

The ABC's of Interviewing

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How to make interviews less stressful and more successful

Most people consider job interviewing a very stressful experience. Unfortunately, the stress itself becomes our greatest enemy, preventing us from creating a positive connection with the interviewer. In this article, I'll show how creating a "less stressful – more successful" interview experience is as easy as A, B, C.

A is for Attitude

AN interviewer wants to find an outstanding candidate as much as you want to find a fulfilling job. It helps to think of the process as one where both parties are hoping for a positive outcome. A positive attitude will enable you to project an image of energy and enthusiasm. If you are competing against a group of candidates with a similar background of skills and knowledge, enthusiasm might be the deciding factor.

Here are four attitude suggestions that will help you in many interview and job-related situations:

- **Never bad-mouth a current or former employer, co-worker or company.** It brands you as a "complainer," and no one wants a complainer on the team.
- **Nurture the ability to accept criticism gracefully.** All employers appreciate this quality in their workers. If anything said in the interview sounds like criticism, accept it with thanks, and treat it as helpful advice that may benefit you in the future.
- **See any job that you hold as part of a larger picture.** Expressing knowledge of the corporate and industry environment where you work (or hope to work) is a big selling point in any job-related discussion, not just in the interview.
- **Maintain a positive attitude** – from the moment you wake up until the interview is over and you've sent a "thank you" note. Positive attitudes are catching, and you have a great deal of control over sustaining a positive atmosphere throughout the interview. Even if you are asked to describe a failure, weakness or negative experience, you can finish your response on an upbeat note by mentioning a lesson learned or strategies used to improve the situation.

Every interview is unique. Because interviewing is an unrehearsed conversation between two strangers, the discussion can take as many paths as there are people. For that reason, it helps to maintain an attitude of willingness, tolerance and flexibility. Learn to accept and participate in the unfolding of the process.

Attitude can save interviews from "going bad". Interviewers normally arrange to prevent calls or visitors from disrupting an interview. If a single brief-but-

important interruption occurs, accept it gracefully and resume the discussion afterward. But if the situation is more severe (the interviewer, or the office, is in crisis mode that creates ongoing distraction), offer to reschedule the appointment. Be sincere, and make it clear that your objective is to maintain a positive atmosphere that benefits both you and the interviewer.

Another situation where attitude can save the day is when an interviewer asks an illegal question. If you are asked to provide personal information (age, ethnic background, national origin, marital status, family planning, or sexual, religious, or political preference), don't panic. You have three valid options:

1. You may choose to answer honestly. It is possible that the truthful answer is the one they want to hear and will add to your desirability as a candidate. (However, you should carefully consider whether you want to work for this particular organisation).
2. You can refuse to answer the question and advise the interviewer that it is not appropriate for you to respond. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to maintain a positive interview environment afterward, and it is likely that you will be viewed as uncooperative or confrontational as a result.
3. You can assume the question was phrased poorly by accident. Put aside your negative reaction and focus on the job-related element that may have prompted the question.

Here are some ways to politely steer the conversation back where it belongs – your ability to perform the functions of the job.

If asked, "What country did you come from?" answer by confirming that you are eligible to work in this country. If asked, "What is your first language?" specify which language you read or speak fluently. For questions such as "Are you married?" "Do you have children?" and "Do you have any physical handicaps?" answer by describing any limitations you have on physical activity, travel, overtime or relocation as part of the job.

If you do not see any relationship between the question and the position, it makes sense to ask: "Could you explain how this is relevant to the job we are discussing?" Most interviewers will appreciate your tact and your desire to get the interview back on track.

B is for Behaviour

Attitude drives the second factor, behaviour. When you have a positive attitude and desire to perform well at the interview, you'll plan to get a good night's sleep, eat a nutritious breakfast, and allow plenty of time to get to the appointment. You won't schedule important activities following the interview, since you may be asked to stay and complete an application, take some tests or meet with another decision-maker.

Make an effort to arrive at the interview looking like the ideal job candidate. Have extra copies of your resume, something to write on and something to write with. Bring any items you've produced that would support your presentation (writing samples, published articles, spreadsheets, software programs, photos or videos). If possible, you should leave copies of everything you bring, so make sure they are crisp, clean and of good quality.

Be polite and friendly on the phone and to the people you encounter on the way to the interview. It pays to be courteous, professional and friendly with the receptionist, the secretary, and even the people you encounter in the parking lot and elevator. You have no way of predicting which people you encounter on the way to and from the interview are part of the hiring team or have input into the hiring process.

Think of the interview as a conversation, not an interrogation. Introduce yourself in a relaxed, confident manner. Sit straight, and lean slightly forward to show openness and interest, but give the interviewer breathing room. Respect the importance of physical space and never get so close that it makes the other person feel boxed in.

Communication is a two-way street. Focus your attention on what the interviewer is saying (not on what you'll say next). Don't talk too much. If you do most of the talking, you will probably miss cues to help you know what the interview feels is important. Once you've determined where the interviewer is "coming from," you can follow his or her lead. Try to speak with the same rhythm and tone of voice. Make some friendly observations about your surroundings. If the interview is conversational, make small talk about your interests, hobbies, or what you did last weekend. Be positive and upbeat. This will help both of you relax and establish a connection.

Remember that communicating information about yourself is your responsibility. It is not up to the interviewer to drag it out of you. The interviewer will often signal the end of the interview by asking you if you have any questions. If you feel you haven't discussed some key points, take the initiative and say, "Before I ask my first question, there are a couple of points I would like to mention."

C is for Compatibility

Think of two overlapping circles – one is you and one is the company. Everything that you say and do during the interview should contribute to enlarging the space where these circles overlap. The bigger and more clearly defined you can make this area, the more desirable you will be as a candidate.

Your preliminary research of the company and the position should give you a clear idea of the skills being sought. Observation during and before the interview should also give you clues as to the personal strengths and character traits that will be key to this position. (An author needs to be good at detail work and be very trustworthy. A sales person needs ambition and people skills, for example.)

Most companies typically conduct a Situational Interview. You will be asked open-ended questions that begin with phrases such as "Tell me about a time..." or "Describe an experience..." Interviewers assume your answers will reveal interesting information and be reliable predictors of your behaviour in future situations.

Think of each question as a Table Topic and give yourself about one minute to create an interesting answer. Part of your preparation will be to have several effective stories that you can use at the appropriate time to illustrate the trait or skill being addressed. Always plan and rehearse stories that

illustrate some of your most remarkable traits and talents. Be sure to include a relevant situation, what you did, and the results.

These open-ended questions give you the best opportunity to sell yourself to the interviewer. Closed-ended (yes/no) questions don't give you the chance to elaborate. Whenever you are asked a closed-ended question, treat it as an open-ended question by assuming the interviewer is asking for a brief, comprehensive explanation. Respond with a "situation + action + results" answer.

An interview is primarily an attempt to assess your compatibility with the job and the organisation. When you hear any of the following questions, you may have several different responses in mind, but the 'right' answer is the one that will emphasise how closely you match the interviewer's mental picture of the ideal job candidate:

"Why do you want to work here?" or *"What about our company interests you?"*

Few questions are more important than these, so it is important to answer them clearly and with enthusiasm. Demonstrate your interest by sharing what you have learned about the job, the organisation and the industry through your own research. Be specific how your skills will benefit this particular company.

"Tell me about yourself." This question deserves a well-prepared, two-minute answer that includes: where you've been, where you're going, and why you want this position. Each part should focus on the skills, traits and knowledge that make you the best match for the job.

"What are your best skills?" or *"What are your biggest accomplishments?"* Keep your answers job-related. By now, you should know what the company values. List them, then describe situations where the skills contributed to success for you and your company.

"What kinds of tasks and responsibilities motivate you the most?" *"What kind of work environment do you prefer?"* *"Do you work better by yourself or with others?"* Many questions don't have an obvious "right or wrong" answer, but these questions are clearly intended to measure the compatibility between you and the job environment where you would be working. Unless it has already been stated clearly that this is a job involving one extreme or another, the ideal answer will emphasise your flexibility. Be honest, and give examples describing your ability to deal with a broad spectrum of alternatives.

Asking questions during a job interview

Prepare five good questions (you may not have time to ask them all, so ask in order of importance to you.) Concentrate on gaining information about the responsibilities of the position and the culture of the organisation. Reinforce the awareness that you already possess knowledge about the company and industry. One question might be, "I read in a Journal that... How would that factor create an impact on your business?"

While you are learning more about the employer, your interviewer will be using this opportunity to further evaluate you as a job candidate. He or she will be measuring your interest in the organisation, knowledge of the field, maturity, professionalism, and communication skills.

Note: Never bring up salary, benefits or work-hour questions at this first interview. Salary and benefit negotiations occur during a second or third

contact with the employer. Your initial interview should help the recruiter see whether you “fit” the company and position, and help you determine whether you want to work for this organisation.

After the Interview

When you leave, thank the interviewer for his or her time and attention. If the interviewer does not volunteer specific follow-up details, ask about the next step in the process. Is additional information needed, or forms for you to provide? Who can you contact when checking on the search status? If they offer to contact you, politely ask when you should expect the call.

While situations will vary, look for positive signs that the interview went well. These may include: The interview lasts longer than you expected, and longer than the company said it would; the interviewer asks you at the end whether you are still interested; you are given a very specific date when they will follow up. (Normally, a follow-up date is general or vague.)

As soon as you leave the building, find a quiet place to sit down and evaluate the interview. How did it go? What did you do well? What can you improve? Be sure to note what you learned about the company or the industry, impressions of the people you met, your responsibilities for any follow-up, and when you can expect to hear from them. If you did not receive business cards from the people you met, you may call the company directly when you get home and ask the receptionist for the correct spellings of their names and titles. This information will become crucial if you are invited back for a second interview.

Even if this job doesn't land in your lap, you will have begun accumulating some positive interview experiences and memories that will help you in future interviews.