

## Four Tips on How to Approach Job Interviews

I've had a non-linear career path, so I've done job interviews for private firms, nonprofits, and academic positions. I've also been on the other side, getting involved in hiring at various places.

The following tips are obvious to mid-career professionals, but they seem less well-known to those who have just entered the job market. These tips help you avoid common mistakes during interviews in the academic and non-academic job markets.

**First, hiring is a solution to an organization's problem.** So during the interview process, the focus should be on why and how you are an excellent solution to a specific problem. The focus should not be on how smart you are. How do we know what the organization's problem is? Getting that answer is relatively easy if you know someone inside the organization directly involved in hiring. Even if you don't, there are still other ways. On the academic job market, you can ask such questions to the search committee chair. On the alt-academic job market, you can raise such questions to the recruiter/hiring manager. Responding to this kind of question is their job. Knowing what the other needs and wants has to be the first step in preparing for a job interview.

**Second, be yourself. You can't and don't need to be someone else.** If the organization you applied for doesn't like who you are or what you want to be, think about whether there's room for compromise or it's just a bad fit. An interview is a process in which the two parties learn about each other. In the end, if you realize that your and the organization's values and needs are not strongly aligned, not getting the job offer is a blessing in disguise. There will be another job, another opportunity.

**Third, listen actively. An interview is a two-way street.** On the academic job market, a candidate performs a job talk followed by a Q&A. On the alt-academic job market, a candidate conducts multiple rounds of interviews with multiple stakeholders. The settings vary, but the principle is quite similar. When you talk, consider that your words are an invitation to a conversation. After your share is done, let the others talk, listen to them carefully, learn what they are curious about, and engage actively.

Paraphrasing what Maya Angelou said, most people don't recall exactly what you said (or even who you are), but they will never forget how you made them feel. Make the audience feel respected, understood, and connected. For instance, consider writing down what the other people asked, repeating their questions briefly to make sure you understood them correctly, and answering all of them thoughtfully.

**Lastly, know thy audience.** An interviewer needs to interview multiple candidates. It is a tough and often boring job. You can be kind to them by making the interview experience 10% more pleasant. On the academic or alt-academic job market, it's easy to know who your interviewer will be. Study their backgrounds, interests, and recent projects (Googling is your friend). In an academic job talk, consider relating what you say to the interests of your target audience. Doing so signals that you know what they care about, and that you care about it too. In the alt-academic job market, a candidate does multiple one-on-one interviews. In most of these settings, one-third or half of the interview time is devoted to Q&A. When an interviewer asks what you would like to know, don't ask what you really would like to know. You can ask these questions once you get an offer. Instead, ask questions that the other side would consider interesting and important. Once again, doing so signals that you understand what your interviewer does and are willing to listen and understand it better.

Every job interview is stressful, but it is a learning process about yourself and many great organizations. You can help yourself by helping the other side. I hope you've learned something useful from the above tips, and please don't hesitate to share your tips with me and others.