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The Interview: What It Is and Is Not

AT THE CORE

This topic examines:

- THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW
- THE INTERVIEW PROCESS
- THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON INTERVIEWS
- TYPICAL INTERVIEW MYTHS
- TRUTHS ABOUT INTERVIEWS

Strategy #1: Concentrate on one thing—the invitation to an interview.

A

n interview is an opportunity for an employer to examine, usually in a question-and-answer exchange, the qualifications of a job seeker for a position in the company.

Although not always considered, an interview is also an opportunity for the job seeker to examine the company and the position to see if they are appealing. Notice the use of the word *opportunity*. Both parties should take advantage of the opportunity to learn as much as possible about each other. In most cases for the employer, the interview is one of the major determining factors to hire or not to hire. If the employer believes the job seeker fits the needs of the company, an offer will be made. In many cases, the interviewee does not take advantage of the opportunity to determine if the company is a good fit. The interviewee is just interested in getting the job.

The Purpose of the Interview

The job interview is an exchange between two entities: the employer and the applicant or job seeker. This exchange usually takes the format of a question-answer session(s) where the employer asks the

questions and the applicant answers the questions. From the impression the applicant makes and the answers he or she provides to the questions, the employer will make a decision.

From the employer's perspective, he or she is looking for an employee who will fit the needs of the company. The employer will be searching for a candidate with the skills, personality, experience, and potential to meet the requirements established or perceived to be required by the organization. Therefore, before interviewing applicants for a position, the employer must clearly establish what skills, abilities, talents, experience, and personality the company needs to fill the position. The employer should keep these requirements in mind throughout the interview process.

From your point of view as a job seeker, you must understand what the employer wants and try to match your skills and abilities to those needs. Your first goal is to research and learn about the company, its product, its culture, and the job description of the position for which you are being interviewed. You want to learn as much as you can to prepare yourself for what the employer wants.

Your second goal is to use the interview as an opportunity to learn more about the position and the organization. Be prepared to ask questions. Try to get answers to the questions you could not get from your research. For example, by asking how you will be evaluated, you discover the supervisor's expectations. Just as it is important for the employer to learn if you will meet the needs of the company, it is equally important for you to determine if the company is going to meet your needs as an employee.

Therefore, the interview is a two-way exchange of impressions and information. The employer will make a decision based on a first impression and your body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions, as well as information you express directly or imply. If the overall impression the employer receives is positive and he or she believes you meet the needs of the company, something very negative would have to come up to change the employer's mind when he or she reviews your resume and application and checks your references. If the first impression is negative, it is very likely the employer will not bother to review your resume or check references.



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As an applicant, you, too, should make a judgment based on the same elements of the exchange. The impressions and information you receive will assist you in making a decision. Before making a final decision, however, you should review your research about the company and speak again with people you contacted during your research about the company. Determine if this is the environment in which you want to work.

From both the employer's and the applicant's perspective, the interview should be an investigation into each other. A student had just completed her associate degree in Office Systems Technology, so she placed her resume with an employment company. An employer was searching for an employee to fill an open position in his company. He spotted this student's resume and said, "I'll take this one." She was hired on the spot—no interview. She accepted the position. On her first day of work, she learned she would be driving a fork lift and wearing a hard hat and that most of the job duties did not match her skills and talents. Understandably, she resigned before she even started the job.

Several things happened here. The employer selected an employee based only on the resume and obviously had not determined the needs of his organization. The employment agency did not carefully screen the applicants and attempt to match them to the needs of the employer. The job seeker just wanted a job and did not inquire or request an interview to learn about the position. Unfortunately, everyone involved lost time, energy, and money. An interview could have quickly shown both parties the unsuitability of the applicant for the position.

As the single most important element in getting a job, think of the interview as an opportunity to sell your skills and abilities. Match your talents to the needs of the company. Listen carefully to determine if the company can meet your needs as an employee.

The Interview Process

Generally, all interviews follow a similar pattern. By being aware of the pattern, you relieve some of the anxiety and stress associated with the interview process. Although there may be some deviation from the routine, all interviews generally begin with a meeting and

greeting time, proceed to a question-and-answer session, and end with a summary/conclusion period.

Stage one is the meeting and greeting process. Names are exchanged and introductions are made. Conversation is usually general, and innocuous topics such as the weather, local events, and travel to the interview are discussed. These discussions all serve as icebreakers. The interviewer may attempt to establish rapport or place the interviewee at ease and provide a more comfortable environment. During this stage, you want to remember names and titles and try to relax for the questions to come.

TIP Use the interviewer's name. Using the name delivers a message of respect and recognition.

Stage two is the question-and-answer period during which questions are asked by the interviewer and answered by you. Your skills, abilities, experience, and interpersonal relationships are typical topics for this stage. While you are selling yourself and your abilities, the interviewer is sizing you up for compatibility or a fit with the company and the position.

TIP Relate your qualifications and experiences fully. If you have never worked full-time, speak about your volunteer, extracurricular, and part-time work experience.

Stage three provides an opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have about the company or the position. Be prepared to take advantage of the chance. Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. Include any questions that were generated by the interview. Your purpose during this stage is to get as much information as possible.

During the final stage, the interviewer begins to summarize and conclude the interview. Your objective at this stage is to learn the timeline for the hiring process, establish how you will be notified, and receive permission to call for progress updates. Be sure to thank the interviewer for his or her time and consideration, then leave.

TIP Leave promptly. Express appreciation for the interview. When leaving the outer office, thank the person who greeted and assisted you when you arrived.

Impact of Technology on Interviews

Technology has made everyone virtually next-door neighbors. Businesses are finding that the search for employees can be global rather than local. The World Wide Web has changed how job seekers learn of job openings and how employers find potential employees. Company web sites now post available positions. Numerous web sites post resumes of job seekers, allowing employers to search for applicants with the desired skills; and vice versa, a job seeker can search for job openings. Technology is also impacting the interview.

The Telephone. The telephone interview may seem to be the least difficult and least stressful type of interview, but in reality it is the most difficult. Telephone interviews are used most often as a screening tool to avoid the expense of travel for a prospective candidate who lives some distance from the interview location. Because there are no visual clues, both parties must use effective oral communication techniques to send the right message. Vocal tone, word usage, and enunciation are critical elements. Speak directly into the telephone. Try to give more than one-word answers to explain your talents and abilities. For example, if an interviewer asks if you have experience with Microsoft® Word. Rather than answering “yes,” explain that you took a college course on Word, earned an A, and successfully completed the MOUS Certification Test at the proficient level. Take notes during the interview. They will become valuable when you have a face-to-face meeting.¹

When the telephone is used as an interviewing medium, those involved must remember that articulation, tone of voice, and choice of words are important due to the lack of visual cues and body language.



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To give yourself an edge with a telephone interview, dress professionally for it. You will project a more professional image if you dress for the part, rather than slouching around in pajamas or sweats. Try to convey a positive attitude by projecting enthusiasm and an upbeat attitude. Have your resume and other notes ready. Try to avoid shuffling papers, as it may send crackling noises over the phone lines. Eliminate all possible distractions and interruptions by enabling call waiting or another electronic interrupter. Request family members to leave the house, or find a room that is quiet and isolated.

TIP During the telephone interview, stand up and speak. You will have more oxygen flowing if you stand and breathe deeply.

How important is the telephone in the job-hunting process? The telephone will become your primary source of contact with potential employers. It will be a primary resource in gaining necessary information. The first contact an employer or a representative of the employer may have with you is a telephone call. This may come after he or she receives your letter of application and resume.

How you answer the phone and how you address the caller will establish a first impression. Make it a good one. If you have an answering machine, be sure your recorded message sounds professional. Many people eliminate themselves from further consideration for a position because the message on their answering machine creates a less than professional image. Using a less than professional message, may leave the caller with a question about your use of good judgment.

Although the telephone is used by business as an important screening interview tool, it is rarely the choice of media for the final interview. On some occasions, an applicant may be interviewed from a distance via the telephone so both parties can determine if travel and a face-to-face meeting would be profitable.

Videoconferencing. Videoconferencing is a system of transmitting audio and video signals between individuals at distant locations. Individuals can see and hear each other. The videoconference is an option if distance and travel expenses are prohibitive factors. Be aware of two minor problems you may experience using teleconferencing

equipment. First, the conference is held in real time but there may be a few seconds' delay of the audio behind the video. This takes a bit of adjustment by both parties. It may take a few attempts to avoid talking over each other. Secondly, what you wear is critically important. Avoid red (men, particularly with ties) and any bright, vibrant color. Also avoid anything that has a pattern. The transmission of the color and patterns can appear distorted and rainbow, which becomes very distracting. Even with these two potential difficulties, videoconferencing is an effective tool to use when distance is a problem.

Some companies have access to video conferencing equipment and can set up an interview time with another branch of the company or with a service provider. This eliminates the lack of visual cues that occurs with using the telephone. Therefore, it is more effective than the telephone. One of the largest obstacles to videoconferencing in the past was the amount of bandwidth needed and the picture quality. However, the technology is steadily improving.

Computer-to-Computer. Within the last several years, new software packages have become available that provide video transmittal from one computer to another. NetMeeting™ is one of these software packages. Participants can arrange an interview anytime and anywhere, providing a savings in travel time and expense, meals, and accommodations. Computer-to-computer interviewing is becoming more common. It is not as effective as face-to-face interviewing, but it certainly eliminates the problems associated with telephone interviews. The software package NetMeeting can turn a personal computer into effective videoconferencing equipment.

I recently had a unique experience using this software. I was assisting an instructor in a class project by interviewing all of her students. She and I created a job description, and students sent me their letters of application and resumes. We set up an appointment for each student. Because the class was online, we had one student who was living in Italy. We used NetMeeting to conduct that interview.

The student and I both needed a PC and the software, Internet access, a camera, and a microphone. Taking into consideration the time difference, we arranged a convenient time that met both our needs. We connected using the software. It was just like the videoconference described previously. There was a time delay between video and voice,

but we quickly adjusted. She gave a very good interview, and overall it proved to be an effective method of interviewing a truly distant potential employee. Computers are sure to become a common medium for communicating and interviewing.

Typical Interview Myths

Misinformation about interviews is common and only adds to the stress and anxiety they can produce. Let's look at some of these myths and get the real story.

1. **My resume will get me the job.** Wrong. Your resume is designed to get you the interview; interviews get you the job. The only time the resume may have gotten an applicant a job was in the situation described earlier, which turned out to be a disaster for all parties involved. Your resume should look professional and clearly outline your skills and experiences. Your resume should entice the interviewer to arrange an interview. You also need the opportunity the interview presents to determine if you want the position with the company.
2. **First impressions cannot be overcome.** Wrong. First impressions are critical and difficult to overcome, but they are not impossible to change. It takes extraordinary effort and strong interviewing skills to erase a poor first impression. Effective preparation should eliminate the chance of making a poor first impression, but if for some reason you sense a negative reaction, hone your listening skills, focus on strong and confident answers, and ask effective questions. Take heart; you can recover.
3. **A poorly answered question is a disaster, and there is no recovery.** Wrong. You have another opportunity. You can contemplate a more effective answer and submit that answer in your thank-you letter. Simply state in the letter that when assessing your performance and responses, you concluded that the questions concerning...required a more extensive answer. Then proceed to give a more effective response.
4. **All interviewers know how to interview effectively.** Wrong. Most interviewers do not know how to use the time provided to get the answers they really need. In fact, most interviewers do not know

the questions to ask to obtain the information they need to make an informed decision. Some interviewers do not know what is legal to ask. Some interviewers do not know how to prepare effectively for the interview. Therefore, you may be in the driver's seat by providing them with the information you want them to know.

5. **The most qualified person gets the job.** Wrong. Often the most qualified person does not get the job. There are many factors that enter into the decision to hire. Skills, abilities, experience, and education are just some of the factors. Probably the most important reason you are hired is because the interviewer likes you. The interviewer likes your skills, talents, experience, and education; but he or she also likes your looks, your personality, your presentation, and so on. Interviewers will rarely recommend for hire someone they do not like. Therefore, your goal is to make the interviewer like you.²

Truths About Interviews

In addition to the myths and misconceptions about interviews that abound, there are some basic truths of which all interviewees should be aware. Knowing these basic truths will assist you in avoiding the simple faux pas.

1. **Most interview appointments are made by telephone.** When the employer receives your resume and moves you into the “potential” column, a date for an interview is established. Today employers usually forgo writing a letter, using the telephone to call the potential employee instead. Therefore, you should be prepared for the initial call to plan the interview date. Have a professional message on your answering machine. Have a calendar and pen or pencil beside the phone so you are prepared when the phone call comes.
2. **The first five minutes are the most important time in the interview.** This is the time when the interviewer makes the initial impression that will sit firmly in his or her mind. You will have answered a question or two, so the interviewer will get a more solid impression. (The factors included in making that impression are how you look, stand, sit, vocalize, and express yourself.) The first

impression sets the tone for the remainder of the interview and may determine its outcome.

3. **Interviewers can be nervous too.** Do not be fooled into thinking that you are the only one in the room who is nervous. For example, in a panel interview, interviewers may be performing in front of their contemporaries or supervisors; as a result, they may feel some pressure. In addition, hiring decisions are extremely important to a company because mistakes can be very costly.
4. **Networking, recommendations from insiders, and knowledge of your abilities and work ethic are more likely to get you the interview than your resume and letter of application.** If a company can get inside information about you and your abilities, you are far more likely to get an interview than a person who just submits a resume and a letter of application. Therefore, use your network to assist you. You also have a better chance of getting a job offer if your interviewers have received positive input about you.
5. **Preparation is the most important strategy as you ready yourself for the interview.** Preparation is the secret. Preparation should be done in every step of the process. You can prepare for 80 percent of the questions the interviewer is likely to ask you. These are great odds in the game of interviewing. It is up to you.³

RECAP OF KEY CONCEPTS

- ◆ An interview is a two-way exchange between an employer and an applicant to gather as much information about each other so an effective hiring decision can be made.
- ◆ The typical interview is face-to-face and one-on-one and follows a specific pattern. Interviews usually begin with the interviewer and interviewee taking time to build rapport. Next comes the question-and-answer period. Then the interview progresses to the summary and conclusion.
- ◆ Technology is impacting the way interviews are conducted. This technology includes the telephone, videoconferencing, and computer-to-computer.
- ◆ There are many myths about the interview: My resume will get me the job; first impressions cannot be overcome; a poorly answered question is a disaster, and there is no recovery; all interviewers know how to interview effectively; and the most qualified person gets the job.
- ◆ In addition to the myths about interviews that abound, there are some basic truths: Interview appointments are usually made by telephone, the first five minutes are critical, and interviewers can be nervous too. Your network is very important and can give you a leading edge. Preparation is the secret to success.