

Preparing for an interview

Introduction

So, you've made it to the interview stage having written a killer cv which was a targeted CV for the position. You now need to ensure you maximise your chances of being offered the position. This article discusses how to prepare for the interview.

The Basics - Where, When and Who

Ensure you know the interview location and leave plenty of time to account for delays in travel. Arriving at an interview late means you already start the interview from behind the rest of the candidates. It gives the impression that you can't organise yourself and plan. Better to be an hour early than a minute late. You can always grab a coffee and go through your notes. It also reduces the panic that could set in if you arrive in a hurry and aren't relaxed.

If you are driving then ensure in advance that you will be able to park, that the car has petrol in it, and that you have change in your pocket for parking meters. On the morning before you set off check the road traffic reports.

Take an umbrella if in case it rains. You don't want to turn up soaked from head to toe.

Make sure you look the part. Nice suit, plain shirt and tie, and don't carry your documents in a plastic bag. Neatly folded in an envelope is fine.

Make sure you know the name of the person(s) you are meeting and their job title(s). If the name(s) appear difficult to pronounce then ensure you check first with the agent so you get it right. Also, if the person(s) you are meeting has a name which could imply male or female, make sure you find out from the agent which one they are first. This avoids you making mistakes like assuming they are the secretary to the person you are meeting when in actual fact they are the person you are meeting. No point shooting yourself in the foot.

Keep details on you in case you have trouble finding the place and need to make a phone call to confirm them. Also, if you are late then you can phone politely in advance to warn them.

Motivation - What They Will be Looking For at an Interview

Now, let's examine the needs and motivations of the employer and then use that to drive the rest of the interview preparation.

An event has occurred which has necessitated the need of the employer to hire someone. They advertise and filter candidates down to those they wish to interview. These are some of the things they will be looking for in an interview:

Is this person skilled for the position?

Do I feel they have a good grasp of their subject matter?

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

Can this person work on their own and use their initiative?

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

Is this person a nice person to get on with or do I think they are arrogant with a self inflated ego and delusions of grandeur?

Is this person going to make me look stupid, or help me to look good?

Are they presentable? Do they suffer from personal hygiene problems?

Can they communicate with other human beings?

Do they perhaps know a little bit more which could help give an edge?

Do they understand my problems and what would be required of them?

Do they give an indication of laziness or are they prepared to get stuck in?

Do I feel they are trying to solve my problems or just trying to get a job regardless?

Are they a positive person or a merchant of doom?

Are they a good listener?

Are they more focused on telling me how great they are or on filling my needs?

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

Do they know anything about our company? Now having an idea of what the interviewer will be looking for we can start the preparation.

Step 1: Find Out Why They Need You

They will need you for perhaps one of the following common reasons:

Spending too much money and feel that by spending more money on you will make things more efficient.

Someone else has left the job and they need to be replaced.

They need you to do a bespoke piece of work due to legislation they need to adhere to.

They need you to train some of their staff with the niche skills you offer.

Press your agent to find this out. Or, use other contacts to find out. You might know someone else who works there. If you cannot find this out then it will be the first thing you will need to ascertain at the start of the interview. Without knowing this makes it pretty much impossible to tailor your responses to meet their requirements.

If you can get it before then great as it will help you to refine your preparation around their needs.

Step 2: Learn About The Company

This is to ensure you tick the box for 'at least he did his homework and found out a bit about the company'. At the start of the interview you will most certainly be asked 'Do you know much about the company?' you will look a fool if you say no. You need something prepared. Just the basics.

An answer that will suffice would be something along the generalised form of 'Yes, I researched your company last week. [tells them you made an effort]. I understand you have 20,000 thousand employees world wide over 40 countries. It was interesting to read recently in the news about XYZ. This might make an impact on the share price which looks to be holding up well. Do you own shares in the company? [Notice how it finishes on a question to keep the flow of conversation going]'

Go to their web site if they have one, or trawl the internet to find out what you can. This type of information is useful:

How many employees

When it was formed. Who started it .

The company mission statement and unique selling proposition (USP).

Which countries has offices in.

Expansion rate of the company.

Annual turnover.

Current share price, and how it has done over time.

Recent press statements. If not on their site, then look in [Google news](#) .

Step 3: Write Down the Skills Required in the Job

Make a short list of what you think the requirements are. Use the motivation of what they are looking for in an interview to drive this part. An example of your list might be something like this:

Visual Basic - since version 3. 5 years experience.

Replace an existing team member - so some maintenance involved. Wonder why they are leaving?

Good communication skills since I will be speaking to end users.

Probably want some requirements extraction experience.

Small project so should have done deployments, maintenance, testing etc. Whole life cycle.

Can work on my own. So, probably need to be commercially aware. Cost versus benefits etc.

Notice that this example has mainly focused on the technical skills. Keep in mind all the other non technical ones though, as these will be needed to drive the motivation behind your list of questions.

Step 4: Your List of Questions

This is key to the process. There is nothing wrong with physically getting out your list of questions when you are at the interview and using them. It shows you have prepared and made an effort. Bonus points again. It is better to commit them to memory as they will then not look as wooden when asked. Even if you do remember the whole lot, still get out your piece of paper at the end to show them that you did do some preparation. [If you don't bother to prepare, then just get something out your pocket and pretend it is your preparation - oh, did I really give that trick away?]

Your list of questions need to follow these guidelines:

The questions you ask must promote discussion about topics which you can demonstrate you have all the skills required for the job.

Your questions must address all of the aspects the interviewer is looking for.

Your questions should also demonstrate that you know just that little bit more than is required. Sort of bonus features if they take you on.

Step 5: Day of The Interview

Before you leave the house, do a quick search on Google to get latest share prices, and any mention of the company in Google news. Having fresh up to the date information on the company will give you extra points when they ask the inevitable first question.

Step 6: Waiting in reception

Get your notes out. Brush up on the company facts. Try and commit your questions to memory.

If you see one, grab a copy of any magazine published by the company and try and read something about recent press statements, releases etc. I personally remember once responding to the first question at an interview about a companies recent product launch for all their mobile operators. The guy was gob smacked that I knew about it. I actually confessed that I'd just read it outside his office in the company magazine. We had a bit of a chuckle about it and it set the interview off to a good start.

Another good trick is to take a look around the walls of the offices and see if you can spot any award certificates like ISO 9001, Investment in People, etc. They can be useful in your opening conversation or for the answering the first question.

Step 7: Your Opening Conversation

You meet, shake hands and then you are led to the room where the interview is being taken place. Chances are you are probably met by the person who is interviewing you. It is a good idea to have an opening conversation prepared for the walk between reception and the room. It removes the awkward silence and gets you off to a good start. Some examples might include:

"So, tell me Bob how long have you been working for XYZ Ltd?"

"I noticed you had an award for XYZ. You must be proud of that?"

You will tend to find the interviewer will ask the inevitable 'Did you have any trouble getting here?' Always answer 'No problem. So, tell me Bob... how did you come to work for XYZ Ltd'. Don't start going into how you got here, which route you took etc etc. It is boring and they really don't care. Switch it round and get the conversation talking about them. Take an interest from the start.

Closing Comments

The key to making an interview a success is demonstrating that you understand the needs of the client and that you have the ability to help them and can perhaps provide just that little bit more. Doing your homework in preparation for what is essentially a mini sales pitch makes all the difference.

In a further article I'll drill down into the interview itself and explain how to ensure the interview itself goes smoothly.

Good luck in your job search.

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