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9-405-014
OCTOBER 13, 2004

A Note on Interviewing

A professional person will virtually always be asked to interview with from one to twenty-five or more different members of a hiring organization. Many people look forward to these interviews, especially initial "screening" interviews, with the same ambivalence that precedes an operation—and with good reason. Interviewing, for many people, is an anxiety-arousing, painful experience in which they display little skill or common sense. **Exhibit 1** outlines some of the common problems that arise in interviews.

The archetype of the poor interviewee is the young student. Such a person goes into an interview, especially at the beginning of the recruiting season, with an awkward feeling that is usually reinforced by his or her friends ("Hey, Jerry, is that really you underneath that suit and without any hair?"). Sometimes people have a gnawing feeling, which they know is silly, that they are basically unemployable (born in the wrong century). At some level, these young people often see the interviewer as someone with life-or-death power over them (which frightens some and enrages others). The fright, anger, and awkwardness are made even worse in the interview when the interviewer doesn't behave as the interviewee somehow expects. Trembling or hostile, interviewees exhibit defensive behaviors that even they usually recognize are not in their own best interests. As a result, some people have real difficulty getting job offers—even people who eventually go on to have splendid careers.

Much of the anxiety that accompanies a person into an interview can be reduced or eliminated by following the procedures outlined previously in this book. People who are confident in knowing who they are and what they want invariably feel more relaxed going into interviews than people who don't. Even people who spend just a half-hour or so before an interview (or a set of interviews) doing some research on the employer tend to be more confident and relaxed.

In addition, we have found that anxiety can be significantly reduced if you have a realistic understanding of the context of the job interview, the different types of job interviews, and the situation the interviewer is in. A surprisingly large number of people go into interviewing situations with very unrealistic assumptions.

For example, most job interviews are thirty to sixty minutes long. As any successful salesperson knows, it's extremely difficult to sell an expensive and complex product (and let's face it, you are an expensive and complex product) within a short time constraint without excellent preparation. Yet many interviewees do not prepare adequately.

Professor Monica Higgins adapted this note, as the basis for class discussion, from James G. Clawson, John P. Kotter, Victor Faux, and Charles C. McArthur, *Self-Assessment and Career Development*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), with the permission of James G. Clawson.

Being prepared in a job interview has two elements: (1) anticipating what the interviewer will want from you and being ready to supply it; (2) knowing what you want from the interviewer and being ready to ask for it.

Exhibits 2 and **3** supply data on what interviewers want from an interview. When 236 recruiters were asked what behavior on the part of the interviewees led to the "best" interviews, they responded as shown in **Exhibit 2**. Interviewers seem generally to like interviewees who have "done their homework"—who know what they want, and who know something about the organization they are interviewing. In another survey of well-known business and industrial concerns, college recruiters were asked what types of questions they typically ask in an interview (see **Exhibit 3**). **Exhibit 4** lists some common questions by interviewers with different styles. Well-prepared students take the time to create short (one- to five-minute) articulate answers to these kinds of questions before they begin interviewing prospective employers. These students seem to be much more successful.

Types of Interviews

When preparing for interviews and while interviewing, it is important to remember that there are a number of different kinds of job interviews.

Screening Interviews

The primary purpose of the screening interview is to save an organization and its managers time and money by limiting the number of job applications they will have to examine. The interviewer has a very limited number of more or less specific criteria that constitute the rough screen. The question he or she is addressing is simply: Does the interviewee make it through the screen or not? The campus interview is typically a screening interview. So are many of the interviews in large companies with a person from "personnel."

The most common mistake made by job applicants in screening interviews is to try to get into too much depth. In many cases, especially with larger corporations, the responsibility of the individual doing the screening stops at selecting from among the interviewees the most appropriate candidates to be invited for a second interview, usually on the company's premises. The interviewer in such cases is seldom the final decision maker regarding a job offer and may not even know the specific requirements of the jobs to be filled. Consequently, an interviewee who attempts to tell an interviewer everything about him or herself, and who tries to learn everything about the company and job, as if both parties had to make a final decision regarding employment on the spot, seriously undermines a screening interview.

Decision Interviews

A second type of interview is with the person (or one of the persons) whose responsibility it is actually to make the hiring decision. These interviews sometimes conclude with the interviewer making a job offer. The question that guides the interviewer's behavior is this: Do I want to hire this person? In this type of interview, you want to make your full "sales presentation." Forgetting or not having time to tell all the major messages you have—about what you want in a job and career, why you want that, and why you think you can help the company with its needs and problems—can diminish your possibilities of getting a job offer. At this stage, it is important to go into detail.

Data-Gathering Interviews

A third type of interview is with people who will have only an input into the hiring decision, and who often will end up working with the person who is hired. Because they have less at stake in the hiring decision, they often are more casual and less prepared for the interview. The key question that tends to go through their minds is this: What's it going to be like around here if this person is hired?

Interviewees often treat this third type of interview just like the second one; this is a mistake that can create problems. It's important in this third type of interview just to establish some rapport with the person, and not to try to make the big sale. Coming on too strong with potential peers might hurt an interviewee (few people like the idea of too much competition around them). Because the stakes are somewhat lower in this type of interview than in the second type, one can also safely allocate more time to gathering information from the interviewer (more on that in the next chapter).

Although the objectives of these three types of interviews are different, they are seldom in direct conflict with the objectives of the interviewee. Both parties want very much to find someone who can meet their needs. A job decision never works out really well unless both sets of needs are met. (If only one set is met, the employee will typically quit or be fired before too long). For these reasons it is in the best interest of both parties to see if they have compatible resources and needs. Yet interviewees sometimes assume an adversary relationship, taking the interviewer's objectives to be in conflict with their own. They behave in a somewhat guarded and competitive way. Not only does that behavior undermine the interview, but it usually gives the interviewer a poor impression of the interviewee.[1]

An Interviewer's Perspective

I spend nearly all my time between January and March interviewing at universities. It's a tough three months. I'm almost always on the road and away from home. The pace can be very hectic.

Yesterday is a beautiful example of the difficulties involved in this job. I got in late two nights ago. Yesterday morning during breakfast I briefly looked over the résumés of the 15 people I was supposed to see that day. Three of them looked like a mistake; I couldn't imagine why they wanted an interview with us. Because I was running late I walked three blocks in the rain to flag down a cab. I managed to get to the campus a few minutes before my first interview—who didn't show up. I got some coffee and then had a good interview at 9:30. When I asked the 10:00 interviewee, shortly after we started talking, if he had worked full time before coming to school, he gave this annoyed look and said, "I sent you my résumé two months ago—haven't you read it yet?" The interview went downhill from there. My schedule had no break in it until 12:30, and for that last half-hour I thought more about my bladder than about the student I was interviewing. I think my 2:30 interview was just trying to kill a half-hour between the naps he takes in his classes. He didn't even know what business we were in and had no conception of what he wanted to do. What a waste of time. My 4:00 interviewee was a very impressive young man, but I can't get over the feeling that I was conned. Some of these kids are more skilled at interviewing than I am. When I got back to my hotel at 5:45, I

[1] Interviewers usually react negatively if they think the interviewee isn't being honest. This happens surprisingly often. In a 1973 survey of interviewers at Harvard Business School, 60 percent said they felt they were being more honest that the interviewees, while only 9 percent said they felt less honest than the interviewees. An interviewee who assumes an adversary stance often comes across as being not very honest.

immediately started reviewing the day and my notes. Already the interviews were beginning to blur together. You know, you end up thinking, now which one was the guy who said such and such.

Last week I came up against one of the parts of the job that really annoys me. I interviewed a young woman that I think could turn out to be a very important addition to one of our divisions. But I decided against recommending her because it was too risky. You see, in evaluating my contribution it can take years and years to determine whether the people I recommended (who eventually join the company) are a real success. But it only takes 12 months or less to determine if they are a disaster. So I tend to be evaluated more on not producing disasters. And that, of course, discourages risk taking. And hiring that woman would, I'm afraid, be risky.

I hired seven people for my department last year. I must have interviewed around 50 people. Of all the parts of my job, I feel in many ways least sure about this one. I keep thinking, there must be a better way.

Interviewing is often an intrusion on other parts of my job. As a result, I'm sure that at least some of the time when I'm interviewing someone my mind and heart are elsewhere. And I can't believe I do an effective job under those circumstances. I often wish I could spend a lot more time with interviewees, but that's just not possible.

I've read a few things on the subject of how to interview, but they haven't been terribly useful. I still wonder if I'm asking the right questions or correctly interpreting the interviewee's remarks.

I just don't know what to do with the person who doesn't really know much about us or our industry, or the one who isn't sure what he or she wants. You could spend hours talking to that kind of person trying to sort things out.

On some days when I'm tired and hassled, I wish the interviewees would run the interview. I've actually seen a few who did just that.

Some of the most common mistakes interviewees make stem from their own inaccurate assumptions regarding the interviewer and the position such a person is in. Job hunters, for example, often behave as if the responsibility for the success or failure of the interview were solely the interviewer's. They themselves assume no responsibility. They further behave as if they expect the interviewer to be extremely competent and working under ideal conditions. When the interviewer subsequently doesn't behave as he or she "should," these people get angry or annoyed, and that feeling further undermines the interview. Less-than-ideal conditions, a less-than-perfect interviewer, and an interviewee who is prepared to tolerate neither systematically produce bad interviews.

The best interviewees not only have realistic expectations regarding the interviewer, they even try to empathize with him or her. Such activity helps them develop a rapport that leaves a favorable impression, as well as helping promote the kind of information exchange that is needed to meet the objectives of the interview.

Interview Structure

Interviews occur in a variety of ways. Sometimes the candidate does all the talking; sometimes the recruiter does all of the talking. Given our basic premise that recruiting is an attempt on the part

of *both* the organization and the individual to find a good fit, we believe that a balanced approach is most effective. By that we mean that since the fit is important to both parties, *both* parties in essence have a screen and need to collect data to see if the other passes the screen.

Thus, it is as important for you, the job candidate, to collect information as it is to give it. The company has to sell itself as well as you having to sell yourself. With this mutuality of purpose in mind, you will be able to approach interviews with less anxiety (since the evaluation process is two-way rather than one-way) and with greater clarity about *your* objectives for the interview. Your self-assessment provides the base from which you can develop a list of questions specifically designed to gather information related to your most prominent themes.

Given this dual purpose to a recruiting interview, a common thirty-minute interview structure looks like this:

Greetings and introductions	1-3 minutes
Recruiter's questions and candidate's responses	5-10 minutes
Recruiter's summary question or comment	1-3 minutes
Agreement on the nature and timing of the next step	1-3 minutes
Goodbyes	1 minute

Some recruiters may have so many questions to ask that they may not allow you the time to ask questions (see **Exhibit 4**). You should remember that *you* bear part of the responsibility for the success of the interview. All recruiters are not professional interviewers. Hence, you must decide how you will meet your objectives for the interview. Will you interrupt or divert the recruiter? Will you save your questions for a later interview?

Getting a Commitment

Always get a commitment from the employer before leaving the interview (or a set of interviews) regarding what will happen next, and when you will hear from them next.

Some of the uncertainty that accompanies this period in job hunting can be eliminated simply by asking the employer to clarify the process. When will you make a decision as to whether a job offer will be made? How is that decision reached? When will I hear from you next? Most employers will expect better, more confident job applicants to ask these questions.

In addition, by getting a specific date when you can expect to hear next, you put yourself in a less dependent position. The knowledge of that date allows you more accurately to plan the other aspects of your own job campaign so that you don't suddenly find yourself caught in a timing conflict. If you find that date is too far away—after, for example, you are expected to accept or decline someone else's offer—you can tell the employer so and often get it changed. And when you interview with other employers and are asked when you can reply to their offer, you can respond knowing that it will be after you hear from the places you have already interviewed.

Getting a commitment regarding the time of an employer's reply also reduces the chances that you will be strung along. Without a date, some job hunters wait for weeks or months, often afraid to call or write the employer because it will make then look impatient or desperate. The job applicant

who has a commitment to a specific date can legitimately call at once if the employer doesn't respond as promised.

After the Interview

It is a good idea to record your reactions to each interview after it is over. These data will be very useful to you later during the decision-making process. When you have written your observations down, file them in the folder for that firm.

Your log of the interview may include the data, name of the organization, the name and a description of the recruiter, a list of the questions he/she asked, and an outline of your responses. Note which answers you need to think about and prepare better. Note too the data you collected and see how it relates to your self-assessment. Are there still large unanswered portions to your themes and implications? What additional data will you want to get next time? Ask yourself too if you accomplished *your* objectives for the interview. Did you present yourself well?

Exhibit 1 Common Problems in Recruiting Interviews

Common Problems for Interviewees	Common Causes	Appropriate Action
Is unable to present self and ask questions within short time.	Does not recognize implications of *30*-minute interview.	Prepare. Polished answers to usual questions and a set of key questions to ask.
Tries to do too much in on-campus interview.	Does not recognize screening purpose of first interview.	Recognize purpose of first interview.
Behaves in calculated, guarded way. Appears to be insincere.	Assumes goals of both parties are in conflict.	Recognize *mutual* desire to find a good "fit."
Gets angry at interviewer for not conducting good interview. Anger makes it worse.	Assumes interviewer will be competent.	Understand the interviewer's frame of reference. Be prepared to make his/her job easier.
Gets angry at what appears to be incompetence. Creates poor impression.	Is unaware of organizational and situational constraints on interviewer.	Assume interviewer wants to do a good job, but is operating within unknown constraints.
Stresses wrong things in interview.	Incorrect assumptions about interviewer's criteria.	Try to get some idea in advance about screening criteria.
Highly anxious in interview. Creates poor impression.	Bad history in interviews, assumes stakes are gigantic.	Being prepared tends to relieve anxiety, as do realistic expectations. Know the company, self.
Judges and rejects interviewer quickly.	Fear of rejection.	Be aware of fear, be realistic about process.

Common Problems for Interviewees	Common Causes	Appropriate Action
Interview ends without discussion of relevant issues.	Interviewee either misunderstands interviewer's purpose and method or is unwilling or unable to take initiative.	Assess the interviewer's skill. If purposeful, realize importance of "fit." If unskilled, gently ask appropriate questions.
Learns nothing from interview.	Assumes the interviewer is the only one who has purpose.	Recognize your purpose to gather information. Prepare questions based on implications and be prepared to seek answers at the appropriate time.

Source: James G. Clawson, John P. Kotter, Victor Faux, and Charles C. McArthur, *Self-Assessment and Career Development*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).

Exhibit 2 What Made the Best Interviews?

Interviewee knew about the company ("had done homework," "knows the field")	66% (174)
Interviewee had specific career goals ("knew what he/she wanted," "good fit between our needs and his/hers," "well-thought-out career interests")	41% (108)
Interviewee knowledgeable ("asked good questions," "knew what to ask")	29% (76)
Interviewee socially adept ("rapport," "in tune with me," "outgoing and expressive")	28% (74)
Interviewee articulate ("able to express ideas," "spoke well," "good with tricky questions")	19% (50)

Source: James G. Clawson, John P. Kotter, Victor Faux, and Charles C. McArthur, *Self-Assessment and Career Development*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992). Based on questionnaire responses from 236 people who recruited at Harvard Business School in 1973; more than one response allowed.

Exhibit 3 The Most Commonly Asked Questions: General Classification

1. Goals and purposes—Life purposes—Career objectives
2. Type of work desired—Kind of job—Job expectations
3. Reasons for selection of company—Knowledge of company
4. Personal qualifications—Strengths and weaknesses
5. Career choice—Reasons for decisions
6. Qualifications for the job—How college education has prepared the candidate
7. Educational choices and plans—Choice of college—Choice of major
8. Geographical preferences—Willingness to relocate
9. Major achievement and accomplishments

Source: James G. Clawson, John P. Kotter, Victor Faux, and Charles C. McArthur, *Self-Assessment and Career Development*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).

Exhibit 4 Questions Frequently Asked by Interviewers with Different Styles

Stress Interview Questions
Given your background, you don't seem to be qualified for this job.
People like you (on whatever dimension) have never done well in our firm. Why do you think you will?
We aren't hiring this year, just keeping in touch.
We only take the best people. What makes you think you measure up?
I think you're wrong. (To whatever you might say).
Specialized Knowledge or Skill Questions
How do you calculate ROI?
What is PIMS and how would you use it in this job?
What is the corporation's liability under Title IX?
What would OSHA (or other related regulatory agencies) say about that?
How would you assess the future of this industry given the current situation?
Open-ended Questions
Tell me about yourself.
How do you know about our company.
What is important for us to talk about today?
What do you plan to do in this industry?
What else would you like to know? Or talk about?
What questions do you have?
Person-Job Fit Questions
This job demands assertiveness. Are you assertive? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
What kind of person do you think would succeed in our company? Could you?

Source: James G. Clawson, John P. Kotter, Victor Faux, and Charles C. McArthur, *Self-Assessment and Career Development*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).