james moore & associates

How to Sell Yourself in an Interview

Quick Start Guide

I. Pre-Interview Preparation

Research the Company and the Interviewer(s)

Well-prepared interviewees double their chances of getting an offer over those who show up for interviews to wing it. With the wealth of information available online today, unless the company is tiny or in stealth mode, you have many ways to walk into every interview well-armed. Research the company's business, products, history, markets, competitors, finances, executives, corporate plans and recent news headlines. You can find this information on the company's own Web site, on business resources Web sites, and through search engines. If you know the name(s) of the people who will interview you, research them as well. Information about interviewers is most commonly found on LinkedIn, but you should also google them for ancillary and personal facts.

Questions for the Interviewer

Prepare a list of at least 15 to 20 open-ended questions — a minimum of five each about the company, the department or project, the interviewer and the position. Questions that begin with "Tell me about..." work the best. The benefits of having questions prepared are:

- The answers provide you with valuable information for evaluating any potential offer.
- They are an excellent way of showing enthusiasm and interest in the company and position.
- They create a favorable impression of you by showing that you are organized and are serious about the interview.

Make certain that you write these questions out and that you take the list with you. By writing them out, you ensure that:

- You formulate better questions.
- You organize them in a more logical and effective sequence.
- You don't forget the questions because you will take the list with you to the interview and use them during the interview.

An effective way to use these questions in the interview is to memorize the first one or two questions to get the interviewer talking. After the interview is underway, ask the person, "Do you mind if I take some notes?" Almost no one will object — after all, interviewers themselves take notes, usually on your resume. Then, take out your note pad, have your questions on one side and take your notes on the other. Examples of good open-ended questions include:

Company

Assuming you've researched the company thoroughly, you should have answers to most of the following questions before the interview. In this case, you can use the interview to confirm the information that you've found and to fill in any blanks.

- What are its products, services and target markets?
- What has been its history (especially if it is a relatively new company)?
- Where does it fit into the marketplace?
- Who are its top competitors?
- What are the company's advantages relative to the competition?
- What are the challenges posed by the competition?
- What are the company's corporate goals?
- How does it plan to meet these goals?
- What sets the company apart as a place of employment; i.e., what makes it a good place to work?

Department or Project

- What is its primary mission or objective?
- Where does it fit into the overall scheme of the company?
- How is it organized?
  - Staff size.
  - Reporting structure.
  - Subdivision of responsibilities.
- What is the technical environment?
  - Hardware and operating system platforms.
  - Programming languages.
  - Other technologies.
- What are the group's short-term (3-12 month) objectives?
- How well are these objectives being met? Why?
- What is being done to ensure that the objectives are met?
- What are the key challenges that are facing the group at this time?
- What is planned after the short-term goals are achieved?

Interviewer

- How long have you been with the company?
- [If he or she has been there six months or longer] What have you liked about working here?
- [If new to the company] What attracted you to the company and what have you found positive since you have been here?
- What kind of people succeed here, or what qualities do successful people in the company/department have in common?
- What does a new person have to be most aware of on first joining?
- What can they do to ensure that they get off to a good start with the company?
- What do you look for in the people who are hired to work for you?
- What do you do to help a person get off to a successful start?
- What sort of feedback and review mechanism do you use to keep a person on the right track?
- Do you perceive that you have a management style? If so, what is it?
- What do you see as the major challenges in your position?
- What can your subordinates do to make your job easier?

Position

- If I were hired, what is the most immediate thing that I could do to help the group meet its objectives?
- What do you expect me to accomplish in the first six months?
- What would be a list of possible assignments after that?
- What are the key skills that one would have to possess in order to be successful in this position?
- What do you feel makes this an attractive position?
- What would be the most important thing that a person needs to be aware of in order to adjust successfully to this environment or position?

If the position involves developing a new computer or software product that is sold on the market, the following make good additional or alternate questions:

- What needs and markets is the product intended to address?
- How well does it do so?
- Who are the chief competitors?
- What are the company's advantages against these competitors?
- What are the challenges it faces from the competition?
- How is it meeting these challenges?
- Where is the product in the current release cycle?
- What needs to be done to meet the next release date?
- What does the company expect of its employees in order to meet release dates?
- What new technologies is the company moving into in order to stay competitive in the market?

Reasons Why You Would Be a Good Employee

Make a list of 15 to 20 reasons why you feel that you would be a good employee. Organize these in the areas of Technical Experience, Job Skills, and Personal Qualities. For example:

Technical Experience

- Operating systems and platforms
- Programming languages
- Databases
- Development Methodologies
- Modern frameworks
- Software tools
- Latest buzzwords in your area specialization

Job Skills

- Design
- Programming
- Debugging
- Documentation
- Testing and Integration
- Presentations
- Customer Interface
- Project Management
- Training

Personal Qualities

- Hardworking
- Self-starter
- Fast learner
- Able to handle complex problems
- Trustworthy
- Team player
- Reliable

After making the list, think of at least one (preferably two or three) concrete examples of your past accomplishments which illustrate each of the above qualities. It is not necessary to think of a separate example for each quality. One particular project may have drawn on most of your strengths and can illustrate them well. However, make sure you have at least five different accomplishments for all of the above points combined.

"Tell Me About Yourself"

In response to the question "Tell me about yourself," you should be prepared with a short (maximum two-minute) response as below. Under no circumstances should you give a lengthy speech. Even five minutes would be much too long.

In replying, don't rehash the contents of your resume nor recite your biography. Instead, imagine that the question were "Why should I hire you?" or "What makes you a good fit for this job?"

Your answer should adhere to the following structure:

- A headline sentence that summarizes you as a professional in a way that relates to the position for which you are being interviewed: e.g., "I am a highly experienced software development manager with extensive experience in the ecommerce field."
- A two-minute verbal resume, with particular emphasis upon your accomplishments and skills rather than just your responsibilities. Try to pick ones that are most relevant to the position for which you are applying.
- A general statement of your career goals. It should be brief, non-specific, and relevant to the position at hand; e.g., "At this point, I am looking for a management level position in engineering with a promising company that can benefit from my skills and expertise."
- A tie-down question at the end; e.g., "Does that quick summary give you an adequate overview of who I am?"

Anticipate Objections

Prepare answers to likely objections, e.g., reasons for leaving previous companies, short job stay, employment gaps, incomplete education. Your answers need to take the objection seriously but do not be defensive. The tone of your response is as important as the substance.

Immediately Preceding the Interview

The following guidelines should be followed as you prepare to leave for the interview:

- Dress in a conservative, professional manner.
- Be at least 10 minutes early for the interview but don't announce yourself more than 5-10 minutes before the appointment time.
- Reread your resume, so that during the interview you know it thoroughly without having to look at it and are prepared to answer questions about it. (Your resume should not include anything that you cannot talk about.)
- Review your objective for going on the job interview (i.e., your goal is for you to advance to the next step on the way to the job offer!). The evaluation of the opportunity should always come after the interview.

II. The Interview

Overview

In the allotted time that follows, both employer and candidate will be given the opportunity to ask the questions necessary to gain enough information to decide whether or not this is a good match for both. In essence, these questions are intended to provide an important exchange of information for each party. The way in which these questions are answered, however, may go a long way towards determining your desirability as a prospective employee.

The Opening

Since the most important impressions are formed within the first few minutes of an interview, it is critical that your first impression be a good one. The following guidelines are essential to achieving this most important first impression:

- Extend a firm, friendly handshake.
- Smile.
- Maintain good eye contact.

Answering the Employer's Questions

Yes/No Questions

If at all possible, a question should always be answered with a 'yes' answer (i.e., a positive response). This is particularly important when the question concerns your personal attitudes (e.g., "Would you work overtime?" or "Would you do maintenance or porting?"). Remember, you evaluate and make a decision after the interview, not during. If a question must be answered with a 'no' answer (e.g., you're asked about technical skills you don't have), it is important to respond in one of two ways:

1. "I'm not strong in that area, but I do have experience in _____", or "I know that wouldn't take me very long to learn since I already have experience in this (other) area _____." In other words, you minimize the negative and accentuate the positive.

2. You ask, "Is that skill important to the position?" and then listen to the response. Many times, the employer will say, "No, it's not required. I was just interested in whether or not you had it." In other words, don't assume that just because you don't have a particular skill or technical knowledge, you won't get the job.

Open-Ended Questions

These are largely attitudinal questions (e.g., "What is your attitude towards overtime?") and should always be answered in a positive, flexible manner.

Asking the Employer Questions

It is during this time that you can ask and gain valuable information that you need to eventually evaluate the opportunity, and, at the same time, demonstrate enthusiasm to the employer. This is done primarily through the use of asking the open-ended questions you prepared prior to the interview.

The Salary Question

It is essential that the question, "How much money do you want?" be tactfully deflected back to the interviewer since it is virtually impossible to accurately guess the specific number the interviewer may have in mind. If you set the number, you run the risk of either not being offered the job at all (by saying a figure greater than they were prepared to go) or shortchanging yourself (by setting the number below their budgeted salary amount).

Therefore, it is imperative that "the ball be thrown back into the employer's court". The following statement is designed to accomplish just that:

> "Mr./Ms. _____, rather than give you a specific amount, I would like to leave you with the thought that I am both qualified and interested in the position we've been discussing. If you feel the same about me, I would like to rely on your honesty and integrity to make me the best offer that you can which is both fair within your internal salary structure and competitive in the marketplace."

Usually, such a response is satisfactory. However, some interviewers will demand more. If you are asked for your current compensation, answer truthfully, stating your base salary and any guaranteed cash incentives, bonuses or other payments that show up on your W-2. Do not include fringe benefits, such as medical plans, retirement contributions, stock options, 401K contributions, etc. You may mention these but clearly identify them as separate from your base compensation.

If you are asked a direct question, "Would you accept $x?", never say "yes" or "no", but deflect the question back to the interviewer: "If you feel that $x is a fair amount and it is your best offer, please make me that offer, because I would like to work here."

Closing the Interview

Interviewers form opinions about you during the interview. These opinions turn into conclusions shortly after you walk out the door. If their opinion contains serious concerns about you, you will likely not get the offer. Therefore, it is essential that you uncover any

concerns in the mind of the interviewer and put them to rest while you are still face to face with them. Later will likely be too late.

At the start of the interview, find out how long the interview is scheduled to last. Then, monitor the time in an unobtrusive manner. With about ten minutes left in the allotted time, begin reviewing your interviewer's opinions regarding your candidacy. One way to do this is to ask the following question:

> "Mr./Ms. _____, you and I have just spent about ___ minutes discussing my background relative to this position. At this point, I want to let you know that I feel confident that I can do this job and would really like to work here. Now, I would like to ask your opinion of me. How do you think I would fit into this position? What do you think are the positives that I would bring to the job? Do you have any concerns? What are they?"

When the interviewer lists positives about you, agree with him or her. Then expand on the positives by giving further examples that support his or her opinion and by stating additional qualifications that you possess that are relevant to the job.

When the interviewer discusses his or her concerns, listen to them carefully, restate them in question form to make sure that you understand the concerns, and then explain them away. Some of these concerns may be simple misunderstandings; e.g., they don't think you have a certain skill because they forgot to ask you about it. Answer these concerns directly by pointing out that you do possess the necessary credentials.

Other concerns may be more difficult. They may be looking for a skill that you don't have or don't have enough of. In this case, try to minimize the deficiency and point out compensating strengths that are important to the position. Additionally, emphasize your confidence that you would be able to get up to speed in the position and be productive quickly. You may not always be successful at this, but you will be surprised at how often a persistent, confident approach will overcome the interviewer's concerns.

Remember that perfect candidates are rare and that, even if one were available with 100% of the desired skills and experience, they would not necessarily want the assignment, because there would be no technical challenge, personal growth or new learning involved. You may even point this out to the interviewer, if appropriate, and emphasize that what you find attractive about the position is the opportunity to learn new skills and that this would make you a good long-term employee. When discussing each concern, don't move on to the next one until you have gotten agreement from the interviewer that this concern should not stand in your way of getting an offer. If you can't answer the interviewer's concerns, you are not likely to get hired.

If you succeed in getting agreement that there should be no concerns about hiring you, then ask for a commitment to be taken to the next step; e.g., to be called back for another interview, or to be made an offer.

Handling the Noncommittal Interviewer

Sometimes interviewers will be very reluctant to give you feedback. Common responses are "I'd like to think about it and get back to you", "I'd like to discuss it with the other people that you met", or "I have several more people to interview." Don't accept these kinds of responses as a justification for not giving you feedback. Be gracious but be persistent.

One way to do this is to say, "I don't want to put you on the spot by asking you for a commitment, but I *would* like to know how you feel about me. At this point, I am simply asking for your opinion. What do you think are the positives that I bring to the position?" Then wait for an answer. If none is forthcoming, that usually is a sign that you're not going to get the job. At this point, there is not much more that you can do.

Nevertheless, it is essential to ask for feedback, because if you fail to ask the question and don't get the offer, it might have been because you were afraid to uncover and answer any concerns. Candidates who confidently ask for feedback and address interviewer concerns have about double the success rate on interviews compared to those who don't.

III. General Tips

- Be on time.
- Turn off your cell phone and all other electronic devices.
- Leave your smart glasses or similar devices in the car or at home.
- Dress appropriately for the culture; don't overdress or dress too casually.
- Don't wear perfume, aftershave, or other scents. Many people have sensitivities to these.
- Greet your interviewer with a firm handshake.
- Sit up straight and maintain reasonable amounts of eye contact.
- Pay attention and look interested.
- Relax. Don't fidget.
- Control nervous mannerisms.
- Smile and look friendly.
- Give honest answers. Interviewers are trained to look for body signals that indicate when someone is lying.
- Speak clearly. Don't mumble or rush your sentences.
- Don't volunteer negative information about yourself.
- Be polite.
- Be confident and positive, not arrogant and over-eager.
- Don't interrupt.
- Don't let any silence shake you.
- Be genuine.
- Keep to the point when asking and answering questions.
- Keep your answers as concise as possible.
- Thank your interviewer for their time.
- Send a thank-you email immediately after the interview.
- Send a courteous follow-up email if you have not heard back from the company within two weeks.

We hope that these guidelines and tips will be as helpful to you as they have been to many of our other candidates. If you need assistance in other areas of your job search, contact us or visit our Web site (http://www.jamesmoore.com/).