

The killer interview technique –successful ways for contractors to pass interviews

Introduction

When you are contracting your frequency of interviews will tend to be much higher than those of permanent staff due to the number of different places you are likely to work. You will need to be a good salesperson to continually sell yourself in interviews and get the roles that you want.

In a previous article we offered 21 tips on [how to pass an interview](#). This particular article explains the details of the interview structure, controlling the interview and avoiding some of the common interview pitfalls.

Who Gets the Jobs?

When demand for contractors was outrageously high in the late 1990s contractors got snapped up quickly for simply having the buzzwords on their CV and being available irrespective of their ability to perform at interview.

When the clouds cleared after the crash the market was left with a large surplus of contractors. Good old fashioned commercial reality kicked in and the survival of the fittest contractors began. It still continues. One crucial element to bear in mind when attempting to find a contract is this:

The contractor who wins the contract is the one who know best about getting the contract, NOT necessarily the best contractor available for the role.

To get the contract you need to [write a killer CV](#) which will get you put forward as a candidate. You will then need to [prepare for the interview](#) and ensure you maximise your impact at the interview to get offered the role.

Let's build the motivation for good interview technique by asking ourselves the question 'What is the client looking for?'

What Is The Client Looking For?

Let's start by looking at the interview process from the point of view of the interviewer and use that to guide our approach for being interviewed:

The interviewer will be looking at the following aspects:

Likeability

Do I like this person? Will they fit into the culture with the organisation?

Will they avoid causing me trouble and making me look bad?

Specific Skills

Does this person have the relevant skills and experience for the role, or is their CV a work of fiction?

Bonus Skills & Knowledge

Do they have additional skills that would come in useful?

Do they follow the industry and keep up with the latest advancements?

Initiative

Is this person proactive, able to work alone and use their initiative?

Motivation

Are they a happy and keen person or a lazy merchant of doom?

Communication Skills

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Can they communicate with other human beings?

Do they put up their hand if they don't understand something or try and pretend that they understand perfectly?

Ability to Listen and Understand

Can they listen and understand problems?

Commercial Awareness

Are they commercially aware or have no understanding of cost versus benefit and business goals?

Has Interest in Company

Do they know anything about our company?

During the interview you need to address all the points listed above to give yourself the best chance of success. Basically, tick all the boxes.

The Killer Interview Technique

Based on the motivation above, we can now define the killer interview technique as following these set of rules:

Demonstrate an appreciation of their problems and needs.

Demonstrate you have previous experience that is directly relevant.

Demonstrate you have extra skills that they might find useful.

Demonstrate that you are keen and motivated.

Leave out anything that is not directly relevant.

Demonstrate that you can fulfil their requirements – cover all bases.

This is hardly rocket science I know! However, you will be amazed how bad some people are in interviews.

Interview Preparation

In our previous article about [preparing for an interview](#) we discussed the need to prepare your list of questions tailored to the role based on the aspects the interviewer will be looking for. We also discussed the entire preparation process up until the point you get into the interview room. Let's go over the pre interview part when you get collected from reception and then go onto the ideal structure of the interview.

The Possible Pre-Interview

If you get collected from reception by the interviewer then your interview has in fact already started before you've got into the interview room. By making casual conversation on the way you get the chance to tick 'Likeability' and 'Has Interest In Company'.

There might be more than one person interviewing you and it might not be the decision maker who picks you up. Still, establish straight away if they are going to be in the interview room with you. If they are then start making conversation by asking them questions about themselves – 'how long have you been working here' and 'what do you enjoy most about working here'. You then start ticking the Likeability box from the start.

If you are led into the interview room by someone who is not going to interview you then still go through the motions of asking the questions. You never know. They might get asked their opinion of you.

Let's move onto the interview stage by looking at an ideal interview structure that satisfies the killer technique set of rules and then discuss the pitfalls that can get in the way of you achieving this plan.

An Ideal Interview Structure

An ideal interview has 4 basic sections:

Chat about company

Discuss and understand needs

Sell your solution

Close

You might think this looks like the sections of a sales meeting. That is because it is identical. The whole purpose of an interview is for you to sell yourself to the client. You are the product.

Let's look at each of these sections in a little more detail.

Chat about the company

They ask you about the company and you tell them what you know (from your research you did in your preparation) [Tick – Has Interest In Company]

They are impressed you know stuff, but tell you a bit more.

You listen, smile, nod your head, sound impressed and perhaps ask short questions. [Tick – Likeability, Ability to Listen, Has Interest In Company]

Discuss and Understand their Needs

Driving point : You take control of the conversation and ask them what the business problem is they are attempting to solve, and how they envisage you helping them to solve it. [Tick – Commercial Awareness.]

They will explain the business drivers, what the project is, and what they are hoping to achieve by bringing you in. Some might even ask you if that interests you. Whilst they do this you don't interrupt and nod, asking the odd short question to perhaps explain some jargon. [Tick – Ability To Listen and Understand, Good Communication Skills]

You tell them it sounds exciting and interesting. You then summarise exactly what they have just said to show you can listen and understand a problem. You could then perhaps ask further questions about return on investment, expected timescales etc. [Tick – Good Personal Skills]

Sell Your Solution

Driving Point : Now for the most important part of the interview: You then tell them what specific skills you have that will help them solve their problem, where you have used them before and the results that were achieved. You then summarise how you would tackle their problem. It might something as basic as saying 'I would do it the same way'. [Tick – Specific Skills, Personal Skills].

If possible you then go on and explain how they could perhaps enhance their existing planned approach and use further skills and expertise that you have. Make sure you also mention that of course you would need to evaluate the timescales of doing so and justify the extra effort since there is no point doing stuff just for the sake of it. [Tick – Bonus Skills, General Skills, Commercial Awareness].

After then convincing them you are the person for the role you can then go on to hammer it home by getting out your list of questions and asking them other questions that are more general to show that you have other areas of expertise. As an example, in IT you might ask about their project life cycle, testing approaches, methodologies, configuration management etc. [Tick – Bonus Skills]

Closing The Interview

Driving Point : The next thing is to say you have no further questions and state that you would be really interested in the role to show you are keen.

Very Important Part - The Close: Ask them 'Are you satisfied that I fulfil your requirements?' This gives them the chance to mention any areas they are unsure about which you can then reassure them about. Leave nothing to chance here. You might not have covered all bases and there is no point missing the opportunity to reassure them.

Finally, ask them when they are going to be making a decision. Unless you've had your eyes and ears shut the whole time you should be able to tell if they are considering hiring you.

Okay, that is an example of an ideal interview structure. Let's now look at all the things that can make this go wrong, and how we can overcome them.

How to Avoid Getting Blown Off Track

Many of the interview pitfalls are discussed in detail in our article [How to Pass An Interview](#).

Here are some of the main ones that you might encounter that will throw you off track from the ideal killer interview technique.

Poor Driving

This means that the interview does not adhere to the format above because you failed to ask the correct questions at the right time and also steer away from some of their questions that are not on the ideal route.

Notice there are 3 key driving questions that lead you into each section of the interview. If you don't latch onto these then you risk veering all over the place.

Picking From Sweetie Jar

This is where you fall into the trap of the allowing the interviewer to say something like 'Please talk us through the previous roles you have done' before you have even established their need.

You then end up spouting on about what you have done with no understanding of what their requirements are or if it is relevant.

You are literally inviting them to have a look in the jar and take out anything they might find useful.

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If they ask you that question then you can respond with 'I'm happy to do that, but first I'd like to understand a little bit more about your requirements so that when I explain what I've done in the past I can discuss the stuff that is actually relevant and interesting for you.' You then get back to the second stage of establishing the need.

An Equal Trying To Prove They Are Better Than You

This is where there is someone else in the interview who is supposed to have the same skills as you and test you. Sometimes they have no sense of commercial reality and might even consider you a threat to their superiority.

They can mislead you by taking you on wild journeys into detail for ages just to prove they are better than you. Don't fall for this. Have a little bit of a detailed discussion to prove your worth, but don't go on for ages. Flatter them and tell them how much you would enjoy working with someone like them then get back on track to selling yourself to the person who makes the main hiring decisions.

Timing

You might be doing great but if you don't get to do your whole pitch you won't sell the goods. Keep an eye on the watch and allow for maximum of an hour. Ask how long they have for the interview when you arrive.

Failure to Take Into Account Clients Capability

You might be a super hero at what you do and/or the client might not actually have a clue. However, there is bound to be a capability gap between yourself and the client, and you need to identify what that gap is.

If you are clearly more capable than the client you need to establish whether it would be risky to let your capability cat out of the bag. They might feel threatened that you could make them look stupid. More likely they will be impressed by your supreme knowledge. In this instance the advice would be to perhaps pop out the cats tail to test their feeling then bring out the rest of the cat and her kittens if it is appropriate. Basically you need to avoid not being hired because you are too good.

If they are more capable than you then just smile and say how impressed you are. But, don't say things like 'Great, I'd like to learn xyz.' Mentioning how the contract will benefit you is of no interest to them and is a common BIG mistake during an interview.

Summary

This article has discussed how to conduct an interview using the Killer Interview Technique which is closely aligned with a standard sales pitch.

You are the product. Sell yourself.

Good luck.

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