

Interview Preparation

Interview preparation is perhaps the single most overlooked aspect of job changing process.

RETAIL Careers
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It's been said that Napoleon won his battles in his tent: that is he did all the planning the night before the battle was joined, so that every contingency could be adequately covered. Interview preparation is similar. You never know exactly what will happen on the battlefield, but by being ready, you can eliminate a lot of uncertainty, and know how to react to different scenarios. Conducting yourself effectively during an interview is a separate topic unto itself, so for now, let's focus on the preparation.

1. The Resume

Of course you should bring a couple of copies, and be sure to read your resume before the interview, so that you are completely familiar with everything you have written. Nothing is more embarrassing (or potentially fatal to your candidacy) than being quizzed on some aspect of your background that appears on the bottom of page 2 - and not being able to remember the details.

You might consider bringing materials which could be particularly good at illustrating an important aspect of your work, such as creative designs, writing samples, and so forth. Just remember to use good judgement. Be careful though not to overdo it with the props. College diplomas, letters of commendation, and company bowling trophies should be left at home. When in doubt, just bring your resume and your business card - they're the most important props you'll ever need.

It's a good idea to carry a leather folder or daytimer with you, so that you can take any notes or store written materials the company might hand you during the interview.

Always remember a pen or pencil.

2. Appropriate Dress and Appearance

As much as we'd all like to believe that we are being judged on our qualifications, skills, and depth of character, the truth of the matter when it comes to interviewing is, in most cases "the clothes make the man". To think any other way is to ignore reality.

- It is always appropriate to wear a suit to an interview, even if you know the company has a casual dress code. Ensure that you look business-like, but not dressed for a formal dinner, and check in a mirror how your outfit looks while you are sitting down. Check pant/skirt lengths, and color of hose.

The more carefully you prepare for your interview, the better your chances of getting hired.

- For some reason, interviewers always notice your shoes. Make sure they are clean, polished and in good condition.
- Don't wear lots of fragrance when you go to an interview; and make sure that your breath is fresh (nothing worse to a non-smoking interviewer than speaking to someone that has recently smoked a cigarette!!) Ladies, keep the makeup businesslike and minimal.

3. Know where you are going

Get the directions at least a day in advance and plot out your journey. There's nothing like arriving late and out of breath to make a big impression! Try to arrive 15 minutes early, but do not announce yourself until the time you're scheduled. It can irk an interviewer to be told that their 2 o'clock interview is waiting in the lobby at 1:30. If for some reason you are running late, call ahead to ask if you can reschedule for later in the day, or later that week. If something happens that is unexpected and you have no control over, simply explain it to the employer, take a deep breath and forget it.

4. Name and title of the Interviewer

Your recruiter will ensure that you know all the important details, but if you go it alone, make sure that you know who you'll be talking with, and what their function is within the company. Will you be speaking to the hiring manager? The Personnel Director? The internal recruiter? A peer level employee or a subordinate? You might already know the person. If so, you're ahead of the game. If not, send out feelers among your own industry contacts, to see if they can give you any insight to commonalities or interconnecting points of interest. Try to find one or two things you feel are comfortable ice-breakers to start the discussion.

5. Understand the Company's Hiring procedure.

To correctly gauge the sequence of events surrounding or following your first interview ask some questions such as:

- *Could you tell me the step by step hiring procedure for this position?* This is important, because you will want to find out if (and when) the company needs to schedule second and third interviews. Some companies make hiring decisions on the spot; others will take several weeks or even months of meetings and endless signatures to process a candidate.
- *How long will it take before you reach a decision?* This will help you measure your progress through their hiring process, and spare you from getting any jitters if you don't hear something immediately.
- *Do you currently have any finalists for the position?* This question lets you know if you've entered the race late, and if your interview with the company is only a formality. In a situation like this, it's better to know where you stand early on.

The more information you can gather about the hiring procedure, the better able you'll be to give a more confident, thoughtful interview. The more information you gather before the interview, the more you can shield yourself from the fear that occurs as a result of feeling out of control.

6. Background Information on the company

While the amount of background information you could gather about a company is practically endless, it would be ludicrous to try to become a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia. However, knowing something in each of the following categories should significantly improve your odds of getting hired:

- **The Company's personnel** - who are the major players, who was recently hired or let go. It's also a good idea to know something of the history of the company, and who the founders were. For example, if you were interviewing for IBM, it might be considered a faux pas to look puzzled and ask " Who?" at the mention of the name Thomas Watson Sr.
- **The Company's basic structure** - what products or services they provide to which customers, what the various divisions are, and whether they are publicly or privately held.
- **The Company's vital signs** - how the company is doing financially. Are they solvent or struggling? Are they involved in a hostile takeover, or merging with another company? How's their stock faring? You get the idea. You should be able to talk intelligently about the company's financial picture.
- **The Company's divisional or departmental details** - any changes that are taking place that could potentially affect the position you're interviewing for. Is there a new product introduction in the works? How about an overhaul in the company's accounting methods, capital equipment or computer systems?

By arriving at the meeting adequately briefed, you'll make a strong impression on the interviewer and feel much more confident. Best if all you can spend more time discussing your background and the company's needs, not the corporate biography, or company financial report.

7. A complete list of questions you want to ask

During the course of the interview, your dialogue with the other person will spawn a number of questions spontaneously. There may be several important issues to discuss, however, that will never come up unless you take the initiative. For that reason, you should bring a list of questions with you that will address these issues, so that you don't leave the interview uninformed.

Premeditated questions can be grouped into four categories:

- **Company** questions deal with organization, direction, policies, stability, growth, market share, and new products or services of the prospective company or department;
- **Industry** questions deal with the health, growth, change, technological advancement, and personnel of the industry as a whole;
- **Position** questions deal with the scope, responsibilities, travel, compensation policies, and reporting structure of the position your interviewing for ; and
- **Opportunity** questions deal with your own potential for growth or advancement within the company or it's divisions, and the likely timetable for promotion

You may have a special interest or concerns surrounding topics in each category. For example, let's say that you are interviewing with a company that is known for a high rate of personnel turnover. You might want to prepare a carefully worded question that deals with that issue.

Leave your laundry list at home!

Naturally you need to be careful not to come on too strong by asking too many questions - it may turn the interviewer off. Presumably, if there's mutual interest, you'll get all your questions answered at a subsequent interview. The general rule of thumb is to limit the number of premeditated questions to 10 or less. While it's true that you are interviewing the company as much as they are interviewing you, the last thing you want to do is turn a dialogue into an inquisition, or come across as a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia.

You should also be aware that there's one specific taboo to first-level interviewing, in terms of questions you should ask. **Never, ever bring up the issue of salary or benefits.** If the employer initiates a dialogue surrounding these issues, and asks you if you have any questions, fine.

If it appears to the employer that your primary motivation for changing jobs is a higher compensation or benefit package, you'll be out of the door faster than a bolt of lightning. Our suggestion is to take the John.F. Kennedy approach to interviewing - " Ask not what your company can do for you, ask what you can do for your company". This way you can present yourself as a loyal, hardworking, dedicated candidate, rather than an opportunistic job-hopper.

While it's unthinkable to accept or even consider a job without first knowing the financial rewards, or the details of the benefit package, there are better and more timely ways to broach the subject, without endangering your candidacy.

Interview preparation is the most overlooked aspect of the job changing process. A candidate who's fired up and ready to go at the time of interview has a tremendous advantage over a candidate who's not.



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