

Spotlight on You: How to Shine During an Interview

For many jobseekers, the job interview represents one of the hardest parts of the search: the unknown variable. While you can meticulously craft a cover letter and resumé over which you have complete control, you lose some of that control when you step through the door to your interview. Notice the word *some* and not *all*? You might not have as much power as the person who is interviewing you, but you have a great deal of influence over how the interview goes.

Preparing for an interview is like getting ready for a final exam. By being fully prepared, you will feel more comfortable and confident, and you'll ace any interview you go into.

A WEEK BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

A successful job interview begins before you walk into the office of a prospective employer. Wise jobseekers do extensive research on the companies, industries, and jobs in which they are interested. You can find this information in trade magazines, on the Internet, and on the company's Web site. If you have networked with anyone in the company, tap that person as a resource as you prepare for the interview.

Obtain and know the company's mission statement.

- Find the mission statement on the company's Web site or by inquiring with a receptionist.
- Take note of the company's significant achievements and challenges.
- Think about what you can do for the company.

Read the daily newspapers and business periodicals.

- Use keyword searches to pinpoint information about the company.

- Research industry trends.
- Be knowledgeable about current events that could affect the company/industry.

Review the job description.

- Review the duties and responsibilities of the job and assess how closely you come to matching the position.
- Note the key words that the company used (e.g., “detail-oriented”) and plan to pepper your dialogue with those phrases.
- Check salary ranges online and be prepared to back up your salary request with local or national statistics.

THE DAY BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

You never have quite as much time as you think you do. That’s why it’s best to take care of some practical matters the day before the interview. Arriving early is professional; arriving late is not an option. And while no one typically admits to being judgmental, your interviewer will likely draw some conclusions based on how you present yourself during your short time together. So be punctual and prepared and look sharp.

Prepare for take off.

- Know the exact location of the interview and the best route to get there. Consider a test run if you are unfamiliar with the area.
- Print out additional copies of your resumé and portfolio materials.

Consider your clothing.

- Choose clothing in line with the company dress code. When in doubt, go formal.

- Dress simply; avoid bright colors, busy patterns, and loud accessories.
- Avoid scents that might get on you and your clothing (this includes cigarette smoke).

THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

Your challenge during the interview is to convince the interviewer that you are the right person for the position. You have to “sell” the idea that you are the best person for the job. Researchers who have analyzed job interviews believe that most interviewers make up their minds about job candidates within the first 30 seconds of meeting them. This decision is based on what psychologists call the Halo Effect, meaning the effect that encountering you for the first time has on the interviewer.

Make a great first impression.

- Arrive early and wait patiently.
- Greet your interviewer by name and handshake.

“Sell” yourself with a smile.

- Be enthusiastic and upbeat.
- Reflect excitement in your speech, body language, and gestures.
- Demonstrate your commitment to team work and professional growth.

Put your best foot forward.

- Use engaged posture and body language.
- Listen actively.
- Answer questions concisely and honestly.
- Be ready to ask questions.

Keep your cool even if you get uncomfortable.

- Describe your skills and link each skill to an example from your work experience.
- Show your interest by referring to a company news byte or press release.
- Explain a project you handled by setting priorities, resolving conflicts, and overcoming obstacles.
- Resist the urge to say negative things about previous jobs. Always speak in the positive.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE INTERVIEW

No matter how the interview ends, you should send a brief letter to the interviewer, thanking him or her for taking the time to meet with you. Your letter will reinforce the points you made during the interview and will show your level of interest in the company and the job.

You should also jot down some notes about your performance, any questions that caught you off guard, and any things you learned about the company that are worth noting.