter indicated that a skill crucial for success was being able to work effectively under pressure, a candidate may respond by citing an instance from their own experience of working under pressure.

Another good question to ask is regarding the hiring timeline—when should you expect to hear something regarding your candidacy?

Tip #4 —Have a Strong Finish. One of the most important parts of a sales or marketing presentation is the 'close'—the wrap-up at the end that can either make or break a deal. Job interviews aren't any different. An effective end to an interview consists of shaking hands, thanking the recruiter for their time, summarizing your skills ('Based on our discussion today, I feel that my strong academic background, relevant experience, and leadership skills would make me a strong candidate for the job'.), and expressing interest in being considered for employment.

Follow up your interview with a thank-you letter or e-mail to the interviewer within a couple of days.