



Make your interview count

From researching the company to handling certain key interview questions, make sure you make a great impression and ace your next job interview by following these 20 tips.

1. Research the industry and company.

An interviewer may ask how you perceive his company's position in its industry, who the firm's competitors are, what its competitive advantages are, and how it should best go forward. For this reason, avoid trying to thoroughly research a dozen different industries. Focus your job search on just a few industries instead.

2. Clarify your "selling points" and the reasons you want the job.

Prepare to go into every interview with three to five key selling points in mind, such as what makes you the best candidate for the position. Have an example of each selling point prepared ("I have good communication skills. For example, I persuaded an entire group to ..."). And be prepared to tell the interviewer why you want that job – including what interests you about it, what rewards it offers that you find valuable, and what abilities it requires that you possess. If an interviewer doesn't think you're really, really interested in the job, he or she won't give you an offer – no matter how good you are!

3. Anticipate the interviewer's concerns and reservations.

There are always more candidates for positions than there are openings. So interviewers look for ways to screen people out. Put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself why they might not want to hire you ("I don't have this," "I'm not that," etc.). Then prepare your defense: "I know you may be thinking that I might not be the best fit for this position because [their reservation]. But you should know that [reason the interviewer shouldn't be overly concerned]."

4. Prepare for common interview questions.

Every "how to interview" book has a list of a hundred or more "common interview questions." (You might wonder just how long those interviews are if there are that many common questions!) So how do you prepare? Pick any list and think about which questions you're most likely to encounter, given your age and status (about to graduate, looking for a summer internship). Then prepare your answers so you won't have to fumble for them during the actual interview.

5. Line up your questions for the interviewer.

Come to the interview with some intelligent questions for the interviewer that demonstrate your knowledge of the company as well as your serious intent. Interviewers always ask if you have any questions, and no matter what, you should have one or two ready. If you say, "No, not really,"

he or she may conclude that you're not all that interested in the job or the company. A good all-purpose question is, "If you could design the ideal candidate for this position from the ground up, what would he or she be like?" If you're having a series of interviews with the same company, you can use some of your prepared questions with each person you meet (for example, "What do you think is the best thing about working here?" and "What kind of person would you most like to see fill this position?") Then, try to think of one or two others during each interview itself.

6. Practice, practice, practice.

It's one thing to come prepared with a mental answer to a question like, "Why should we hire you?" It's another challenge entirely to say it out loud in a confident and convincing way. The first time you try it, you'll sound garbled and confused, no matter how clear your thoughts are in your own mind! Do it another 10 times, and you'll sound a lot smoother and more articulate.

But you shouldn't do your practicing when you're "on stage" with a recruiter; rehearse before you go to the interview. The best way to rehearse? Get two friends and practice interviewing each other in a "round robin": one person acts as the observer and the "interviewee" gets feedback from both the observer and the "interviewer." Go for four or five rounds, switching roles as you go. Another idea (but definitely second-best) is to tape record your answer and then play it back to see where you need to improve. Whatever you do, make sure your practice consists of speaking aloud. Rehearsing your answer in your mind won't cut it.

7. Score a success in the first five minutes.

Some studies indicate that interviewers make up their minds about candidates in the first five minutes of the interview – and then spend the rest of the interview looking for things to confirm that decision! So what can you do in those five minutes to get through the gate? Come in with energy and enthusiasm, and express your appreciation for the interviewer's time. (Remember: She may be seeing a lot of other candidates that day and may be tired from the flight in. So bring in that energy!)

Also, start off with a positive comment about the company – something like, "I've really been looking forward to this meeting [not "interview"]. I think [the company] is doing great work in [a particular field or project], and I'm really excited by the prospect of being able to contribute."

8. Get on the same side as the interviewer.

Many interviewers view job interviews as adversarial: Candidates are going to try to pry an offer out of the interviewer, and the interviewer's job is to hold onto it. Your job is to transform this "tug of war" into a relationship in which you're both on the same side. You could say something as simple as, "I'm happy to have the chance to learn more about your company and to let you learn more about me, so we can see if this is going to be a good match or not. I always think that the worst thing that can happen is to be hired into a job that's wrong for you – then nobody's happy!"

9. Be assertive and take responsibility for the interview.

Perhaps out of the effort to be polite, some usually assertive candidates become overly passive during job interviews. But politeness doesn't equal passivity. An interview is like any other conversation – it's a dance in which you and a partner move together, both responding to the other. Don't make the mistake of just sitting there waiting for the interviewer to ask you about that Nobel Prize you won. It's your responsibility to make sure he walks away knowing your key selling points.

10. Be ready to handle illegal and inappropriate questions.

Interview questions about your race, age, gender, religion, marital status, and sexual orientation are inappropriate and in many areas illegal. Nevertheless, you may get one or more of them. If you do, you have a couple of options. You can simply answer with a question ("I'm not sure how that's relevant to my application"), or you can try to answer "the question behind the question": "I don't know whether I'll decide to have children in the near future, but if you're wondering if I'll be leaving my job for an extended period of time, I can say that I'm very committed to my career and frankly can't imagine giving it up."

11. Make your selling points clear.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, did it make a sound? More important, if you communicate your selling points during a job interview and the interviewer doesn't get it, did you score? On this question, the answer is clear: No! So don't bury your selling points in long-winded stories. Instead, tell the interviewer what your selling point is first, then give the example.

12. Think positive.

No one likes a complainer, so don't dwell on negative experiences during an interview. Even if the interviewer asks you point blank, "What courses have you liked least?" or "What did you like least about that previous job?" don't answer the question. Or more specifically, don't answer it as it's been asked. Instead, say something like, "Well, actually I've found something about all of my classes that I've liked. For example, although I found [class] to be very tough, I liked the fact that [positive point about the class]" or "I liked [a previous job] quite a bit, although now I know that I really want to [new job]."

13. Close on a positive note.

If a salesman came to you and demonstrated his product, then thanked you for your time and walked out the door,

what did he do wrong? He didn't ask you to buy it! If you get to the end of an interview and think you'd really like that job, ask for it! Tell the interviewer that you'd really, really like the job – that you were excited about it before the interview and are even more excited now, and that you're convinced you'd like to work there. If there are two equally good candidates at the end of the search – you and someone else – the interviewer will think you're more likely to accept the offer, and thus may be more inclined to make an offer to you.

Even better, take what you've learned about yourself from your MyPath career assessment and use it to explain why you think this is the job for you: "I've done some careful career self-assessment, and I know that I'm most interested in [one or two of your most important career interest themes], and – correct me if I'm wrong – it seems that this position would allow me to express those interests. I also know that I'm most motivated by [two or three of your most important motivators from your MyPath assessment], and I have the sense that if I do well, I could get those rewards in this position.

Finally, I know that my strongest abilities are [two or three of your strongest abilities from your MyPath assessment], and I see those as being the abilities you most need for this position." If you follow this tip, you'll be (a) asking for the job, (b) explaining why you think it's a good match, (c) displaying your thoughtfulness and maturity, and (d) further disarming the tug-of-war dynamic that interviewers anticipate. You'll be making the strongest possible "close" – and that's worth a lot!

14. Bring a copy of your resume to every interview.

Have a copy of your resume with you when you go to every interview. If the interviewer has misplaced his or her copy, you'll save a lot of time (and embarrassment on the interviewer's part) if you can just pull your extra copy out and hand it over.

15. Don't worry about sounding "canned".

Some people are concerned that if they rehearse their answers, they'll sound "canned" (or overly polished or glib) during the interview. Don't worry. If you're well prepared, you'll sound smooth and articulate, not canned. And if you're not so well prepared, the anxiety of the situation will eliminate any "canned" quality.

16. Make the most of the "Tell me about yourself" question.

Many interviewers begin interviews with this question. So how should you respond? You can go into a story about where you were born, what your parents do, how many brothers and sisters and dogs and cats you have, and that's okay. But would you rather have the interviewer writing down what kind of dog you have – or why the company should hire you?

Consider responding to this question with something like: "Well, obviously I could tell you about lots of things, and if I'm missing what you want, please let me know. But the three things I think are most important for you to know about me are [your selling points]. I can expand on those a little

if you'd like." Interviewers will always say, "Sure, go ahead." Then you say, "Well, regarding the first point, [give your example]. And when I was working for [company], I [example of another selling point]." Etc. This strategy enables you to focus the first 10-15 minutes of the interview on all of your key selling points. The "Tell me about yourself" question is a golden opportunity. Don't miss it!

17. Speak the right body language.

Dress appropriately, make eye contact, give a firm handshake, have good posture, speak clearly, and don't wear perfume or cologne! Sometimes interview locations are small rooms that may lack good air circulation. You want the interviewer paying attention to your job qualifications -- not passing out because you've come in wearing Chanel No. 5 and the candidate before you was doused with Brut, and the two have mixed to form a poisonous gas that results in you not getting an offer!

18. Be ready for "behavior-based" interviews".

One of the most common interview styles today is to ask people to describe experiences they have had that demonstrate behaviors that the company thinks are important for a particular position. You might be asked to talk about a time when you made an unpopular decision, displayed a high level of persistence, or made a decision under time pressure and with limited information, for example.

Step 1 is to anticipate the behaviors this hiring manager is likely to be looking for. Step 2 is to identify at least one example of when you demonstrated each behavior. Step 3 is to prepare a story for each example. Many people recommend using SAR (Situation-Action-Result) as a model for the story. Step 4 is to practice telling the story. Also, make sure to review your resume before the interview with this kind of format in mind; this can help you to remember examples of behaviors you may not have anticipated in advance.

19. Send thank-you notes.

Write a thank-you note after every interview. Type each note on paper or send them by email, depending on the interviewers' preferences. Customize your notes by referring specifically to what you and the interviewer discussed; for example, "I was particularly excited about [or interested by, or glad to hear] what you said about ...". Handwritten notes might be better if you're thanking a personal contact for helping you in your job search, or if the company you're interviewing with is based in Europe. Whatever method you choose, notes should be sent within 48 hours of the interview.

To write a good thank-you note, you'll need to take time after each interview to jot down a few things about what the interviewer said. Also, write down what you could have done better in the interview, and make adjustments before you head off for your next interview.

20. Don't give up!

If you've had a bad interview for a job that you truly think would be a great fit for you (not just something you want badly), don't give up! Write a note, send an email, or call the interviewer to let him or her know that you think you did a poor job of communicating why you think this job would be a good match. Reiterate what you have to offer the company, and say that you'd like an opportunity to contribute. Whether this strategy will get you a job offer depends on the company and on you. But one thing's for sure: If you don't try, your chances are exactly zero. We've seen this approach work on numerous occasions, and we encourage you to give it that last shot.

