

INTERVIEWING – AN OVERVIEW

How to answer interview questions

It has been mentioned on more than one occasion that the process of job search is less about being selected as the reigning candidate and more about elimination. The interview is where a lot of hard work can end in disappointment. I read a recent article that strongly suggested that only one person in ten can interview well enough to be hired. The rest struggle along until they get it right or land a job through a network contact where “tough questions,” seldom, if ever get asked.

There is a solid clue there for those of you who may still be questioning the value of strong networking. Developing and using a network can help to avoid many of the more challenging pitfalls of job search. I recall vividly a client of mine who managed to extract an answer to her question as to how the company had selected her out of a rather large field of contenders. “I never had anyone interview as well as you did. You answered all the questions better than anyone else,” came the hiring manager’s response. As part of the total marketing project plan, the interviewing arena is another critical piece to prepare for.

I think the first great challenge for job searchers is avoiding negative words. If you feel you are harboring any ill feelings toward your current or previous job, it will be necessary to find a way to suppress those feelings immediately. Attempting to conduct a job search while feeling disgruntled will likely result in the search taking a lot longer and it could easily end in disaster. Those negative thoughts will find a way to come out at the interview and could sabotage weeks of hard work.

I’ve seen many clients come to me after months of job searching with no results only to find out that they had discussed at the interview how bad the last boss or company was. I’ve even seen such self-destructive language in their cover letters which could damage or destroy the campaign right at the beginning. It is important to note that this process is also designed to offer positive input and energy. I would suggest that if any self-work needs to be done in this regard it is best to do so prior to the launch of your job/career search campaign.

Avoiding negative language in interviews can be especially challenging for the job searcher because many interview questions include negative terminology in words which make it easy for the searcher to fall into a trap. Interview questions like “Tell me about your worst boss” makes it easy for you to respond by saying “My worst boss was....” It is essential that you put a positive spin on every single interview question no matter how you feel or what kind of language the questioner use.

Preparing for interviews is an interesting process. I say that because I have come to the realization that to win at the interviewing game one must transcend what may have been learned about excellent communication skills. From the first words we learned from our caregivers or parents to our most sophisticated active listening techniques we have practiced as adults, the art of communication has taught us to be as direct, clear, and forthright as we are able. The most effective techniques such as “reflecting” or “mirroring” and “paraphrasing” a conversation has greatly helped the workforce improve communications across many boundaries. That is until they are used in the interview. Behavioral psychology has provided interviewers with some very powerful weapons to use on unsuspecting candidates. It is one of the reasons that only one person in ten can interview well according to a recent article I read. These challenging questions are often known as “behavioral” questions. They are designed specifically to help the candidate fall hopelessly down a conversational rat hole. Paul Green, Ph.D., (1996), in his book, Get Hired provides a great foundation for surviving such interviews.

To set the groundwork for preparing to answer behavioral questions, it is helpful to make a number of mental changes. The first is that we always tell the truth, but *we don't always disclose everything*. The next step is that we always put a positive spin on the interview question response and we don't elaborate on everything. Nearly all responses should take under 45 seconds. Questions that require a scenario or story should not take more than a minute or two at the most. By the way, if you find that the interviewer is “probing” or asking questions about your initial response, you've probably made the journey down the rat hole already. Well-structured responses are conversation stoppers. This is the goal. There is nothing left to hear or tell if you've done it well.

Now that we've set the stage for preparing good interview question

responses, we want to examine the nature of the questions. This is important to know because knowing the nature of these kinds of questions can help us avoid learning a response for each and every question. Interestingly, many interview questions are very similar in nature and one response can work for answering several of them. I'll get into detail on this in a moment. One other big consideration about these difficult questions is that there is almost always a question beneath the question. If you answer the question that was asked you will likely end up where you don't want to be. If you answer the hidden question you will do a lot better. In the following examples we will examine some of the most difficult type questions and offer some suggestions for you to think about. It is important that you NOT try to memorize the answers like a script to a play, or try to internalize my or someone else's responses. They must be in your words so they sound true to your personality.

History Type Questions

History type questions give the job searcher some challenges when it comes to putting a positive spin on their response. *Being forthright is almost guaranteed* to land you someplace you don't want to be. The first step in answering this kind of question is "don't go there," meaning do not discuss the past at all except perhaps to say something to the effect of, "I have been engaged in researching this industry and companies like this one."

1. Why did you leave your last job or/ why do you want to leave your current job?
2. What have you been doing since you left your last job?
3. How long have you been out of work?

"I am a person who is highly motivated by and my research has informed me that this organization encourages those qualities." You can play around with the words, but do NOT discuss it, put a positive spin on it, and include your motivational qualities a great starting place.

Upside/downside Scenario Questions

1. Tell me about a great accomplishment you were most proud of and tell me about your greatest disappointment?
2. Tell me the best thing about your last job and tell me about the thing you disliked most.
3. Tell me about your strengths and your weaknesses.

Essentially, answering the first part of the question isn't too tough, but it does have its traps. If you answered it with something like, "my children, my wife, marriage, time off, vacation time, I'm good at everything I do, or I work hard," you are already in trouble. It isn't that those things aren't true, I'm sure they are, but they have little to do with what the interviewer is looking for. The question beneath the question is, roughly, "Have you done a good job of assessing yourself, knowing the good things and the things that need developing, what have you done about them, and how have they made you a better person/supervisor/manager?" An important point here is that if they ask for more than one item, e.g. weaknesses, try hard not to offer more than one. Let them push for additional information in that instance. Choose strengths, accomplishments, etc. that are work related and might, in fact, appear on your resume in one form or another.

To answer the second half or negative side of the question requires some fancy footwork on your part. First translate the bad word for one that is more acceptable, e.g. challenges. Next, you must have selected a scenario that actually fits the situation that I described in the last paragraph, "something that needed developing, what you did about it, and how it has made you a better person/supervisor/manager." This criteria has to be met or you run the risk of getting into difficulty. For example, (disappointment = challenge) "Life is filled with challenges and I recall one situation that ultimately helped me develop as a manager....." Needless to say this scenario must be well thought out in advance.

Flaws in the personality Questions

1. With regard to this job we're talking about, what is your weakest suit?
2. Everyone has a pet peeve, what is yours?

3. Everybody likes to criticize. What do people criticize about you?
4. Tell me about a time when you made a serious mistake.
5. Tell me about the most difficult problem you've had?
6. Who was your worst boss?

The answers for these types of questions may sound familiar to you. The question beneath these questions is, "Have you done a good job of assessing yourself about the things that need developing, what have you done about them, and how have they made you a better person/supervisor/manager." As above, if they ask for more than one item, e.g. weaknesses in the plural, do not to offer more than one, make them ask for more. As above, translate the bad word or words for one that is more acceptable, e.g. challenges. Next, you must have selected a scenario that actually fits the situation that I described in the last paragraph, "something that needed developing, what you did about it, and how it has made you a better person/supervisor/manager." This criteria has to be met or you run the risk of getting into difficulty. For example, (disappointment = challenge) "Life is filled with challenges and I recall one situation that ultimately helped me develop as a manager...." Needless to say this scenario must be well thought out in advance. As you can see, answers for these questions could be very effective responses for many other questions, too. You may have to alter the verbiage a bit, but that does not require you to develop and learn a host of answers for each and every question.

Missing parts Questions

1. Isn't this a career switch for you?
2. Aren't you overqualified/underqualified for this job?
3. What has kept you from progressing as fast as you would have liked to? (i.e., no degree, frequent job changes, too long at one job, etc.)

These questions can be a bit tricky for many people. The question beneath the question here is more about "aren't you a misfit for this position?" It is

critical here to avoid answering much if anything of the question directly. It's time to put on your "dancing shoes" to stay out of difficulty here. You must demonstrate that you are, in fact, the right person for the position, or that you have progressed at your own, planned out, pace. The strategic tactic of pointing to your resume and specifically picking out which attributes you demonstrate right, on your resume, parallels what is in their advertisement. Remember, they called you, so you must qualify. Target specific experience, knowledge, and *accomplishments* that prior organizations have found invaluable and have resulted in good things for the company, and that you'll want to replicate at this firm, too.

Current events Questions

1. Why do you want to work for us? -If you were choosing someone for this job, what kind of person would you select?
2. What are your motivations? -What do you expect to get from this job that you weren't getting from the last job?
3. What are your short/long range goals?
4. Do you plan to get further education, degrees? -How do you spend your spare time?

A couple of things are going on here. The first three questions are all about *your motivations*. You must answer the question, "What floats your boat, what gets you out of bed in the morning, what gets your juices going?" Liking to be challenged might be true, but it's overused and very lame these days. You've got to get under the challenged word to the ones that give it meaning. Words like: closing the deal, solving problems, analyzing things, or teaching/training someone are concrete motivational terms.

The last three questions are all about developing you. Here you must think about what you do, are doing, and will do to enhance your skill competencies. If the real answer is little or nothing you are in hot water. Companies are less interested in individuals who tend to not keep up with the changing world of work. This is one area where you'll need to think about actually providing some concrete action to the words otherwise you'll end up praying that they don't ask this type of question. It is now a world of *life-long learning* and all employees are expected to keep pace with

industry changes even if they have to do it themselves.

Miscellaneous Killer Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself?

The answer to this question is one that every single job searcher should have down firm. Refer to your 30 second commercial. It is a very short response about the specific kind of experience you have, number of years (rounded) doing it, industry, and specific areas of expertise, e.g. consulting, conflict resolution, training, etc.

2. What salary do you require?

The answer to this one is not easy. I have a 3 stage answer to this very difficult, annoying, and usually inappropriate question.

- a) First response – “I was hoping that we would get a little further into the discussion before we got into the money. I don’t really know much about the job yet and you don’t know much about what I can do for the company at this point”

If the interviewer presses further...

- b) Second response – “I assume this position has been approved. Could you share the salary range with me?”

If the interviewer presses yet further and may be getting irritated...

- c) “Considering my experience, areas of expertise, and skill level, I am looking to be in a position that compensates in the (\$60K’s) or better. (substitute appropriate dollar amount)

Three key points about this last statement; it is a single, open ended number which you select, usually about 15% over your last salary. It affords you and the hiring organization a lot of flexibility and are less likely to be ruled too high or too low. Lastly, the overall structure of the statement allows you to press your best attributes prior to springing the number on them which helps a lot in supporting why you are asking what you are.

Now you want to develop *your* responses to these questions. Once that is done it would be a good idea to ask a trusted friend, partner, or spouse to listen and test how they come across.

Just sharing and reading your responses isn't enough. You need to verbalize your answers as your intonation, attitude, honesty, credibility, and believability are much more easily depicted when they are heard.

Of course, we have not included every question here, so you may have others to work on that are not listed in the above examples. If you do, try to find a category that sounds close enough for you to work with. If all else fails, use the *positive spin guidelines* we've discussed throughout this section to help you to format a suitable response.

Questions that you should ask at standard interviews

At any interview it is very important to be fully prepared to engage in activities that will help the interviewer determine your candidacy eligibility. At some point in the interview the person on the other side of the table will ask you if you have any questions of them even though they may have been very thorough. The best candidates ask poignant questions that help in determining if you want to work at that organization. Remember, you should have several, but you will only have time for one or two at a regular interview and up to five at informational interviews. You will need to be selective. Listen closely to the interviewer and then take your best shot. The questions listed below are designed to arm you with as much information as you can about the organization you're looking at, e.g., the health of it and its industry, the nature and social environment of the company, and its politics. Questions may include:

1. Where do you see the industry going in the next few years?
2. Where do you see this company heading in this industry?
3. What kinds of challenges do you see in the foreseeable future?
4. What do you enjoy most about working for this company?
5. What are the 3(three) greatest challenges you see for this position?
6. How is it that this position has become available (if appropriate)?

7. If you were CEO of this company what would be the first two changes you would make? (Since you are CEO of this company what two things would you like to change?)

How to prepare for telephone interviews

With the advent of technology and other high speed working environments, companies are adding another twist to the interview process: the telephone interview. Although telephone interviews have been around for a long time, companies are relying on them more and more to save them time and costs by conducting initial screenings over the phone. It has become so pervasive that larger organizations have full-time individuals dedicated to that specific job. This puts additional pressure on the candidate because the face-to-face value is removed and not everyone has a great phone voice and is often not able to rely as heavily on their performance as if they were at the company site.

To overcome the problems of conducting effective phone interviews there are a few tips that greatly help people engaged in this process.

Most people today are quite comfortable speaking on the phone. However, when it comes to speaking to “strangers” and individuals who are about to make a judgment call about your continued eligibility for the position, there are many individuals who become a bit rattled under those circumstances and feel that they don’t come across as professional as they might. One thing that can help greatly is to have a handy script of what you would like to speak about especially regarding the depth and breadth of your accomplishments. You could also have the responses to your “tough” interview questions in front of you. Although reading them would likely not be as effective, just having them in front of you could easily *prompt* you as to what you want to say. (This can also work when you are making “cold” contact development (network) calls.) This is a bit of work to type out this information, but if it helps you organize your thoughts, keeps you on track, and allows you stay focused and not get lost. It is more than worth the effort.

The next tip that I’d share is to always have all your materials with you that would have at a face-to-face interview, right near the phone. These would include:

1. The original advertisement
2. The original cover letter
3. Current Resume
4. Any available research on the company
5. Company prospectus, if available
6. Competitor research, if any
7. Your list of questions that you should ask

These can be very helpful during phone interviews. Often, the conversation will lead to specific details and if the information is right in front of you it is much easier to recall the specifics. If you have these items you will sound extremely well informed, organized, and have every tool you need at your fingertips.

Another great tip is to prepare the environment for telephone interviews in advance of the event. It so often happens that many people are NOT informed of the interview until it occurs. This can easily put you at a disadvantage. It is not effective if you're in the middle of breakfast, shaving, or walking around in your "bunny slippers" to conduct a good presentation. You can make a couple choices here.

During the telephone interview it is very important to understand some of the principles effective presentation skills. In this case, it is important to know that if you are engaged in a phone interview it is important to stand up and stay standing up, and even walking around a bit. It significantly changes your presentation dynamics. It is all too easy, while sitting, to begin to slide down into the chair, lean over the table with your free hand propping your forehead, or other things that greatly hinder an open, upright, full breath, energy oriented delivery.

One other tip related to the previous suggestion is to smile. Most people get wrapped up in the importance of the interview, which, of course, it is. However, it is more important to sound enthusiastic, upbeat, and genuinely

interested in the organization and the potential position. The way to convey this over the phone is to smile. A fairly well trained telephone interviewer can hear a smile on the phone. The effort dramatically changes the entire facial muscle configuration and is quite easily detectable. The challenge is to remember to keep smiling during the entire conversation.

These ideas are designed to enhance your efforts in conducting good telephone interviews and contact calls. It is likely that if you follow these suggestions you will attain your goal, which, in this case, is to be invited to a face-to-face interview. Good luck, and don't forget to contact your consultant to further assist you in these activities.

CONFIDENTIAL