

The Key to Successful Job Interviews

Preparation

In our experience, it is a good idea to view an interview as a 'test' and like any test preparation is an important ingredient in determining the level of success achieved.

Prior to the interview, it is also a good idea to have a good think about four or five of your strengths. These could include your ability to stay calm under pressure, commitment, lateral thinking, a willingness to work longer hours when a project needs to be completed, being a team player or a sense of humour. Prepare an example of how you have demonstrated each of these strengths in the workplace in the past and be prepared to mention them in the interview.

At the same time, be prepared to confront your weaknesses. While you don't necessarily need to discuss your weaknesses during the interview, you don't want to land yourself with a job that is not suited to your abilities and which you will not enjoy.

Demonstrate a "good fit"

Demonstrating that you are a 'good skills fit' for the role is of great importance to your potential employer. During the interview, it's a good idea to list the requirements of the job point by point and then match your prior work experience to those requirements. When the opportunity to do this arises during the interview, try and discuss this naturally and spontaneously – don't regurgitate them in an obviously rehearsed manner.

If a 'gap' in your skills is mentioned, try and stress your enthusiasm to learn. If the interviewer really focuses on this gap, counter any negative impact by pointing out a previous situation where you were thrown in at the deep end and you demonstrated a rapid learning curve.

In addition to looking for a 'good skills fit', your potential employer will also be looking to secure a 'good cultural fit' for their organisation. That means that during the interview your potential employer is making some value judgements about your behaviours and work experiences in order to determine whether you would be a 'good fit' for their business. Determining the business culture of an organisation prior to an interview takes time and research. Please refer to the next paragraph for further information on how to best determining the culture of a prospective employer's business.

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Research the Organisation

If you can't demonstrate some knowledge and interest in how a prospective employer's company makes their money, they are unlikely to offer you any of it! Accordingly, the more information that you can find out about your prospective employer's business, the better position you are in to win the job. Following are some suggested courses of action that will assist you in researching a company in order to prepare you for an interview;

- Spend some time looking over the company's web site to learn about their products, values, strategy and people
- If the company states their 'values' on their web site, this will go a long way toward providing you with some insights into their business culture
- If a company states their 'mission' or 'statement of strategic intent' on their web site, this will go a long way toward providing you with some insights into their business strategy
- Develop an understanding of the company size, its various divisions, locations and whether there is a 'parent' company that is the ultimate owner of the company that you are applying to work at
- Learn about the company's products and services
- Learn as much as possible about the company's target market(s)
- Develop an understanding of the company's competitors in the marketplace and identify what makes your potential new employer unique
- If possible, visit their business premises. If your potential employer is a retailer, this is a must as it will provide you with some insights into their products and operations which you can share with the interviewer if the opportunity arises

If your potential employer is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX), you should also be able to download a copy of their Annual Report from their web site or obtain hard copy from the Australian Stock Exchange offices in your capital city.

Review your Resume

Prior to attending the interview, always re-read your Resume carefully to remind yourself of your past achievements and identify areas to highlight at the interview. Keep in mind that you have got to the interview stage because the prospective employer has already seen something in your Resume that appeals to them. Practise answering likely questions on your past history that demonstrate the following;

- A logical progression from one position to the next
- Positive reasons for moving rather than negatives ones or fickle rationales

How your skills and experience has been built by each successive employer

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Plan the Journey

Planning the journey to your interview is of equal importance to other considerations;

- Plan your travel route carefully
- Allow for delays and traffic jams
- Plan to arrive 15 minutes before the scheduled interview commencement time so that you arrive relaxed
- Arrive at the interview venue approximately 10 minutes early. Use the time to soak up the atmosphere of the company and mentally rehearse what you have to say

Dress Appropriately

Dressing appropriately for the position that you are applying for is another important consideration that is sometimes overlooked. Dressing appropriately for the position may also have some bearing in your prospective employer's either conscious or sub-conscious assessment of your 'fit' for their organisation.

- Make sure that your shoes are clean and avoid wearing overpowering aftershave/perfume
- Darker outfits give an image of being in control, while lighter outfits tend to show a need for attention
- Irrespective of how you dress in your own time, in an interview situation, it's always best to err on the side of being a little more conservative
- If you take off your jacket during an interview, make sure that you are still well presented

At the interview

You're prepared, on time, perfectly groomed for the role and ready to convince the prospective employer that you're the person they need. Along with the other applicants, you will have been allocated a certain amount of time in which to convince the interviewer or panel of interviewers.

It's also worthwhile pointing out that the interviewers too are in the spotlight to a certain extent. Even the most thorough pre-application research cannot tell you certain things about the company or the job. So the recruiter/employer is selling the company and position to you as well.

Make a good first impression

The first impression is always the strongest and most lasting. Be friendly, but not over-friendly. Create a positive first impression by offering a firm, non-bone crunching, handshake and always make direct eye contact.

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Deal with Nerves

Being nervous is normal and most experienced interviewers understand this. And it rarely harms your chances if you acknowledge your nervousness. However, excessive nervousness can work against you - especially if you continually apologise for it. It makes other applicants, who are more relaxed and confident, seem more attractive.

Also many people tend to be overly talkative when nervous. If you fall into this category, try not to go off on tangents. Stick to the question being asked and answer it concisely. You will control your nervousness more effectively if you have taken the time to practise answering questions before the interview.

Ask questions

Interviews aren't supposed to be grilling sessions. The intention behind a good interview is to find out more about you, while you find out more about them. In other words, the goal is to get a good match between the person and the job.

Interviews should be a two-way street. Probing, intelligent questions can help the employer to evaluate your professional and personal needs. Your chances of being successful increase when the employer believes that the position will be mutually beneficial for both parties.

Consider bringing a notepad and pen to take notes of answers to your questions and pertinent facts and figures. It shows you have come prepared and are taking the opportunity seriously.

Answer Honestly and Completely

Answer questions honestly. Avoid the temptation to overly embellish your experience, qualifications and abilities. If you're questioned deeply about a fact that you've creatively enhanced, your credibility could disappear very quickly.

On the other hand, try to avoid giving blunt "yes" or "no" answers. They reveal nothing. Certainly, a 'closed' question ("Do you perform well under pressure?"), generally indicates an unskilled interviewer. You could simply answer 'yes' but this doesn't help you. If you get a closed question, give a brief but comprehensive response. Use it as an opportunity to sell yourself. A more appropriate answer to this question may be;

Answer: "Yes, it gets the adrenalin going and I get a real sense of achievement. But I also like to plan and manage my time so as to avoid crises whenever possible"

As a general rule of thumb, try not to speak longer than two minutes at a time and never dominate the conversation. The potential employer must feel in control. Furthermore, in the book '*What Colour is your Parachute?*', Richard Bolles points out that studies have shown that people who mix listening and speaking activities roughly 50/50 have a greater chance of getting hired.

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Never Complain

Avoid making negative judgements and criticisms of past employers and companies - even if encouraged - unless you want interviewers to make the following judgements:

- You're a 'know-all'
- You're a 'buck-passer' who refuses to accept responsibility for your own performance
- You would just as happily criticise this organisation and its members when applying for a future job

Ask for the Job

Don't be afraid to strongly communicate your desire for the job. Acting cool won't get you anywhere. An interested candidate always gets the offer over the non-interested candidate. Here is an example of how you might phrase it;

"I'm very interested in what you're doing here and the products you're developing. The working environment appears pleasant and the people I've met seem knowledgeable. It's a very interesting opportunity and I believe with my background I could make a significant contribution."

Dealing with Tricky Questions

Here are the answers that just might help get you through the questions you hoped they'd forget to ask;

Question: "Why were you out of work for so long?"

You must have a sound and feasible explanation for this one. Don't attempt to gloss over this question, as it's an issue that most prospective employers take seriously.

Martin Yate, author of *'Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook'*, suggests you emphasise that you were seriously considering your next move, rather than just looking for another pay cheque. You enjoy your work and are determined that the next job you take will be one where you can settle down and make a solid long-term contribution.

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Reason(s) for Leaving

Hopefully you'll have an acceptable reason for leaving every job you've held. If not, Martin Yate suggests you choose one of the reasons from the following acronym, **CLAMPS**.

- **Challenge:** You weren't able to grow professionally in that position
- **Location:** The commute was unreasonably long
- **Advancement:** There was nowhere for you to go. You had the talent, but there were too many people ahead of you
- **Money:** You were underpaid for your skills and contribution
- **Pride or prestige:** You wanted to be with a better company
- **Security:** The company was not stable

Yate gives this example: "My last company was a family-owned business. I had gone as far as I was able. It just seemed time for me to join a more prestigious company and accept greater challenges"

Question: "Your application shows you have been with one company a long time without any appreciable increase in rank. Tell me about this"

This is one case where saying the wrong thing can get you in just as much trouble as failing to say the right thing. The more time either of you spend on this query, the more time the interviewer has to concentrate on negative aspects of your application. Make your answer short and sweet. Then move on.

Martin Yate in his book, *'Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook'*, 1996 (Adams Media Corporation) suggests this response:

"My current employer is a stable company with a good working environment, but there's minimal growth in my area. In fact, there hasn't been any promotion in my area since (whenever). Your question is the reason I am meeting here with you. I have the skills and ability to take on more responsibility and I'm looking for a place to do that."

Prepare your response and practise it out loud several times before the interview. It may take a few tries to convince yourself that you're being honest and spontaneous.

Question: "Why do you want to work here?"

You can't answer this one unless you've done your homework. You must have researched the company. Reply with the company's attributes as you see them. Cap your answer with reference to its reputation for providing a stable and happy work environment — an atmosphere that will encourage your best work.

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Reason(s) for Leaving (cont)

Martin Yate suggests:

"I'm not looking for just another pay cheque. I enjoy my work and am proud of my profession. Your company produces a superior product/provides a superior service. I share the values that make this possible, which should enable me to fit in and complement the team."

Question: "What did you like/dislike about your last job?"

Should you get hit with this one, the interviewer is trying to find out the incompatibilities between you and the prospective job. Now, most interviews start with a preamble about the company. Pay attention. They are giving you the information that will help you answer this particular question. Use statements the interviewer makes about the job or the organisation to your advantage.

The solution is to focus on what you like and gloss over what you dislike. It won't hurt to say that you liked everything about your last job; it taught you the importance of certain key aspects about business, achievement, or professional profile. Never criticise! Criticising a prior employer is a warning flag that you could be a problem - and no-one intentionally hires trouble.

Question: "What would you like to be doing five years from now?"

The best answer to this question will include your desire to be regarded as a professional and a team player. As far as promotion, that depends on finding a manager with whom you can grow. Of course, you will ask what opportunities exist within the company. Martin Yate suggests you can pick up on these and become specific:

"From my research and what you have told me about the growth here, it seems operations is where the heavy emphasis is going to be. It seems that's where you need the effort and where I could contribute toward the company's goals."

Or

"I have always felt that first-hand knowledge and experience open up opportunities that one might never have considered. So while, at this point in time, I plan to be a part of (eg operations), it is reasonable to expect that other exciting opportunities will crop up in the meantime."

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Other Relevant Questions

Question: "What are your biggest accomplishments?"

Yate suggests you might begin your reply with:

"Although I feel my biggest achievements are still ahead of me, I am proud of my involvement with {whatever}. I made my contribution as part of that team and learned a lot in the process. We did it with hard work, concentration, and an eye for the bottom line."

Question: "Why should I hire you?"

Make the answer short and to the point. Highlight areas from your background that relate to current needs and problems. Recap the interviewer's description of the job and match it point-by-point with your skills. Finish your answer with:

- "I have the qualifications you need" [itemise them]
- "I'm a team player. I take direction and I have the desire to be a thorough success"

Question: "Tell me about yourself"

This is not an invitation to ramble. If the context isn't clear, you need to know more about the question before giving an answer. In such a situation, you could ask, "Is there a particular aspect of my background that would be most relevant to you?" This will enable the interviewer to help you find the appropriate focus and avoid irrelevancies.

Whichever direction your answer may take, be sure that it has some relevance to your professional endeavours. You should demonstrate, or refer to, one or more of your key behavioural profiles in action — perhaps honesty, integrity, determination or being a team player. If you choose 'team player', you can tell a story about yourself outside of work that also speaks volumes about you at work. Your answer must make the connection between the two, such as:

"I put my heart into everything I do, whether it be sports or work. I find that getting along with team-mates, or professional peers, makes life more enjoyable and productive"

This is rarely a question that you can answer instantly. Think about how you would answer it in advance, together with those aspects of your personality and/or background that you'd like to promote or feature in your interviewer.

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Other Relevant Questions

Question: "What is the most difficult situation you have faced?"

This question looks for information on two fronts:

- How do you define difficult?
- What was your handling of the situation?

You should have a story ready for this one in which the situation was both tough and allowed you to show yourself in a good light.

Question: "Why did you choose this particular career path?"

This sort of question could lead to a vague and lengthy explanation. Avoid the trap. Form your answer so that it connects you with the position and the company. Keep it succinct and offer a specific example.

You need to convince the interviewer that their industry and your career goals are in sync. Do you have a realistic view of what it is like to work in their industry? What aspects of their industry are particularly attractive to you? Give specific examples that the interviewer can relate to and convince the person that this career path makes perfect sense for you.

"I chose team leadership because I have always been a strong communicator with a good track record of results and developing others around me. I also like the fast-paced high-energy environment that seems to be commonplace in the retail industry"

Question: "What are your salary expectations?"

You could be asked how much money you're after. We all want to earn as much as we can. But be realistic. Saying that you will work for peanuts won't get you the job either. Both you and the interviewer know that you will soon become dissatisfied.

If the advertised position didn't indicate the likely remuneration, ask to discuss the approximate pay range for the position. Then answer in general terms, taking into account your qualifications in relation to the job requirements. Mention the market value for yourself, in general terms.

"Most people with my experience and track record of results can expect around \$38,000 to \$44,000 per year. I presume your salaries are within that range. However, because of my extensive experience with (whatever) my feeling is that I'm worth a figure towards the top of the range."

Adapted from Peter Veruki, Adams Job Interview Pro

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After the interview

After the interview, take the time to write down the names and titles of all interviewers, your impressions, type of questions asked and information learned. If you are undergoing regular interviews, this will help you keep employers and circumstances clearly defined.

If you are unsuccessful, ring and ask if you can have feedback about why you didn't get the job. While most people will be diplomatic rather than brutally honest, you should still be able to work out whether you could have improved your presentation - or whether you lost out simply because the job was not for you.

In the meantime, be brutally honest with yourself. Review your performance. What went well? What went badly? Did you sufficient prepare yourself? In which areas do you need to improve?

Remember, the only way to appear confident in an interview is to actually believe you are the person for the job. While the more you get your hopes up, the more they crash if you don't succeed, remember to pick yourself up again and launch into a new opportunity with the same energy and optimism. From every situation you learn something extra, and move one step closer to your next success.

Make your interest in the job formal with a thank you letter. If they have yet to decide who will get the job, use the letter as an opportunity to reinforce your strengths. If you have found out that you were unsuccessful, still write and thank them for giving you the opportunity to try out for the job. You never know when you are again going to be face-to-face with someone from the interviewing panel.

In summary, every job and job interview differs slightly for the others. However, the common theme here is preparation. The better prepared you are, the more likely you are to secure the role.

Note: This information is provided courtesy of SEEK, Retail IQ, and the various authors who have been acknowledged throughout this text.

We are here to help you! Our Recruitment Consultants are here to assist you with your interview preparations. Please telephone Claudette, Vincent or Martin on (08) 8212 9588 for a confidential discussion.

Level 1 Shell House
170 North Terrace
ADELAIDE SA 5000

Telephone (08) 8212 9588 Facsimile (08) 8212 8699

Web www.retailiq.com.au

GPO BOX 2971 ADELAIDE SA 5001