



More useful tips for the interview

Understanding the dos and don'ts of a job interview will help decrease stress and increase your chances of success.

You check your answering machine and finally hear the message you've been hoping for. They want to schedule an interview. Anticipation turns to anxiety, however, as your head fills with unsettling images of interrogation by a ruthless recruiter. Or maybe you take the no-big-deal approach. After all, everyone who meets you likes you, so why should this be any different? Either of these mind-sets will likely lead to a poor interview performance

The best attitude going into an interview blends natural confidence with a dose of caution. Knowing what is expected of you as a job applicant can help adjust your thought process and, as a result, improve your presentation. Also, adhering to the following "dos and don'ts" tells the interviewer that you are professional and respectful, two qualities that EVERY employer seeks.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Your answering machine or voice mail message should be brief and professional. Your mother-in-law may find your toddler's sing-song greeting adorable, but your goal is to impress a potential employer, not Grandma.

When you get the call to set up the interview, write down everything. Where, when, and with whom will you be meeting? (Get spellings and pronunciations too.) Read it back to make sure you have it all. You may want to ask how long the interview is anticipated to take so that you can plan your day accordingly.

If you are unfamiliar with the office location, do a dry run before the actual interview. See how long it takes to get there (taking into consideration the time of day), and scope out the parking situation too.

Decide what to wear well in advance, and make sure your clothes are clean, pressed, and otherwise presentable. Your outfit should be one step up from typical office wear for that environment. Better to err on the side of too conservative (which is perceived as professional) than too casual (which is seen as sloppy or insincere).

Prepare a folder or portfolio to bring with you including several copies of your resume, a list of references, and some paper and a pen.

If you haven't already, take some time to research the company. At the very least, visit their Web site. If possible, talk to people who work there or do business there. Write down a few insightful questions or comments (more on this later).



THE INTERVIEW

Arrive 5 to 10 minutes early. If you arrive much earlier than that, they might think you got the time wrong. Any less and you appear rushed or unorganized. Use this extra time to observe the workplace. Do the employees seem happy? What can you tell about the culture? Can you see yourself working there?

If you are given an employment application, complete it neatly, accurately, and entirely. Do not write "see resume" for any responses.

Greet everyone you meet warmly and respectfully. When you are introduced, use the person's name right away: "Hi, Sally. It's nice to meet you." People like to hear their own name, and using it in a sentence or two will help you remember it. Shake hands firmly.

Do not sit until invited to do so. During the interview, remember to make eye contact, sit up straight, and smile when appropriate.

Interviewers expect job applicants to be well-mannered, so don't disappoint them by smoking, drinking, chewing, swearing, lying, or engaging in any other conduct that your grandmother would not approve of. This rule stands regardless of what others in the room are doing.

Interview formats vary depending on many factors. A small-business owner, for example, will have a different style than a corporate recruiter. The ultimate question, however, is the same for each interviewer: Is this the best applicant to meet our needs? Researching before the interview and listening during the interview will give you insight as to what the employer's needs are. Your main job in the interview, then, is to describe how you can meet and even exceed those needs.

One very effective way to underscore your qualifications is to use the situation, action, and result (SAR) outline. If, for example, the job advertisement said that the position requires strong attention to detail, you should have a SAR example of your keen accuracy. For example, "As an office assistant, I often review various documents before they are sent to the printer. Last week, I proofed the quarterly bulletin that is sent to all of our sales representatives, (situation). I caught and corrected two model number errors and a significant pricing discrepancy, (action). My attention to detail saved the company time and money", (result). This kind of storytelling gives the potential employer a vivid picture of how you have operated in the past and, thus, how you are likely to perform in the future. Prepare several SAR-format examples, using different skills and traits, to help illustrate your accomplishments and work style.

In addition to specific work-related issues, you should be prepared to talk about your education, your personality, your strengths and weaknesses, and your goals.

Let the interviewer lead the discussion but, when appropriate, ask questions yourself. Although the best questions come naturally as a course of the conversation, you may want to prepare a few ahead of time. Ask why the position is currently open. Ask what a typical day is like. Ask

how the supervisor's management style can be described. Ask what the challenges of the job are. Ask if, from what the interviewer has seen so far, you seem to be a good fit for the job.

Asking about the salary and benefits, however, is considered a big no-no. If the pay is non-negotiable, the interviewer may let you know the figure early in the process. Otherwise, the topic will come up when they are closer to making an offer. (You may want to read articles on salary negotiation to better prepare for this important part of the job search process.)

Another big no-no is speaking negatively about a former job or employer. Obviously, something has you looking for work, so you needn't launch into your litany of complaints. Such venting usually says much more about the applicant than it does about the former employer; the inference being that you're hard to please, high maintenance, or just plain whiny. And who wants to work with that? Granted, you may have legitimate gripes about a former job. When the topic comes up, phrase the matter responsibly and with the interviewer's needs in mind. "I am looking for a job with more customer contact" is a much better statement than "I was bored." And "The management style you described is a good match for my personality" sounds much more mature than "My boss was a big jerk."

At the end of the interview, if you are interested in the position, say so. Then ask what the next step in the process is. They may have more candidates lined up to interview. They may want you to come in and meet with some other members of the staff. They may give you a timeline as to when you can expect an answer. Before you leave, make sure you get a business card from everyone you met so that you can follow up.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Immediately after the interview, jot down your thoughts on the meeting: pros, cons, questions, concerns, highlights, etc. This is especially important if you are interviewing with more than one company in a short period of time. You may think that you'll remember everything, but the details might get mushy if you don't write them down.

Write a brief follow-up letter to each person you interviewed with, thanking them for their time and for any other courtesies they showed you (a tour of the office, for example). Use this opportunity to reiterate your interest in and qualifications for the position. This can be emailed or snail mailed but, either way, make sure you send it within a day of the interview.

If they said you would hear within a certain time frame and that time has passed, a follow-up phone call is perfectly acceptable and, in fact, expected. Simply ask about the status of the position and when you might expect to hear about the next step.

Job applicants often think of the interview process in stark terms of acceptance or rejection. And given what may be on the line (next month's mortgage payment, the kids' college fund, a meaningful self-identity), this outlook is understandable. Remember, however, that the interview is also for you to determine if the company and the position are a good fit for you.



Follow these tips and prospective employers will see you as professional, serious, and poised for success exactly the impression you want to give.