

GENERAL INTERVIEW ADVICE

PREPARATION

- Find out as much about the company as you can. Get hold of annual reports (if available), research the company on the internet. If you have applied through a recruitment consultancy (such as Executive Connections) most of this research will have been done for you. The type of information you might want to research: nature of the business, number of people, revenue of company, revenue forecast, number/location of offices, general dedication to career development.
- Sign up for Google News alerts to keep up with latest developments in the company. <http://www.google.com/alerts>
- Allow plenty of time to travel to the interview location - plan to arrive 15 minutes early.
- Always wear smart business attire (even if the company allows casual dress).
- Make sure you are clear on who is interviewing you and what the interview process is and how many interviews will you have?
- What are the interviewers' names/job titles? How will these people contribute to the decision making process?
- Will there be any tests? If you are working with Executive Connections most of this research will have been done for you.
- Bring along a spare copy of your CV.

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE INTERVIEW

- Upon arrival, if you have brought a coat/umbrella try to find somewhere to put them before you meet the interviewer. Sit down, look relaxed (even if you're not!), think twice about accepting a drink (what do you do with the cup when the interviewer arrives?)
- Upon first meeting your interviewer make sure you shake his/her hand firmly - make eye contact, smile. Be prepared to make polite conversation - 'Did you find us OK?' - Always try to answer these questions with more than just Yes/No answers. Perhaps you might want to comment on the attractiveness of the office environment or the ease by which you got there.
- In the interview room, play safe with your etiquette. Don't take your jacket off without asking; sit down after or at the same time as the interviewer.
- Pay close attention to your physical communication throughout the interview. This means good eye contact (i.e. looking at the interviewer for over 70% of the time - if you have more than one interviewer always try to address all of them with your answers). Don't cross your arms (it looks very 'defensive'), don't slump in the seat, smile.

DURING AND AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- Be clear about what your major selling points are. If, by the end of the interview, these haven't been covered make a point of talking explicitly about these.
- Be to the point, make sure that you answer the interviewer's question (it sounds obvious but nervousness and a keenness to communicate your selling points can often lead you away from the point.)

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- If you are asked to talk about a specific project it is worth explaining what the business aim and scope of the project was before you start talking about your involvement - it helps to set the scene.
- Never say something in an interview which can't be backed up by examples. If you say you are a 'leader', 'creative' or 'enthusiastic' you will inevitably be asked for proof.
- Be positive. Don't overly criticise your current employer. Generally, every time you talk about a problem or issue you should always be looking to say what your involvement was in overcoming this issue.
- Sell yourself. Try to avoid giving clichéd answers to interview questions (it is likely your interviewer has heard these responses more than you care to imagine). Use examples from your own experience, give your opinion.

AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

- Ask how you did. Re-affirm your interest in the role.
- Ask what the next stage is and when you can expect to hear. Ask how many other candidates are being interviewed for the role.
- Follow up with a thank you letter. Keep the thank you letter short and business-like. Avoid trying to oversell yourself; the thank you letter is to remind the interviewer of you, not to reemphasise your selling points.

7-PLUS REASONS WHY CANDIDATES FAIL AT INTERVIEWS

Appearance

Conservative business attire is always the most reliable way to dress. Don't be misled by the company whose dress code is casual. Interviews are considered a formal business situation. You can dress down once you are hired.

Lack of preparation

Anticipate the technical and personal questions that each interviewer will most likely ask. Specifically, relate experiences you have had to the skills and personality attributes being questioned. Be prepared to answer questions with specific examples of your strengths and accomplishments.

Lack of / over enthusiasm

Even though companies say they hire candidates with particular skill sets, interviews depend significantly on the connection between interviewer and candidate. If you express and exhibit enthusiasm for your work, your career and the new company, you are much more likely to receive an offer. How you say something is just as important as what you say. You need to understand how your particular personality communicates during an interview. You only have one chance to make a first impression. **However**, over-enthusiasm is an equal killer. The paradox is that appearance of the willingness to take any job is likely to mean ending up taking no job.

Negativity

Never criticise a former company, position or boss. You can "re-frame" your job frustration by talking about your desire to contribute more, participate on a team or assume greater challenges. Almost everyone has worked for a difficult boss at some point in his or her career; this is one of the top reasons why people change jobs. Keep your comments and your attitude positive; negativity about your former or current company is an interview killer.

Failing to listen

During the interview ask about the skills, experience and personality traits that are important to success on the job. You will then articulate these same qualities as they apply to you. If you are too busy formulating your next idea to listen carefully, you will miss this critical information. Without listening carefully to the interviewer, you are shooting at a target while blindfolded.

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

Lack of supporting evidence

People remember stories far more than they remember facts and figures. Have the evidence to illustrate each of your skills and personality attributes, and relevant and transferable experience, important to the job.

Lying, or over embellishing

Don't even think of lying in an interview. It will bite you on the ankle at some point. Once you start it is impossible to stop and the lie will get more and more involved. Exaggeration is a more common failing. The line between it and lying is a fine one. For an experienced recruitment consultant it is usually quite easily spotted. Be proud of your achievements, talk them up, but don't make them up.

And here are more than 25 other reasons given by HR managers:

1. Over emphasis on money: interested only in best offer.
2. Failure to look at the interviewer during conversation.
3. Limp, fishy handshake.
4. Unwillingness to go where sent.
5. Late to interview.
6. Failure to express appreciation for interviewer's time.
7. Asks no questions about job.
8. Indefinite response to questions.
9. Overbearing, over aggressive, conceited with superiority or "know it all complex."
10. Inability to express self clearly: Poor voice diction, grammar.
11. Lack of planning for career: no purpose and goals.
12. Lack of confidence and poise: nervous ill at ease.
13. Unwilling to start at the bottom-expects too much too soon.
14. Makes excuses, evasive, hedges on unfavourable factors in record.
15. Lack of tact. & courtesy: ill mannered.
16. Lack of maturity.
17. Lack of vitality.
18. Indecision.
19. Sloppy application.
20. Merely shopping around.
21. Wants job for short time.
22. No interest in company or industry.
23. Low moral standards.
24. Cynical.
25. Lazy.
26. Intolerant: strong prejudices.
27. Inability to take criticism.

WHAT DO I DO IF I MAKE A MISTAKE AT INTERVIEW?

- Correct it. Once you leave the room, your fate is sealed. If you know that things are going badly, you can try to put the interview straight. A willingness to admit mistakes is not going to harm the impression you make.
- If you know where you went wrong, then say so to the interviewer and tell them what you meant to say.
- If you feel that the interview is running away from you, ask the interviewer how the interview is going, and if there are any issues you can address. Try to provide the evidence of the impression you meant to make.
- It may well not work, but if you really have blown the interview, what have you got to lose?

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

HOW DO I DEAL WITH OVERALL PHYSICAL APPEARANCE & WITH AGEISM AT INTERVIEW STAGE

Physical appearance does matter. Take a long hard look at yourself in the mirror. In fact, why not get your partner to take a long hard look at you. Is there anything that should change? Here are few hints...

- Whilst you are not expected to dress as someone 20 years your junior, ensure you are business smart and attuned and in empathy with the dress of that organisation. Most organisations have a style and any prior research before attending an interview is useful.
- Glasses can make a big difference; one of my colleagues has taken 10 years off his look by a new pair of glasses not trendy but just more suited to him.
- For men, choose your tie carefully, ties – as one of the few items of business attire where you have the scope to express yourself - do follow fashions and poorly selected ties can 'age you'.
- Hair – if you dye, get it dyed properly! Do not use your partner to dye your hair (unless they are trained by Vidal Sassoon of course).
- Invest in a good hair cut. Even if you don't have much hair left - make what you've got work for you!
- For men, be freshly shaved...it really can make a difference.

Other points

- If the prejudice is that older candidates are less adaptable and less in touch with modern values, use every opportunity to overcome these perceptions. So show and demonstrate your energy, your innovation, creativity, illustrate how you have in your last role(s) been an agent of change and transformation, focus on those strengths!
- Remember: old is good! Age brings with it many, many strengths, often over-looked by younger people, so take every opportunity to emphasise these:
 1. Wisdom / experience. More likely to be self aware, less likely to be political
 2. More likely to have the rest of their career mapped out (to retirement) and therefore are a more predictable / stable employee.
 3. More likely to be flexible in terms of mobility, have less domestic strife and family commitments. More likely to have a partner more tolerant of them working away and children more likely to be independent
- If your prospective boss is younger than you, he / she may be quietly concerned that having an older person in their team may imbalance the (possibly delicate) authority they hold in the team. If appropriate take time to emphasise how much of a team player you are, how your career aspirations are unlikely to upset the apple cart, how you can be a wise counsel.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

HOW DO I DEAL WITH DELIBERATELY AGGRESSIVE QUESTIONING?

- Stress interviews are designed to deliberately put a candidate ill at ease to see how they perform. Although interviews are stressful experiences, it is not uncommon in some sectors for companies to ratchet up the pressure.
- The stress approach can be in the form of questions or statements. Mild stress: "With your lack of relevant experience, what makes you think you can do this job?" Or, medium stress: "You seem to lack the authority to handle these responsibilities." Or, major stress: "That is the worst answer we've heard from any of the candidates."

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- The stress could be presented in a situation or disguised in the interviewer's behaviour, such as an unsmiling greeting, protracted silence after hearing your answer to a particular question, or a confrontational or argumentative attitude.
- Often the stress is caused by the set up of the room. The American Army used to ask candidates to open the window. What the candidate did not know is that the window was nailed shut.
- Consulting firms sometimes use these techniques. Consultants are often faced with stressful situations and the interviewer wants to determine how you will react. Sales is another area where the stress interview is more common. The assumption is that the individual who performs better under stressful situations is more likely to handle live stress situations at work.
- Often the interviewer will use the "WHY" approach. You will be asked a question and immediately after you respond, you will be asked a WHY question on the same subject. This may continue four or five times. No matter how you respond, the information is apparently insufficient.

How to deal with it

- Keep your cool. The secret of success is to stay calm and not let the interviewer throw you. After the question, take a breath and a pause, consider your answer and deliver it pleasantly in a neutral, calm tone of voice. Stress interviewing requires being a good listener and giving a deliberate response.
- Since the aim is get you emotional, try your best to be calm, collect your thoughts, respond clearly from the intellect rather than emotions. Do not take the interviewers' remarks personally and try to be consistent in your responses.

HOW SHOULD I DEAL WITH PANEL INTERVIEWS

- This can be as few as two and as many as ten people interviewing you at the same time. Often linked with the Aggressive / Stress interview technique (see above). Outside of the public sector, panel interviews are not a common interview practice.
- Seating arrangements can be indicative of the kind of interview you are going to face. If you are sat alone on a chair in front of the panel arrayed in a straight line in front of you it is a pretty good bet that you are going to be in for a grilling.
- More sympathetic arrangements might include the panel being sat round a large table with a space for you to join them.
- Typically in a panel interview each member of the panel will be assigned to ask questions on a particular skill or competency, and there will be an overall chairman.

How to deal with it

- To handle this interview well, you must appear to be confident, don't hesitate too long before you give an answer. Watch your posture and try not to fidget too much.
- Ensure that you treat all members of the panel equally. Don't address all your answers to the chairman, nor to whomsoever it was who asked. Make good eye contact with each member of the panel.
- Some panels deliberately contain a "Devil's advocate". If so, do not allow this person to get under your skin, and answer their questions in the same way as every other member. Equally well, their may be the "good cop, bad cop" game. The way round it is to treat each member of the panel equally.

COMMON EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

WHAT WAS YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT IN YOUR LAST JOB?

Commentary:

- The interview wants to gain a better picture of exactly what you did in your previous role. This is a very open question and may tempt you to waffle in your response so avoid this by being very specific and illustrating your role with a well thought through example.
- Look to use facts and figures in your answer

Example bad answer:

- "We improved sales significantly through a major change initiative"
- Commentary: there is no clear evidence of what was achieved by this person, who is the 'we'? How significant was the sales improvement? Did it make any difference to the bottom line? What was the change initiative?

Example good answer:

- "I was responsible for improving sales by 25% through a major restructuring of the sales and account management team of 20 people."
- Commentary: this is a good opening response as it focuses on the facts to draw in the interviewer's attention. Look to move quickly onto putting a 'personal' slant onto this by emphasising the particular challenges the project had and how you overcame them.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO BE DOING 5 YEARS FROM NOW?

Commentary:

- The interview wants to understand your ambitions and how realistic you are with them. It's a double edged sword, aim too low and you won't look ambitious enough, aim too high and the interviewer themselves may think you are a threat or 'too arrogant or big' for the role.
- Also, avoid cliched answers (one is coming up)

Example bad answers:

- "I want your job." Commentary: if you say that - what happens if the person interviewing you wants to keep their job for more than 5 years?, anyway - it's a horrible cliché
- (In a vague type style:) "I want to achieve all that I am set and work in a productive environment where I feel that I have a significant influence"

Example good answer:

- I don't have a detailed plan, but my broad aim is to continue my existing career progression working towards marketing manager / financial controller / production manager etc level in a SME company. What's more important to me though is...

WHY ARE YOU LOOKING TO LEAVE?

Commentary:

- The interviewer wants to understand if you are jumping or being pushed. How quickly will you jump from the interviewer's company? How likely is it that they will have to 'push' you?
- It is also a chance for the interviewer to see how you deal with negative subjects. Although a 'simple' question it has often been said that understanding why people leave is the single most insightful piece of information you can find out about a potential employee.

Example bad answer:

EXECUTIVE CONNECTIONS

RECRUITERS • HEADHUNTERS

- "The executive management in my organisation is terrible and there's a huge amount of disagreement about where the company is going. I've also been sidelined onto a 'special project' type role which doesn't interest me."

Example good answer:

- "I have enjoyed my job and believe I have achieved a great deal. I also feel that I am ready to move upwards, but that it not possible in my current company because..."

WHAT SALARY ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Commentary:

- The interviewer is trying to gauge how much you are worth to him and – in some cases - how little he can get away with paying you
- The interviewer (even though he may be your potential boss) may also be on a similar salary having been promised a raise once this hire has been made

Example bad answers:

- "At least £160K – I think I'm worth it"
- "A similar package to my current if it's the right job"

Good answer:

- Have a look at Salary Negotiations!!!