

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING

It starts simply enough. A warm greeting. A passing comment about the weather. A light-hearted remark about a local sports team. Your resume is on the desk between you and the employer. She glances down at it and then back up to you. Her brow has a more serious cast now, “Well,” she says, “why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself?” Her gaze stays fixed. The interview has officially begun. It’s your turn.

“I attended St. Mary’s University and graduated with a degree in Business Administration. I’m very interested in retail management, having worked part-time as a sales clerk over the past two years. Your company is a leader in retailing and I’d really like the opportunity to prove myself.”

Positive. Eager. Safe. You check out the employer’s reaction. A polite nod and a pleasant smile. You congratulate yourself on the fine start, thinking, “Fire away. I’m hot.”

But are you?

Probably not. Chances are good that the employer’s agreeable manner is only a professional veil to hide her true feeling, boredom. Why is she bored? A better question: Why shouldn’t she be? After all, all you did was recite the most skimpy, superficial, and obvious facts about yourself. Moreover, she already knew them from your resume. Making matters worse, you gave her your version of the same worn-out answer that she’s heard in almost every interview she’s ever conducted. Far from excited, she’s pigeonholed you early. You are predictable, commonplace, run-of-the-mill. You are like everyone else. That’s not good enough. The employer is looking for someone exceptional. For all practical purposes, the interview has concluded. It will drag on for another twenty minutes or so, but don’t kid yourself – it’s over.

You didn’t have to make this mistake. Behavioural science has given us legions of studies of the interview process. Boiled down, these studies have produced three documented-to-death findings.

1. *Interviews count.* To the degree that the interviewer will influence the hiring decision, he makes up his mind during the interview. He decides then that he either wants to hire you or he doesn’t. Probably, this won’t get communicated to you during the interview, but the decision is real and it’s firm.
2. *The decision gets made early in the interview.* Researchers differ on just how early – some say in the first minute or two, some stretch it to the first five minutes – but all agree the die is cast in the beginning. And it’s difficult to reverse the interviewer’s first impressions. If you get off to a good start, you can stumble later and be forgiven. The interviewer will stick to his earlier judgement. He knows you are wonderful. It works the other way, too. If you start poorly, it doesn’t matter that you come on like gangbusters at the end of the interview. A poor start can doom the candidate.

3. *The driving force behind the interviewer's assessment is a subjective perception of your personality and capabilities.*

Here's a list of words drawn from studies which asked employers why they selected certain candidates over others:

- oral communications
- initiative
- enthusiasm
- drive
- motivation
- assertiveness
- confidence
- energy

Another study ranked the top selection factors as communication skills and impression of personality. Different studies use different language, but considered collectively, they all reach the same generalized conclusion. It's critical that you communicate to the employer that you are confident. Employers don't want to hire people who feel that they *might* be able to do the job. They are looking for the sure thing.

Wrap these findings into one tidy sentence. *You must start your interview by establishing yourself as confident and assertive.* This sends tremors of fear up the spines of some. "I'm not brash and aggressive. I don't dance on table tops, tell terrific jokes, and slap people on the back. I'm not confident and assertive. All is lost." Relax. No one said you had to be loud and obnoxious. Anyone, I repeat, anyone – including those who are reserved, quiet, even a little shy – can come across as confident and assertive in an interview. And it doesn't take a radical overhaul of your personality. You don't even have to put on an act. You can be yourself, even if you're quiet.

Consider the question literally. "Tell me a little bit about yourself." What is the "little bit" that would be most helpful? That's easy – it's the most impressive and substantiated thing you can say about yourself. What is it you do best? And what's your proof? Before you ever get into an interview, have answers to these questions firmly in mind. They are your ammunition. Don't be afraid of the open-ended question. Hear it as an opportunity. You have been invited to tell the employer why he should hire you. Do it. "The most important thing that I am eager to say is that I'm very adaptive and respond well to pressure and change. As a sales clerk, I worked in three different departments and under two different managers. I had to learn new product lines quickly and, at the same time, different sales approaches preferred by a new manager. I found this challenging and exciting and my portion of departmental sales grew steadily. My manager commended me for how well I handled the pressure. Retail is always changing and I think I'm very well-suited for such a career."

This kind of answer – even if stated quietly – gets you off to the all-critical right start. The employer will sit up and take note. You will have distinguished yourself from the herd. You are confident and assertive. You are special.

We're all special. Each of us knows that we have some special qualities or characteristics that cut us away from the crowd and make us good prospects. We've seen

the proof time and time again in our lives. The beginning of an interview, when responding to an open-ended question, is the one time in life that it's not boorish to be right up front with it. The employer wants to know why we're special. Tell her.

All other interviewing advice pales in comparison to this. If you do everything else right, but don't get this down, you'll be stuck with mediocre results. Conversely, if this is your only preparation, you'll still be a shade or two above most.

Presuming that you'd like to have a wider margin of success than a mere shade or two, let's cover a few other points. These tips can be roughly divided into three groups: **before the interview, during the interview, and after the interview.**

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

After carefully preparing to identify and substantiate your main strength, concentrate on three other areas of preparation.

Get inside employers' shoes. What do employers care about? This is not a great mystery. They have been asked this question many times and their responses are generally quite similar, giving more weight to interpersonal skills and other personal characteristics than to objective measures such as grades, institutional reputation, and past work experience. For example, in a recent study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, here's how employers rated the importance of various qualifications using a five point scale:

• Interpersonal skills	4.67
• Teamwork skills	4.65
• Analytical skills	4.56
• Oral communication skills	4.53
• Flexibility	4.52
• Computer skills	4.32
• Written communication skills	4.12
• Leadership skills	4.08
• Work experience	4.05
• Internship experience	3.77
• Co-op experience	3.37

In a related question, employers identified the personal characteristics that are most important to them. They are, in order:

- Honesty/integrity
- Motivation/initiative

- Communication skills
- Self-confidence
- Flexibility
- Interpersonal skills
- Strong work ethic
- Teamwork skills
- Leadership skills
- Enthusiasm

All this emphasis upon personal qualities doesn't mean that you have wasted your efforts accumulating a lofty GPA or stacking up an impressive work history. Far from it. But it sure *does* mean that you cannot rest on these laurels alone. Instead, see them as contexts from which you can draw examples that prove you have the traits employers seek.

Before interviewing, look at the above lists and sift through your experience, inside the classroom and out, identifying situations that prove that you have what it takes. For example, the fact that you maintained a solid GPA while holding down a part-time job says something significant about your time management skills and your motivation, as well as your work ethic. Your teamwork skills might have shown through on a class project. Perhaps you exhibited initiative and leadership skills while holding an office in a student organization. Your experience will be as valuable as you make it by translating it into proof that you have the skills employers seek.

Research the job and the organization. Learn what you reasonably can about the nature of the job. Ask if a written job description is available. How about an organization chart. Talk to others. Visit the organization's website. If you have been given or directed to printed materials, be sure to read them. Don't get carried away with this task. You don't have to become the world's leading authority on the subject. Just make sure that you understand what the job entails so that you can envision yourself in it and that you have a clear understanding of what the organization does. That will keep you from looking like a know-nothing.

Anticipate the questions and practice. Look at it this way: Almost all of the questions will be about you – your goals, skills, work attitudes, education, expectations. You are the expert. No one knows more about this subject than you. Still, a little practice can help. Get friends to simulate interviews and ask you predictable questions. You can even do it by yourself in front of a mirror. Don't strive for rote answers to the questions. Instead, aim to get the *main* points of your desired responses into your head where they can be easily recalled. Evaluate honestly, but don't worry about the fine details. Look for evidence that you are answering with poise and clarity, coming across as comfortable and confident. Your answers need to be clear and concise, directly responding to the questions.

Stress specificity. It's critically important to make sure you back up your claims with specific evidence. Think of yourself as a trial lawyer proving your point. While this

is always good advice, no matter what the situation, it's absolutely essential when employers are deliberately conducting behavioural interviews. This methodology has been adopted by many employers who feel that it helps them discern the "best" candidates from those who simply talk a good line. Using their most successful employees as models, employers identify traits that these employees have in common. This exercise tells them what they need to look for when interviewing candidates. They then frame questions that ask you to provide specific evidence drawn from your past that proves that you have what the organization seeks. The basic idea is that past success is the best predictor of future success.

For example, a company that values teamwork may ask you to tell about a time you worked on a project as part of a group. Then you will be pressed for specifics. What exactly was your role? What contribution did you make? How do you know the project was successful? Precisely, how did you make it so? Sometime, this questioning can seem aggressive if you aren't specific enough.

Behavioural interviews stress specific experiences you've had. If you've done your homework properly, thinking of examples that prove, beyond all doubt, that your sterling qualities are not figments of your imagination, you will be ready. Being ready for behavioural interviews, even if that method is not anticipated, is ideal preparation. It requires you to arm yourself with facts that prove your merit. This is what interviewing is all about. Specificity is your most important ally.

Don't fear technical questions. For some jobs, you may be asked technical questions. These questions are asked to see if you are familiar with a particular technique or process required by the job or, if the question is of a problem-solving nature, to determine the process by which you reach your answer. Usually, that is more important to the employer than the accuracy of the answer. This type of question is not typical and doesn't merit a lot of anxiety on your part. It's the sort of thing that either you know or you don't so don't sweat it. Concentrate instead on this list of common questions. They are far more likely to be asked and far more likely to cause you to stumble.

Practice with these.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Why are you interested in this position?
3. Why did you choose this type of career?
4. What are your greatest strengths?
5. How would you describe yourself?
6. What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
7. How do you determine or evaluate success?
8. Provide an example from your past that demonstrates the contribution you could make to our firm.
9. Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and those supervised.
10. What are your weaknesses?
11. What accomplishment has given you the most satisfaction. Why?

12. Describe your most rewarding educational experience.
13. If you could do so, how would you plan your preparation differently? Why?
14. What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?
15. Cite a situation from your past that required you to respond to pressure. How did you deal with it?
16. What are your long-term goals?
17. Why should I hire you?

There is a perfect answer to questions about salary. If the employer asks you about your salary expectations, don't be bashful. A perfect answer: "I'm aware that the typical range for this kind of position is ___ to ___ and naturally I'd like to be at the higher end of the range. This type of answer is positive and assertive but still non-demanding enough to leave room for negotiation. Of course, to be ready with this kind of reply, you need to do some homework. Research salary issues. The Internet provides an abundance of salary information. Check it out. If your career centre conducts an annual survey of graduates, that may be your best source of comparable information. You don't have to get extremely precise, but it helps to have a realistic, five-thousand dollar range in mind.

Be ready for inappropriate questions. One other type of question deserves attention. Once in a great while and fortunately with diminishing regularity, you may be asked a question that you consider illegal, unethical, or at least inappropriate. The question may have to do with marital or family status, race, gender, or some other taboo topic that has no bearing upon your capacity to do the job. The question might be something like, "Will your spouse object to you traveling alone or with members of the opposite sex?" Or, "How do you feel about working in a predominantly white environment?" could be asked of a job seeker from an underrepresented ethnic group. An older applicant might hear, "How would you feel about reporting to a younger supervisor?" Marriage, race, and age aren't supposed to be the subjects of job interviews. We all know that, don't we? But it can happen. When it does, it customarily catches the job-seeker off-guard. Stunned, uncertain of how to answer, the applicant simply unravels until the thread of the interview has been lost altogether. For better or worse, so has the job.

A little forethought might have saved the day. Anticipate inappropriate questions just as you have anticipated the predictable ones listed above. How do you want to answer? Basically, you have three choices. You can refuse to answer or you can go along with the employer and respond. Those are two of your choices and in both cases the results are unpredictable. It may well be that there was no pernicious intent to the question and your response, whatever it is, will be inconsequential. Or the opposite could be true and you were being deliberately tested by an irascible employer and your response brought the curtain down on the job. Or labelled you an easy mark.

The third choice has more merit. Decipher the question and respond only to its appropriate content, ignoring the offensive issue. For example, the question regarding your spouse's attitude about work-related travel contains a legitimate, though unspoken,

question. “This job requires travel. How do you feel about that?” You can respond to that on your own terms. Forget your spouse. Simply tell the employer that travel is not a problem for you (assuming it isn’t, of course). “Working in a predominantly white environment” can be translated into a question about the type of environment within which you prefer to work. No racial overtones to that. Just describe in non-racial terms your preferred work environment. Don’t talk about the age of supervisors. Talk about the relationship that you’d like between you and your supervisor. Thinking this through in advance will keep you from falling apart during the interview. When it’s all over you can decide if you think the employer made an honest mistake or acted deviously. And whether or not you want the job. That has merit.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Even with your preparation to rest upon, you can still expect nervous tension. You’re on the spot. It’s natural to feel a little uneasy. The employer knows that, having experienced the same thing himself. It doesn’t have to mess up your interview. Proceed, and as you do, keep these tips in mind.

First impressions count. Be on time and look sharp. The employer is already employed and has the luxury of being late. You don’t. Tardiness will be taken as a sure sign that you will always be late for work. Dress, at the least, as you would if you were on the job, and probably a step or two higher than that. It’s almost impossible to err on the conservative side and easy to go astray by being too casual. If you are a bit over-dressed, the worst that will happen is that the employer will assume you are trying to impress her. Is that bad?

Start strong. As stressed above, research proves that it’s important to begin on the most positive note possible. Be on the alert for that predictable open-ended, beginning question, “Tell me about yourself.” Don’t interpret it as an icebreaker. It’s the real thing. The interview has begun. Trot out your main strength and its proof. Get the flying start you want.

Send the right behavioural signals. Let’s not belabour what pop psychology has already beaten to death. To the greatest degree possible, relax and be yourself. Aim for a demeanour that is attentive but moderate. You don’t want to look like you’re ready for a nap, but you also don’t need military posture. If you normally use hand gestures, go ahead. Just don’t flap around like a seagull. Establish eye contact to show self-confidence.

Communicate carefully. Since we all know that interviews are all about us talking, we are quick to rush in and fill any silence with our words, whether or not we’ve decided what we want to say. Often, to the listener our words sound like gobbledygook. It figures. How can you be clear when you aren’t organized? Take your time. If you need clarification, ask for it. It’s okay to pause, reflect, and get your act together before you start talking.

If you know you speak with an accent that others sometimes find difficult to decipher, you'll naturally want to do your very best to speak as clearly and intelligibly as you can. Be especially alert for speaking too softly or too rapidly. Adjust your pace and your volume accordingly. If necessary, ask if you were understood.

Appear enthusiastic. Projecting low energy or being flat in your voice or demeanour can be devastating. These impressions are drawn from your expression and your tone of voice more than the words you utter. If you know that you tend to have low affect or speak in a monotone, it's advisable to use a little trick. Raise your eyebrows when talking. It may sound silly, but our voices tend to follow our expression and raised eyebrows put liveliness into your voice. Try it. A smile here and there is nice, too.

Participate, don't dominate. Let the employer set the tempo. In most cases, that won't be a problem. The interview will move briskly along and you'll be surprised when it has ended. You can expect to do at least half of the talking. Some, though, may be torturously slow. The employer will plod and pause and hem and haw. Don't let it rattle you. Your task remains the same. Make a good impression by settling in for a rather tedious pace. Perhaps the most difficult situation is the employer who converts the interview into a monologue. It's awkward, but you need to occasionally find a way to interrupt the droning and make a few points of your own. Look for pauses and use "That reminds me..." beginnings for your own comments. Mostly, though, you can expect to do a lot of listening.

Ask questions. At some point in the interview, you'll be asked if you have any questions. Count on it. You look disinterested if you don't, so prepare specific questions for each interview. Some of these questions can be general but others should reflect the research you did on the company.

You can always begin a question with the line, "I noticed on your website..." or "Your annual report indicated that..." and then ask for an elaboration. The point won't be missed.

Use the closing. The closing minutes of the interview are kind of a wrap-up. Don't ask about salary. Never leave an interview with an uneasy "I wish I had said..." feeling. If there were omissions, get them in now. Likewise, never leave an interview without knowing when you can expect to hear from the employer. Most will make a point of telling you, but if they don't, ask. The best way to end your interview is the same way you started it. While shaking hands, thank the employer for the interview, reiterate your interest in the position and cite your primary qualification as a reminder of how good an employee you would be. If you weren't offered a business card, ask for one.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Hiring decisions can be hair-splitting exercises. Often, the employer must make a tough choice between two or more closely matched candidates. Give yourself the edge after the interview.

Keep notes. As soon as you can after the interview, jot down some notes to yourself. Record the date of the interview. If you didn't get a business card, make sure you have the correct spelling of the interviewer's name. If it is a tricky pronunciation, write it out phonetically as well. What are your impressions of how the interview went? Did you learn something new and important about the employer? What is to happen next and when? Were there any weak spots or points that you failed to make? Keep these important notes in an orderly fashion. You need to stay organized and have this information at your fingertips. Scribbling upon little pieces of paper that get lost in the laundry won't work.

Write a thank you note. It's standard advice, but only about ten percent of all job seekers follow it. That's precisely why you should. A few well-phrased words of gratitude, as well as a reaffirmation of your interest, can make your interview – and you – more memorable. Unless you're specifically asked to correspond by e-mail, it's best to send this note through the postal service. If you omitted something important from your interview or didn't adequately bolster one of your points with a pertinent specific, you can briefly include it in this note. Send the note within 24 hours of the interview.

Stay in pursuit. If the interviewer suggested that you take additional steps such as completing applications, visiting branch offices, calling later, or talking to others, take the advice seriously. It was given for a reason and if you ignore it, it could cost you the offer.

Don't wait too long. Employers don't always live up to their own best intentions. If you were told you would hear by the end of the week and you haven't, give the employer a reminder call. It's reasonable and will underscore your interest. Usually, you'll simply be told that the decision is still under consideration and be given a revised timeline. Go back to waiting, and after the new deadline has passed, if you still haven't heard, call again. During such calls, you may get disappointing news. "Sorry, we should have gotten to you earlier, but we hired someone else for the position yesterday." That's tough and it will hurt, but it's still news you need to hear.

A FEW SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Telephone Interviews. Sometimes an employer may ask to interview you by phone. Sure, this takes away the obvious advantages of going face to face, but, on the other hand, it gives you a couple of advantages, too. Pick a time and place that maximizes your comfort and privacy. Make sure you will be in a quiet setting. Schedule your phone interview carefully, avoiding times or situations when you might become hurried or interrupted.

If the employer calls without warning and you don't have these conditions in place, politely explain that and ask to arrange a different call. You won't have to sit in one of those uncomfortable hard-back chairs. And you can be equipped with notes. Keep these simple, you won't want to be shuffling through papers, looking for your prepared answer to a question. Having a few helpful reminders on hand – points you want to be sure to make – can give you a boost.

Don't short-change yourself in preparing for a telephone interview. You should take exactly the same steps as you would for any other interview.

Video Interviews. Talking to a camera can be taxing. Subconsciously, we are always looking for signals and reinforcement from our listener. Often, an expression or body language tells us if we are being understood or if we are successfully making our points. To be without that instant reinforcement and direction hurts. To the degree that you can, do your very best to remember that you are talking to a person. It might even help to envision someone if the situation is not a live, two-way video interview. If your career centre offers practice videotaped interviewing sessions, take advantage of them. If not, you may want to try it on your own just to get comfortable with the process.

Group Interviews. Interviewing panels or committees are commonly used in government, education, and social service agencies. You might find the prospect of facing a group of interviewers intimidating, but don't confuse this process with the "Grand Inquisition." Consider it an advantage. With more people in the room, everything doesn't rest upon the reactions and judgement of one person. Although you may not click with everyone, your chances of finding an advocate within the group are reasonably good.

The most important thing to remember in such situations is to address every person in the room. They are all there to be a part of the hiring decision and if you seem to be talking with the highest ranking person or the friendliest face, you run the risk of offending someone else, losing their vote. From time to time, visually scan the room, making eye contact with even the most silent or foreboding members of the group.

NO FAILURES, JUST LESSONS

Well, that's probably stretching it a bit. You will blow some interviews. You are human. But even when you are clicking and doing it all right, you won't always come out on the right side of that hair-splitting decision. Let there be no doubt about it, even in the best of economic times, rejection is a nearly inevitable part of the interviewing process. Not everyone loves us. Toughen up and live with it. Your success rate multiplies with persistence. Try to learn from problems you encounter. Work on questions that give you a tough time. At your next interview, remember to work in those items that you wished you had said in the last interview. With outstanding preparation and a little practice, interviewing can be fun.

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