

Successful Interview Techniques

No matter what interview techniques you use, there are obviously limits to what they can achieve for you, and are no substitute for your own interest and enthusiasm for the position you are being interviewed for, and its suitability in relation to your skills and experience. However, good 'professional' interview techniques will help you to impress the interviewer and will encourage the interview to proceed well. They will also help you to avoid the simple, but fatal, mistakes we can all too easily make in these situations.

We hope you find these notes constructive, but if you have any questions, please discuss them with your consultant.

The Objective

Remember that the only objective is to win a job offer on acceptable terms. You are under no obligation to accept an offer if you are unhappy with the small print. Your recruitment consultant is a trained negotiator who will be able to smooth out any problems once you have won the offer.

The Arrival

- Arrive 5 – 10 minutes early.
- Leave all coats, briefcases, etc. at reception. Carry a folder, if necessary, with the essential information you require.
- Introduce yourself to the interviewer, and offer a firm handshake.
- When sitting, don't fold your arms.
- Many interviewers decide whether you are right for them within the first five minutes. First impressions are vital, and therefore it is very important that your dress and appearance strikes the right note.
- Try to establish a friendly rapport as quickly as possible. Achieve friendly eye contact (without overdoing it). Smile.

The Interview – Getting Results

- If you are properly prepared for the interview, you should already have a fair idea about your suitability, and your level of interest. It is important to work out beforehand exactly why you think you stand a chance of getting the job, i.e. what are your most suitable skills/experience, and what BENEFITS you can bring to the company. The purpose of the interview is to present these benefits and your suitability to the client in the most effective way, so make sure you bring them up in conversation. If by the end, you haven't managed to, take the opportunity to go through them with the interviewer.
- You will do better in interviews if you come across as interested and good-natured. Never stray from the point, or talk for more than a minute at a time, but do give full, lively answers that provide more information than is on your CV and show that you are interested. Avoid giving just 'yes' and 'no' answers. Most questions an interviewer asks will be intended to get you talking, to find out what sort of person you are. Help your interviewer to interview you.
- Never jump in with an answer; always let the interviewer finish talking. Never assume what sort of answer the interviewer is seeking – if you're not sure how to answer then ask the interviewer to explain the question – ask him/her to tell you what he/she is trying to get at.

- Expect to be asked to describe each job you have done in some detail. Be ready to tell the interviewer the following:
 - What you enjoyed about each job
 - What you think your achievements were
 - What experience you gained and how this has helped you
 - What technical skills you acquired.
- If you are asked to describe your strengths, back this up with examples (but don't boast).
- If you are asked to describe your weaknesses, it is generally best to describe a problem or difficulty you have experienced and how you effectively overcame it, e.g. "In my present job I had a problem working within tight deadlines, so I sat down with my manager and reorganised my working practices. Now I have achieved all projects within timescales and with some significant improvements in quality". Prepare this sort of thing beforehand.
- Never bring up money at an early stage of the interview, or appear in any way **too** money-motivated. You must show that you are interested in the job first and foremost.
- Always present a positive, flexible attitude and be prepared to consider your interviewer's ideas, or aspects of the job that may at first seem strange to you (within reason).
- Never criticise your current or previous employer. No-one likes to recruit someone who could be a potential 'moaning minnie', and remember that many interviewers may perceive your criticisms from a 'boss's perspective'. If you have to make a criticism, always be as fair as possible and say something like "I appreciate that they would have good reasons for doing this".
- Many of the interviewer's questions about your background will be designed to find out how you will tackle the job effectively. It is therefore a good idea to ask the interviewer if the same circumstances apply to the role you are applying for. If they do, this is an ideal opportunity to show interest, or to point out that you think your experience means you could do well at it.
- Make sure you talk about the job in sufficient detail. The interviewer will probably love to tell you how good it is. Agree with him. If you are not sure on any points, your consultant can get clarification at a later date.
- Avoid arguing with the interviewer. If he/she clearly has strong views on a subject, it is usually best to avoid discussing it and to direct the conversation to more profitable areas. If you disagree with his views, keep your comments to yourself.
- Your humour may be different from that of your interviewer, but it is usually important that there is some humour in the interview, otherwise you may come across as very 'dry'.
- Avoid unnecessary apologies.
- Never allow yourself to become defensive or aggressive. If an interviewer starts asking you difficult questions, it may be to see how you perform under pressure.
- Remember that the interviewer is hoping that you are the person they are looking for.
- Always have one or two questions you can ask the interviewer about the company and the opportunities that it can offer. Good questions are: "If I were to join, what would my prospects be?" "What are the company's plans for the next few years?"

- Always make it clear that you have a responsible, long-term attitude to your career. You are looking for a company you can commit yourself to. You enjoy your work. You are looking for a company that offers you promotion, but you are not going to become impatient if it doesn't happen overnight.

Finishing the Interview

- Always thank the interviewer for interviewing you. Say you have enjoyed the interview.
- Always state that you are genuinely interested in the position. Never say that you'll think about it. If a company has to choose between two equally qualified candidates, they will always choose the one who wants the job most.
- Find out if the interviewer has any reservations about you. If so, ask (in the politest possible way) if he/she sees these reservations as being important or not. If not, relax. If yes, this is your one opportunity to persuade him otherwise.
- Establish when you can expect to be informed of a decision.

Common Reasons for Failure

A recent survey of interviewers revealed that the following were the most common reasons for applicants failing at interview. For your interest, we have reproduced below the answers they gave:

- Poor appearance
- Overbearing or aggressive attitude
- Defensiveness
- Conceited attitude
- Inability to articulate ideas clearly; poor voice; diction; grammar
- No obvious interest or enthusiasm
- Overemphasis on money
- Unwillingness to start at the bottom – wanting too much too soon
- Evasiveness
- Dishonesty
- Lack of tact
- Immaturity
- Lack of courtesy – no social understanding
- Criticism of past or present employer
- Failure to look interviewer in the eye
- Limp, fishy handshake
- No sense of humour
- Cynical attitude
- Laziness
- Intolerance, strong prejudices, ill-formed views
- Inability to accept criticism
- Little appreciation of the value of experience
- Narrow-mindedness, hide-bound outlook, no imagination
- Failure to ask questions about the job
- Failure to show appreciation for the interviewers time
- No vitality – listless attitude.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE PREPARED FOR

- **Q. Tell me about yourself.**

Cover four segments about your life – your early years, education, work experience and what's been going on in recent times.

Keep your answer short – about 2-3 minutes. Be sure not to ramble or be too elaborate.

- **Q. What can you offer us?**

Be sure you know something about the position they have in mind before you answer this. Then you can relate some of your past experiences where you have successfully solved problems that appear similar to those of your prospective employer.

- **Q. What are your strengths?**

By now you should be able to tick off 3 or 4 key strengths that are relevant to their needs.

- **Q. What have you accomplished?**

Try to pick out accomplishments that relate to the challenges you have been discussing. Stay away from ancient times.

- **Q. What are your limitations?**

Respond with a strength which, if overdone, can get in your way and become a weakness. For example, you might say "My ambitions to get the job done sometimes causes me to press a little too hard on my organisation, but I am aware of this problem and believe I have it under control".

Or deal with your need for further training in some aspects of your profession. Do not claim to be faultless.

- **Q. How much are you worth?**

TRY to delay answering this until you have learned quite a bit about the job and, if possible, explore beforehand the typical ranges they are accustomed to pay for similar positions.

If you feel obliged to answer something you might reply along these lines: "You are aware of what I have been earning at Ajax and I would hope that coming to Acme would be a progressive step. Perhaps we can discuss this question a little better when we both have a more complete idea of what the job responsibilities and scope would be".

- **Q. What are your ambitions for the future?**

Indicate your desire to concentrate on doing the immediate job well, and your confidence that the future will then take care of itself. You do not want to convey the idea that you have no desire to progress, but you do need to avoid statements that are unrealistic – or that threaten some of the present incumbents.

- **Q. What do you know about our company?**

If you have done your homework, you can honestly state that you have studied the information that is publicly available about the company and are therefore aware of quite a bit of the published facts. However, you might also state that you would like to know more – and then be prepared later to ask some intelligent questions.

Don't try to be a show-off and recite everything you have learned, but merely let your knowledge show through the informed way in which you handle the interview.

- **Q. Why do you want to work for us?**

Indicate that from your study of the company, many of the activities and problems are the sort that would give you a clear chance to contribute to the company – through your past experience and skills. If you can honestly say so, explain your admiration for the company and what it is that appeals to you.

- **Q. What do you find most attractive about the position we are discussing? What is least attractive?**

Mention three or more attractive factors, but hold the unattractive factors down to one or two minor ones.

- **Q. What do you look for in this job?**

Keep your answer opportunity oriented. Talk about the chance you would have to perform and get recognition.

- **Q. Please give me your definition of ...** (the position for which you are being interviewed)

Keep your answer brief and task-oriented, i.e. deal with responsibilities and accountabilities?

- **Q. Don't you feel you may be over-qualified or too experienced for the position we have in mind?**

A strong company needs strong people, with the right experience to deal with current problems. Explain that your interest in the company would be a long term one, and that you are willing to bet that your accomplishments in the first year or two will lead eventually to growth opportunities for you.

- **Q. What is your management style?**

If you have not thought about this, it's time you did! If the job you are going for has management responsibilities, you might want to talk about how you set goals and then get your people involved in them. Also describe the techniques that you would use to bring out the best in people. Try to sense whether the company believes in a highly participative style, or is more military in its approach.

- **Q. Why do you feel you have good potential to be a manager?**

Keep your answer to this question oriented towards your past achievements and the task to be done. Explain how you go about getting work done, either by yourself or through your organisation.

- **Q. As a manager, what would you be looking for when you hire people?**

Their skills, initiative, adaptability – and whether their chemistry fits with that of the organisation.

- **Q. As a manager, have you ever had to fire anyone – if so, what were the circumstances and how did you handle it?**

Answer briefly that you have indeed had experience with this problem and that it worked out to the benefit of both individual and the organisation.

- **Q. What do you see as the most difficult task in being a manager?**

Getting things planned and done on time and within budget.

- **Q. What important trends do you see coming in our industry?**

Pick out two or three things that you see approaching – ‘big picture stuff’. This is your chance to show that you have thought about the future, the economics, the markets and the technology of your industry.

- **Q. Why are you leaving your present job?**

This is one of those sensitive questions that must be handled crisply and briefly. If it was a forced reduction due to economic circumstances, make that clear. If possible, explain how your termination was part of a larger movement. When you have finished answering, let it go. Stay away from analysing any friction points with your boss.

- **Q. How do you feel about leaving all your benefits at Ajax?**

Concerned, but confident that you will make it up when you are established in your new company.

- **Q. Describe what you feel would be an ideal working environment.**

This is the place where you can bring in some of the “satisfiers” and “ideal job preferences” – but don’t make it sound too sublime and impractical. Otherwise, they may conclude that you are not ready for the realities of old Ajax. Play down the “dissatisfiers”.

- **Q. Looking back, how do you perceive your last employer?**

It is an excellent company that has given you a lot of good experience, and opportunities to perform.

- **Q. What have you done that helped increase sales or profit? How did you go about it?**

Be specific and give examples if possible.

- **Q. How much financial responsibility have you had to account for?**

You can answer this in terms of your budget or head-count or the size of the project or sales that you directed.

- **Q. How many people have you supervised on your recent jobs?**

Be specific, and feel free to refer to those over which you had influence, such as task force or matrix organisation.

- **Q. Which do you prefer – working with figures or words?**

Answer honestly.

- **Q. How do you think your subordinates perceive you?**

Be as positive as you can, but remember to be honest, too – they can easily check your references.

- **Q. In your last position, what were the things you liked most, and the things you liked least?**

Be careful on this one. Emphasise the positive and don't dwell on the negative.

- **Q. In your recent position, what were some of your most significant accomplishments?**

Be ready to describe three or four of them in detail. Where possible, try to relate to the nature of new challenges you might be facing.

- **Q. Why haven't you found a new position after these many months?**

Finding just any job is not too difficult, but finding the right job takes care and time.

- **Q. What do you think of your previous boss?**

Be as positive as you can, and avoid getting too deep. This is a loaded question, because most bosses shy away from a contentious or difficult subordinate.

- **Q. Describe a situation in which your work was criticized.**

Be specific and brief, and avoid getting emotional or defensive about it.

- **Q. If I spoke to your previous boss, what would he/she say were your greatest strengths/weaknesses?**

Be honest about this one, but do not emphasise the negative. Your boss will probably want to give you a good send-off. Recount some of the good things you did for him/her.

- **Q. How do you hold up under pressure or deadlines?**

I can handle it – it is a way of life in the business world.

- **Q. Do you think you are better cut out for staff work or line work?**

I can handle either, and my preference depends a lot on the specific job, the boss I would be working for, and the challenges in the position.

- **Q. Why aren't you earning more at your age?**

Don't be defensive about this one. Explain that you are hoping to rectify the situation through this career change.

- **Q. What do you feel you should earn in the proposed position?**

You may want to answer this with a question such as "What is the typical salary range for similar jobs in your company?" If there is no range in the company, give the range that you had in mind, but qualify by saying you hope to learn more about the job responsibilities and scope.

- **Q. If we were to offer you this position, exactly how much would you expect?**

Again, be careful about pinning yourself down – either too high or too low. If possible, deal in terms of what the market value is for the job. For example "My understanding is that a job like this one you're describing might well pay in the range of £..... to £..... How does this fit your going scales?"

- **Q. Do you have any objections to taking our battery of psychological tests?**

No, none at all (this would mean that you are a serious candidate).

- **Q. What other types of jobs or companies are you considering at this time?**

Don't feel obliged to reveal details of your other negotiations. If you have other irons in the fire, refer to your campaign in a general way, but concentrate mainly on the job at hand.

- **Q. What sort of outside reading do you do?**

Be honest. If possible mention some of the things that you read in order to keep up-to-date in your professional field. However, it is acceptable to show balanced interests by your recreational reading as well.

- **Q. Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?**

Yes - and be prepared to give a couple of examples.

- **Q. How would you describe your own personality?**

Balanced and human. Mention two or three of your useful traits.

- **Q. Are you a leader?**

Yes (give examples).

- **Q. What are your long-term goals?**

Relate your answer to the company you are interviewing with, rather than giving a broad, general answer. Keep your ambitions on a realistic track.

- **Q. What are your strongest points?**

Be ready to present at least three, preferably in a way that relates them to the potential job opening.

- **Q. How long would you expect to stay with our company?**

As long as we both feel there is challenging work that I can do.

Good Luck!