



## Book Top Notch Executive Interviews

### How to Strategically Deal with Recruiters, Search Firms, Boards of Directors, Panels, Presentations, Pre-interviews and Other High-stress Situations

Katharine Hansen  
Career Press, 2009  
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## Recommendation

The U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration does not send anyone into space who is not superbly qualified. The U.S. Navy selects only the toughest individuals for its formidable SEALs training program. The most brilliant high school students battle to win full scholarships to Harvard. Similarly, job candidates for executive positions go through a far more intense vetting process than normal employees before they get hired. The costs of hiring, retaining and losing executives is higher, so companies have to get recruitment right. For the candidate, these multiple interviews are by far the most challenging part of the process. You may possess stunning professional credentials and a terrific work record, but they won't help if you cannot handle being on the receiving end of executive job interviews. In this valuable, information-packed – though not especially innovative – guide for businesspeople, employment expert Katharine Hansen discusses what interviewers look for in executive candidates, what questions they ask and how you should answer them to get hired. *BooksInShort* considers this book a very practical resource for individuals who want to win top-level executive positions.

## Take-Aways

- Candidates for executive positions undergo a longer, far more intense grilling and vetting process than other job seekers.
- They often must participate in multiple interviews that follow different formats.
- To succeed in executive interviews, develop a personal brand that distinguishes you from other applicants.
- Focus your job search on no more than 20 firms. Learn everything you can about them.
- What you say during a job interview is important, and so is how you say it, how you behave and how you come across.
- You should be able to recite your résumé with your eyes shut, as well as explain everything in it in a succinct, compelling fashion.
- Fully prepare for job interviewers' likely queries.
- Ask job interviewers questions that make you look good – and that give you useful information.
- Try not to discuss salary until the company makes you a formal offer.
- Always negotiate your best deal. You must know your value in the market.

## Summary

### Interviewers Treat Executives Differently

Top executives must conquer a difficult interview process to get hired. In fact, major companies use a longer “interview cycle” for executives than for normal

employees. If you are a candidate for an executive position, conduct comprehensive research about the firm in advance of the interview cycle and be ready to perform superbly. Your first interview (of many) is likely to become an all-day affair. Several people will want to talk with you. Work to exhibit more than mere executive competence during these interviews; show that you can take the organization to new heights. You must demonstrate vision and impress individual interviewers, sometimes including board members. Interviewers may ask you to problem-solve or work through a hypothetical assignment.

“At no time in recent history have executive career paths been as likely to change as they have since the global economic crisis unfolded dramatically in 2008.”

Companies work hard to develop their brands. You must do the same with your “personal brand,” which identifies you, shows your merit and explains why a company would want to hire you. Your cover letter and your results-oriented résumé, which should be filled with keywords, need to reflect this brand. Forget the Web and other scattershot job search methods. Limit your research to 20 appropriate firms. Networking helps, and so do executive recruiters. Follow up by phone within 10 days on all the résumés you distribute. Your calls are selling opportunities, so prepare a compelling “short sound bite.”

## Do Your Research

A company will not excuse an executive candidate’s ignorance about what it offers. You must know almost as much about a firm as its employees do. That means learning about its markets, customers, products, services, competitors, organizational structure and culture, top executives and stakeholders. Prepare thoughtful, impressive questions to ask during the interview. You must also be fluent on the state of the economy. Stay on top of these news sources: *The Wall Street Journal*, *Barron’s*, *Forbes*, *Fortune* magazine and the *Financial Times*.

“Executives are expected to have a clear vision of their career paths.”

Other valuable research tools are the company’s Web site, Google’s news alerts, Glassdoor.com (which provides inside information on more than 23,000 firms), the Investor Relations Information Network and Corporateinformation.com. Check the online tutorials about conducting corporate research at QuintCareers.com and at Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s site.

“Before you can succeed in an interview, you must land the interview.”

Research various industries by using other online resources, including Industry Link and Fuld & Company (fuld.com). Find background information about your potential interviewers on LinkedIn, ZoomInfo, Jigsaw and similar online resources. Ask for a written job description for the position you are pursuing. Learn as much as possible about the firm’s interview process. Finally, because you are your own product, “research yourself,” especially online. How do you come across? Secure objective assessments of how you appear to a recruiter so you can work to improve your ability to get hired.

## During the Interviews

Be aware of your nonverbal behavior, including your body language. The wrong conduct can sink an opportunity before you even say a word. Your attire and grooming count; no one will hire sloppy, ill-kempt executives. Maintain good posture during your interview. Shake hands firmly and speak confidently. Hand gestures should be small but powerful. To practice, do mock interviews in advance. Use a mirror and videotape to check your body language and demeanor, and then correct any problems before your interviews. Job interviews take numerous forms:

- **“Recruiter” or “search firm interview”** – If you don’t get past the recruiter, you don’t get to speak to the hiring executives.
- **“Screening” or “phone interview”** – Companies want to know if you are capable of doing the job, if you have a good work ethic and if you align with their culture. Explain how the position fits your career plan. Expect to undergo assessment tests such as the Predictive Index and the Simmons Personal Survey.
- **“First face-to-face interview”** – Your game plan is to get to the next interview, so adopt a consultant’s approach. Present yourself as the solution to the company’s problem.
- **“Second and subsequent face-to-face interviews”** – If you reach the second round, you have a 25%-50% chance of winning the job. Expect more intense probing. The interviewers want to get inside your head to see who you really are.
- **“Meal interview”** – This is not a social event; it is an interview. Be poised. Take care with your manners and conversational style. Eat light and avoid messy foods. Don’t drink alcohol or order the most expensive entrée on the menu.
- **“Panel interview”** – Research the panelists beforehand. Engage with all of them. Direct your specific responses to the questioner, but include the other panelists as you speak.
- **“Board of directors interview”** – Usually only candidates for CEO and other top-level executive positions meet with the board.
- **“Presentation interview”** – You should know in advance if you must give a presentation. Focus your content on why you’re the best person for the job.
- **“Remote interview via video”** – Recruit a professional to apply TV makeup. Look directly at the camera. Don’t fidget; limit your hand gestures. Try to simulate this session in advance.
- **“Work-assignment,” “simulation” or “problem-solving interview”** – The interviewer could ask you to develop a 30-, 60- or 90-day plan for your first three months on the job. Another common interview assignment is an “inbox simulation” game, which tests your productivity, time management and delegation skills.
- **“Stress interview”** – Can you keep your cool under pressure? The interviewer will try everything to make you lose control. Remain calm, composed and collected. The interviewer wants to see if you blow your top. Don’t.

## The Content of Interviews

Preparing for the questions interviewers may ask will help you give good answers. Study these types of questions and tips on how to respond:

- **“Icebreaker,” “screening” or “sell-yourself”** – Early in the interview process expect such set-ups as, “Tell me about yourself” or “Why do you think you are the best person for this job?” See these lead-ins as opportunities to sell your capabilities and talents. Answer succinctly, but depict your career as the perfect

preparation for the job.

- **“Résumé,” “experience” and “job history”** – Make sure you know your résumé inside out. Provide just two or three salient facts about each of your jobs. Focus on your accomplishments. Typical questions are, “What skills have you acquired from your work experience?” and “Tell me about your promotions.”
- **“Behavioral”** – The logic is that “past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.” So respond thoroughly to questions like, “Tell me about when you dealt with a sudden problem.” Be specific.
- **“Situational”** – Here the emphasis is on how you would manage a given situation. To explain, say, “I would handle it the way I did in my old job,” then fill in the details.
- **“Illegal and inappropriate”** – In the U.S., questions about “age, national origin, marital and family status, religious affiliation,” and so on, may violate equal hiring regulations. Try to address the underlying meaning that prompts the question. For example, “Nothing about my personal status...would get in the way of my doing a great job for your company.”
- **“Yes or no”** – “Are you a team player?” Reply with sufficient detail: “Yes, I am. Let me tell you how I have demonstrated that in the past.”
- **“Compensation”** – “How much will it cost to make you happy here?” Without a formal job offer, you possess no negotiating leverage so deflect these questions if you can. “I am sure your compensation program is a fair one. The main thing is, I know I will be happy to work for such an outstanding firm.” If the interviewer insists, supply a salary range based on your research about what similar jobs pay.
- **“Comprehension and contribution”** – “Tell me what you know about our company.” If you’ve done your research, this is where your preparation proves its merit.
- **“Success”** – “What do you think it takes to succeed in this career?” Tie your description of your achievements and expertise to the position’s requirements.
- **“Accomplishment”** – Your achievements are the “meat of any interview.” A typical question: “Give me an example of one of your major accomplishments.” Pick one that is most relevant to the job you want.
- **“Vision”** – Executives are leaders, so the interviewer must check your leadership credentials: “Describe the characteristics of a successful leader.” An effective response compares yourself (humbly, but favorably) to leaders in the interviewer’s firm.
- **“Future and goal”** – “I would like to become the very best [job title] that your company employs.” Indicate that you can envision a long future with the firm.
- **“Innovation,” “creativity” or “improvement”** – Original thinking is a hallmark of successful executives. Plan a response to, “Describe a time when you created a new way to do things at work,” that will reveal your ingenuity.
- **“Expertise”** – If the interviewer asks what you know about the company’s specialty, your answer is especially crucial if you are changing industries. Demonstrate that your professional skills translate to the new job.
- **“Mistake and failure”** – Everyone makes mistakes. The interviewer wants to see if you can own up to yours. “What is the biggest mistake you’ve made?” Speak openly about a past failure and how you have gained from it.

“Your branding effort should include your online presence.”

Interviews should not be a one-way street. You can ask questions like, “Can you describe the company’s management style?” and “What is the top priority of the person who accepts this job?” These queries provide you with the opportunity to learn if the position will be right for you and they enable you to impress the interviewers with your insight.

“Don’t make a pest of yourself, but don’t just sit by the phone waiting for employers to call, either.”

Be ready to overcome objections such as, “You seem overqualified for this position.” The interviewer may be expressing concern about “your age, attitude or motivation.” Communicate your enthusiasm about the position and about working with younger colleagues. If told, “You don’t seem to have the right experience for this position,” you can use your career portfolio to disprove the objection. To counter the issue of employment gaps on your resume, discuss your consulting and contract assignments, volunteer work, and so on.

“Background checks for high-level candidates are increasingly common and often staggeringly rigorous.”

Be prepared to explain why you want to leave your current job. Some possible responses: You want a more challenging job. Another firm bought your company and you cannot align yourself with the new management philosophy. You got a promotion but “you and your boss have irreconcilable differences regarding how the company...should be run.” You feel underpaid. Whatever you do, don’t speak ill of your present firm. If you must explain a job termination, keep it brief. Be upbeat and positive about any former employer.

“When the economy is uncertain, you shouldn’t be.” (Dave Opton, founder and CEO, ExecuNet)

Send thank-you letters after all your interviews. Make sure your references (three to five) are primed to speak favorably on your behalf. Prepare for background checks. If something in your background looks bad, assume that the prospective employer will find out about it and practice “pre-emptive disclosure” at the beginning of the interview process. Follow up after the interviews, but don’t be a pest. Leaving a brief voice mail after hours shows your continued interest in the job, without interrupting people at work.

## Congratulations! You Have a Job Offer

**Be ready to negotiate your compensation package. Do not casually agree to whatever the company offers. Check salary.com and salaryexpert.com for the position’s financial value. Research the company’s “historical salary levels.” After the employer makes you an offer, you have maximum leverage to get what you want. Take time to think about it. Make a counteroffer (higher than what you hope to get). When you reach an agreement, get everything in writing.**

## About the Author

**Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.**, is an educator, author and blogger. She is an expert in career management and the preparation of résumés.

