

How to Master the Art of Interviewing

By Bill Radin

To a large degree, the success of your interview will depend on your ability to discover needs and empathize with the interviewer. You can do this by asking questions that verify your understanding of what the interviewer has just said, without editorializing or expressing an opinion. By establishing empathy in this manner, you'll be in a better position to freely exchange ideas, and demonstrate your suitability for the job.

In addition to empathy, there are four other intangible fundamentals to a successful interview. These intangibles will influence the way your personality is perceived, and will affect the degree of rapport, or personal chemistry you'll share with the employer.

1. Enthusiasm -- Leave no doubt as to your level of interest in the job. You may think it's unnecessary to do this, but employers often choose the more enthusiastic candidate in the case of a two-way tie. Besides, it's best to keep your options open -- wouldn't you rather be in a position to turn down an offer, than have a prospective job evaporate from your grasp by giving a lethargic interview?
2. Technical interest -- Employers look for people who love what they do, and get excited by the prospect of tearing into the nitty-gritty of the job.
3. Confidence -- No one likes a braggart, but the candidate who's sure of his or her abilities will almost certainly be more favorably received.
4. Intensity -- The last thing you want to do is come across as "flat" in your interview. There's nothing inherently wrong with being a laid back person; but sleepwalkers rarely get hired.

By the way, most employers are aware of how stressful it can be to interview for a new position, and will do everything they can to put you at ease.

The Other Fundamentals

Since interviewing also involves the exchange of tangible information, make sure to:

- Present your background in a thorough and accurate manner;
- Gather data concerning the company, the industry, the position, and the specific opportunity;
- Link your abilities with the company needs in the mind of the employer; and
- Build a strong case for why the company should hire you, based on the discoveries you make from building rapport and asking the right questions.

Both for your sake and the employer's never leave an interview without exchanging fundamental information. The more you know about each other, the more potential you'll have for establishing rapport, and making an informed decision.

Basic Interviewing Strategy

There are two ways to answer interview questions: the short version and the long version. When a question is open-ended, I always suggest to candidates that they say, "Let me give you the short version. If we need to explore some aspect of the answer more fully, I'd be happy to go into greater depth, and give you the long version."

The reason you should respond this way is because it's often difficult to know what type of answer each question will need. A question like, "What was your most difficult assignment?" might take anywhere from thirty seconds to thirty minutes to answer, depending on the detail you choose to give.

Therefore, you must always remember that the interviewer's the one who asked the question. So you should tailor your answer to what he or she needs to know, without a lot of extraneous rambling or superfluous explanation. Why waste time and create a negative impression by giving a sermon when a short prayer would do just fine?

Let's suppose you were interviewing for a sales management position, and the interviewer asked you, "What sort of sales experience have you had in the past?"

Well, that's exactly the sort of question that can get you into trouble if you don't use the short version/long version method. Most people would just start rattling off everything in their memory that relates to their sales

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experience. Though the information might be useful to the interviewer, your answer could get pretty complicated and long-winded unless it's neatly packaged.

One way to answer the question might be, "I've held sales positions with three different consumer product companies over a nine-year period. Where would you like me to start?"

Or, you might simply say, "Let me give you the short version first, and you can tell me where you want to go into more depth. I've had nine years experience in consumer product sales with three different companies, and held the titles of district, regional, and national sales manager. What aspect of my background would you like to concentrate on?"

By using this method, you telegraph to the interviewer that your thoughts are well organized, and that you want to understand the intent of the question before you travel too far in a direction neither of you wants to go. After you get the green light, you can spend your interviewing time discussing in detail the things that are important, not whatever happens to pop into your mind.

Don't Talk Yourself Out of a Job

I've got a friend who's the hiring manager of an electronics company. He told me once that he brought a candidate into his office to make him a job offer. An hour later, the candidate left. I asked my friend if he had hired the candidate.

"No," he said. "I tried. But the candidate wouldn't stop talking long enough for me to make him an offer."

Don't misinterpret me. I'm not suggesting that an interview should consist of a series of monosyllabic grunts. It's just that nothing turns off an employer faster than a windbag candidate.

By using the short version/long version method to answer questions, you'll never talk yourself out of a job.

The Prudent Use of Questions

Beware: An interview will quickly disintegrate into an interrogation or monologue unless you ask some high quality questions of your own. Candidate questions are the lifeblood of any successful interview, because they:

- Create dialogue, which will not only enable the two of you to learn more about each other, but will help you visualize what it'll be like working together once you've been hired;
- Clarify your understanding of the company and the position responsibilities;
- Indicate your grasp of the fundamental issues discussed so far;
- Reveal your ability to probe beyond the superficial; and
- Challenge the employer to reveal his or her own depth of knowledge, or commitment to the job.

Your questions should always be slanted in such a way as to show empathy, interest, or understanding of the employer's needs. After all, the reason you're interviewing is because the employer's company has some piece of work, which needs to be completed, or a problem that needs correcting. Here are some questions that have proven to be very effective:

- What's the most important issue facing your department?
- How can I help you accomplish this objective?
- How long has it been since you first identified this need?
- How long have you been trying to correct it?
- Have you tried using your present staff to get the job done? What was the result?
- What other means have you used? For example, have you brought in independent contractors, or temporary help, or employees borrowed from other departments? Or have you recently hired people who haven't worked out?
- Is there any particular skill or attitude you feel is critical to getting the job done?
- Is there a unique aspect of my background that you'd like to exploit in order to help accomplish your objectives?

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Questions like these will not only give you a sense of the company's goals and priorities, they'll indicate to the interviewer your concern for satisfying the company's objectives.

Give It Some Thought

Here are seven of the most commonly asked interviewing questions. Do yourself and the prospective employer a favor, and give them some thought before the interview occurs.

1. Why do you want this job?
2. Why do you want to leave your present company?
3. Where do you see yourself in five years?
4. What are your personal goals?
5. What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
6. What do you like most about your current company?
7. What do you like least about your current company?

The last question is probably the hardest to answer: What do you like least about your present company?

I've found that rather than pointing out the faults of other people ("I can't stand the office politics," or, "I don't get along with my boss"), it's best to place the burden on yourself ("I feel I'm ready to exercise a new set of professional muscles," or, "The type of technology I'm interested in isn't available to me now.").

By answering in this manner, you'll avoid pointing the finger at someone else, or coming across as a whiner or complainer. It does no good to speak negatively about others.

I suggest you think through the answers to the above questions for two reasons.

First, it won't help your chances any to hem and haw over fundamental issues such as these. (The answers you give to these types of questions should be *no-brainers*.)

And secondly, the questions will help you evaluate your career choices before spending time and energy on an interview. If you don't feel comfortable with the answers you come up with, maybe the new job isn't right for you.

Money, Money, Money

There's a good chance you'll be asked about your current and expected level of compensation. Here's the way to handle the following questions:

1. What are you currently earning?

Answer: "My compensation, including bonus, is in the high-forties. I'm expecting my annual review next month, and that should put me in the low-fifties."

2. What sort of money would you need in order to come to work for our company?

Answer: "I feel that the opportunity is the most important issue, not salary. If we decide to work together, I'm sure you'll make me a fair offer."

Notice the way a range was given as the answer to question [1], not a specific dollar figure. However, if the interviewer presses for a exact answer, then by all means, be precise, in terms of salary, bonus, benefits, expected increase, and so forth.

In answer to question [2], if the interviewer tries to zero in on your expected compensation, you should also suggest a range, as in, "I would need something in the low- to mid- fifties." Getting locked in to an exact figure may work against you later, in one of two ways: either the number you give is lower than you really want to accept; or the number appears too high or too low to the employer, and an offer never comes. By using a range, you can keep your options open.

Some Questions You Can Count On

There are four types of questions that interviewers like to ask.

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First, there are the resume questions. These relate to your past experience, skills, job responsibilities, education, upbringing, personal interests, and so forth.

Resume questions require accurate, objective answers, since your resume consists of facts, which tend to be quantifiable (and verifiable). Try to avoid answers, which exaggerate your achievements, or appear to be opinionated, vague, or egocentric.

Second, interviewers will usually want you to comment on your abilities, or assess your past performance. They'll ask self-appraisal questions like, "What do you think is your greatest asset?" or, "Can you tell me something you've done that was very creative?"

Third, interviewers like to know how you respond to different stimuli. Situation questions ask you to explain certain actions you took in the past, or require that you explore hypothetical scenarios that may occur in the future. "How would you stay profitable during a recession?" or, "How would you go about laying off 1300 employees?" or, "How would you handle customer complaints if the company drastically raised its prices?" are typical situation questions.

And lastly, some employers like to test your mettle with stress questions such as, "After you die, what would you like your epitaph to read?" or, "If you were to compare yourself to any U.S. president, who would it be?" or, "It's obvious your background makes you totally unqualified for this position. Why should we even waste our time talking?"

Stress questions are designed to evaluate your emotional reflexes, creativity, or attitudes while you're under pressure. Since off-the-wall or confrontational questions tend to jolt your equilibrium, or put you in a defensive posture, the best way to handle them is to stay calm and give carefully considered answers.

Whenever I hear a stress question, I immediately think of the Miss Universe beauty pageant. The finalists (usually sheltered teenagers from places like Zambia or Uruguay) are asked before a live television audience of three and a half billion people to give heartfelt and earnest responses to incongruous questions like, "What would you tell the leaders of all the countries on earth to do to promote world peace?"

Of course, your sense of humor will come in handy during the entire interviewing process, just so long as you don't go over the edge. I heard of a candidate once who, when asked to describe his ideal job, replied, "To have beautiful women rub my back with hot oil." Needless to say, he wasn't hired.

Even if it were possible to anticipate every interview question, memorizing dozens of stock answers would be impractical, to say the least. The best policy is to review your background, your priorities, and your reasons for considering a new position; and to handle the interview as honestly as you can. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so, or ask for a moment to think about your response.

Wrapping It Up

At the conclusion of your interview, you can wrap up any unfinished business you failed to cover so far, and begin to explore the future of your candidacy.

During your interview wrap-up, it's a good practice to make the interviewer aware of other opportunities you're exploring, as long as they're genuine, and their timing has some bearing on your own decision-making.

The fact that you're actively exploring other opportunities may affect the speed with which the company makes its hiring decision. It may even positively influence the eventual outcome, since the company may want to act quickly so as not to lose you.

However, your other activity should be presented in the spirit of assistance to the interviewer, not as a thinly veiled threat or negotiating tactic. I'd advise you to play it straight with the interviewer.

And remember to maintain a positive attitude. In today's job market, you'd be surprised how often victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat.

The better your interviewing skills, the greater your chances of getting the job.