



What You Need To Ace Today's Job Interviews

No doubt you're a pro at hitting the slow job of the old job interview like: "Where do you want to be in five years?" But get set for new playing field. Are you prepared to be grilled by a veteran team of five managers? Can you articulate detailed anecdotes about past success and failure? And can you field these currently popular queries:

- Give me an example of a time you worked under heavy stress and the sacrifices you made to achieve an important work goal.
- What would you intend to accomplish within the first year that suggests I should hire you?
- How do you deal with someone who disagrees with you?

If you lack ready responses, you might strike out during the tough new interview process. Increasingly, cost-conscious corporate America is asking executives to take a harder more judgmental line on new hires. As a job candidate, you now face intense scrutiny and probing questions. The process also tends to drag on. You may undergo as many as four follow-up interviews so you can be eyeballed by the entire team. "In this competitive marketplace," says recruiter Paul Ray Jr., President of Paul Ray Berendtsen, the fifth largest executive search firm in the U.S., "organization have gotten more specific about the qualities they want their employees to have."

Companies as diverse as Southwest Airlines and Andersen Consulting, for instance, have now analyzed the traits its most successful employees have in common. They will then evaluate applicants for specific characteristics. Andersen Consulting looks for adaptable workers who will help develop others, while Southwest wants self-starters.

To sell yourself at today's higher powered interviews you must ❶ show you fully understand the company's needs, ❷ demonstrate that you possess the specific skills and experience to handle the position, and ❸ perhaps most important, convince your potential employers that you're in sync with the corporate culture. As a result of these new demands on you, preparing for job interviews nowadays requires intense time and research. Here's how to interview smart to get the job you want.

Show up sounding like an insider

The initial interview is an equal-opportunity meeting: You get to size up the company as well as vice versa. So, whether you're interviewing for CEO or back-office programmer, arrive knowing the company's complete bio, wants, and all. Your best sources are recent news clips and, if the company's shares are traded publicly, annual reports and critiques by securities analyst. You can also check the library for reference books, such as Hoover's Handbook, that profile private, public and emerging companies. Magazine articles are another source of company and industry news. Or log on to online services to scan recent headlines.

Don't stop there. Also canvass your contacts to find an employee, client or consultant you can quiz about any hush-hush problems. In 1993, for example, ex-Apple CEO John Scully-hardly a corporate rub-overlooked that rule. After a whirlwind courtship,

he accepted the job of chairman of Spectrum Information Technologies, a small Manhasser, N.Y. firm, without running a thorough background check. As it turned out, Spectrum was facing a Securities and Exchange Commission inquiry, and Scully left in a flurry of bad publicity after only four months. Spectrum is now in Chapter 11 and Scully has set up his own New York City marketing and investing firm.

Make sure you determine what the job is worth on the open market. Call your professional association's placement office and request a recent salary survey. Check out want ads in trade journals and local newspapers. If you're lucky enough to have an "in" at the company, ask about the salary range for this job.

Most companies have their own interviewing style, so it's to your advantage to familiarize yourself with their techniques. Current or former employees are your best bet for tips, but your human-resources contact or the recruiter who set up your interview can also guide you. Ask about how many people you'll see, whether it will be a group or one-on-one and what sorts of questions are typically asked.

For instance, at Microsoft applicants are tossed mind-benders like, "How many gas stations are there in the U.S.?" The purpose is to observe how you think through unexpected problems, not to hear your educated guess.

Marry your past to their future

"A great way to kill an interview is to talk about 'me, me, me'", says Ronald Krannich, co-author of *Dynamite Salary Negotiations* (Impact Publications, \$13.95). "Instead, emphasize what you will bring to the job and what your expertise is worth." Before the interview, make a list of the qualities the company wants, such as creativity and communications skills. Then prepare memorable sound bites that will illustrate those points, such as: "I developed a monthly newsletter for our clients that explained how we follow the highest manufacturing standards."

"Most employers have found the best way to predict whether someone will succeed in the job is to look at how they behave in the past." says Tom Washington, president of Career Management Resources, of Bellevue, Washington. The more you can demonstrate using success stories from your past, the greater your chances for getting the job and the big bucks.

Ask tough, intelligent questions

Arrive at the interview armed with 10 or 20 insightful questions, including such provocative ones as. "What is the company doing to pay down its current debt?" says recruiter Paul Ray Jr. "The person who challenges the company will have the best chance of getting the job."

Ask direct questions about exactly what the job entails: How many people will you supervise; how often will you be expected to rave; how much support staff will you

have; and whom will you report to. This information will help you prove what the job is worth when it's time to discuss salary.

And think through what the job will do for you. "Companies don't expect you to stay with them forever," says Joseph Boyett, co-author of *Beyond Workplace 2000: Essential Strategies of the New American Corporation* (Dutton, 1995- \$24.95), released this month. "Look for the job that

will offer the greatest resources and the most opportunity to learn." One good sign is a boss who encourages feedback from employees.

Don't play hardball

Once talk turns to money, try to get the company to make you an offer first. By this point, you should have shown the company the skills and expertise you can bring to the position. If the executive insists on sharing your desired salary first, or if the salary he suggests sounds measly, Krannich suggests you spend two to five minutes summarizing the position as you see it. Tick off the responsibilities you'll have, such as supervising 10 employees, taking three business trips a month, managing a \$50, 000 budget and so on. The mention of the high end of your range, saying, "This sounds like a \$75, 000 a year job." If he gasps in horror, trot out your salary research. If the company still refuses to cough up and you do want the job, don't back down, negotiate. Ask if part of the \$75, 000 could come from a bonus pool, or if you could get a raise to \$75, 000 within six months if you accomplish specific tasks or meet goals. Whatever arrangement you strike, Krannich cautions, "Don't play hardball by making subtle threats or saying you have another offer for \$80, 000. Be amenable. That will get you off on the best footing with your new employer."

Let your ambitions show

"No matter what position you're interviewing for," advises Boyett, "bear in mind that most companies know that in this fast-paced economy, the job you interview for today will probably be entirely different a year from now." The company wants assurance that you'll be helping to propel them forward, rather than simply maintaining the status quo. At the appropriate time, mention your ideas for changing or revamping the job later. Or suggest changes you think should be made immediately. Last fall, for example, Dan Nienhauser, 33, interviewed with the president of an Iowa clothing maker for a job that required finding manufacturing sources abroad. Nienhauser suggested that what the company really needed was someone to develop new business overseas. With eight years of experience in international marketing and competency in three languages, Niebauser offered himself as the logical choice.



After lengthy discussions with the president and three rounds of interviews, he got the position he had envisioned - and with 30% more pay.